

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: “GET LISTENIN’ KIDS!”: INDEPENDENCE AS
SOCIAL PRACTICE IN AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

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This dissertation examines the concept of independence—defined as alternative approaches to the creation, distribution and consumption of music that actively resist cultural hegemonies—as an ongoing tradition in American popular music. While previous studies of independence have focused on specific independent record labels or eras, this project views independence as a historical trajectory that extends to the beginnings of the recording industry. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the social field frames my investigation of the ways in which independence becomes socially and musically manifested in communities of musicians, mediators and audiences. I explore how these communities articulate their distinction within the dominant music industry by responding to the social and aesthetic chasms created by the centralization of media.

This study is divided into two sections. The first focuses on independent record labels and local radio broadcasts in the first half of the twentieth century, when “independent” referred to either a record label that distributed outside major label channels, or a radio station unaffiliated with a network. In the second section, I show how the modern concept of independence became more overtly political with the emergence of the punk movement of the late 1970s. I follow the subsequent development of

independent underground networks in the 1980s through their present-day fragmentation in twenty-first century internet culture. I conclude with an ethnographic examination of independent music performances in order to show that, while independence remains situated in ideas about community, authenticity and autonomy, it is subjectively understood and constructed by individual members of independent communities.

The primary research for this study draws from eight years of personal experience as a freeform DJ and active consumer of independent music, as well as seven years working as a sound archivist at the University of Maryland Broadcasting Archives. Because this is a study of popular music, I engage with several interdisciplinary theoretical areas, including ethnomusicology, musicology, sociology and media studies, in order to conceptualize some of the patterns that shape independent social practices.

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AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC

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Dedication

To the memory of my grandfather

Sam Mages,

who handed me my first clarinet.

Acknowledgments

When I embarked on this journey, I had little idea about the number and quality of people who would eventually contribute to it. It is a daunting task to try and include every one of them in an official statement of gratitude. Some of them are the lifelong friends and family whose ongoing support I have had the good fortune to take for granted. Others were individuals whose paths only briefly intersected with mine, but by offering a kind word or helpful piece of information, they, too, nudged this project a little closer to its completion. Then, of course, there is everyone in between who gave of themselves in both official and unofficial capacities, and without whose involvement I would not have survived this long and often arduous process.

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I owe a lifetime's worth of successes large and small to the continuing encouragement of my parents, Claudia and Gary Schnitker, who have nurtured each of my endeavors. Thanks also to my sister Karen, who swears she's going to read this entire dissertation, for pointing out the humorous sides (and there are many) of academics.

Finally, it is no exaggeration to claim that I would not have made it this far were it not for the unwavering support, inspiration and companionship of my partner Mary Switalski, who believed I could achieve this long before I did.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I was a first-year graduate student at Tufts University in 2003 when I decided to become a DJ. I attended an open house at the campus station WMFO, and gathered in a small room with a few dozen other aspiring DJs, many of whom were undergrads. One of the student staff members circulated the room asking everyone what kind of music they wanted to play on their show. “Indie,” most of them replied, and the staff member would nod, and write it down. As for me, I had intended to feature jazz and blues. That seemed okay with the Programming Director, but I did begin to wonder about this strange, seemingly new trend. After two hours of orientation, the open house adjourned and I was left puzzling over the sudden spike in popularity of Indian music.

I soon learned that “indie” was short for “independent,” and that, like many college radio stations, WMFO was a repository and an outlet for this kind of music. What that meant became more apparent to me as I familiarized myself with the vast shelves of vinyl records and CDs that lined the station’s walls in every room and hallway. For each artist whose name I recognized, there were twenty that I did not. And artists such as Rafter, The Lonesome Organist, Fugazi and Stereo Total did not release albums on Capitol and Columbia, but on labels called Asthmatic Kitty, Thrill Jockey, Dischord and Kill Rock Stars. Most of the DJs I spoke with claimed that indie had grown out of the punk movement in the late 1970s, when a staunch do-it-yourself ethic motivated artists and audiences to create a musical underground. In present-day parlance, the term indie implied that the music was too creative, too weird or too esoteric to be played on

commercial radio. The sheer volume of it indicated that the breadth of American popular music is far greater and more diverse than the sum of its hits.

Whence Independence?

Prior to the twentieth century, there were two ways to consume music: attending a live performance in a public or private space, or playing an instrument. With the invention of the mechanical reproduction of sound in 1877 came the ability to make music tangible, portable and repeatable. Although Thomas Edison did not originally conceptualize the phonograph as a music player, the machine's eventual adaptation by fellow inventors for precisely that purpose forever changed American culture. Building on the establishment of a centralized sheet music industry in New York, the nascent recording industry turned popular songs into a booming business. Music no longer required live musicians or instruments, but could be accessed and consumed by untrained and unenlightened masses of consumers. Dropping a nickel in coin-operated playback machines (also known as "coin-ops," and later as jukeboxes) or winding a phonograph and placing a needle were the only demands involved in reproducing sound. The process fascinated and excited Americans of every age, class and ethnicity, and the nascent recording industry did everything in its power to exploit their interest.

Recorded music soon saturated public spaces, as coin-ops were placed in train stations, ferry boat landings, shopping areas, amusement parks, hotels, saloons and cafes.¹ At the turn of the century, phonograph manufacturers designed players for home-use, which would eventually replace the piano as the primary means of domestic musical

¹ William Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25.

entertainment. The emergence of radio shortly after further expanded the availability of music; as early as the 1920s, music comprised over sixty-percent of all programming.²

Not everyone was enamored with sound technology, or the ways in which it commodified music. Early detractors of jukeboxes in the 1890s lamented the perceived decline of American culture signified by swarms of working class citizens who favored cheap public entertainment. Although recordings of his music were some of the biggest sellers in the early 1900s, John Philip Sousa initially feared the phonograph would put music teachers out of business.³ Likewise, many cultural critics claimed that recordings of popular songs distracted consumers from the more edifying pursuit of learning to play an instrument. “As books have become common with the invention of printing, so has music with the invention of player-machines,” rued violinist Elise Fellows White, “and the best books and the best music must now share the same careless fate.”⁴

One of the most outspoken and influential critics of popular music was German music scholar Theodor Adorno, who wrote volumes of essays on music and culture between the 1920s and 1960s. He was one of the early members of the Frankfurt School, which was founded on interdisciplinary, neo-Marxist theories of social behavior. According to Frankfurt theorists, modern capitalism and the mass media threatened the development of cultural forms by manipulating the public into mass consumerism. For Adorno, the commodification of popular music led to regressive listening through the promotion of standardized, repetitive songs. In his 1945 essay “A Social Critique of Radio Music,” Adorno decried popular music programming for encouraging mere

² Fred J. MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!: Radio Programming in American Life, 1920-1960*. (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 13.

³ Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 31.

⁴ Elsie Fellows White, “Music versus Materialism,” *The Musical Quarterly* 8 (1922): 41.

“commodity listening...whose ideal it is to dispense as far as possible with any effort on the part of the recipient,” leading the listener to “suspend all intellectual activity when dealing with music.”⁵ Other cultural elitists also supported the idea that mass activities had culturally stultifying effects, as Dwight Macdonald wrote in 1957:

There are theoretical reasons why Mass Culture is not and can never be any good. I take it as axiomatic that culture can only be produced by and for human beings. But in so far as people are organized (more strictly, disorganized) as masses, they lose their human identity and quality. For the masses are in historical time what a crowd is in space: a large quantity of people unable to express themselves as human beings because they are related to one another neither as individuals nor as members of communities.⁶

But some scholars were more cautious about casting the music industry as a faceless corporate machine that manipulated passive audiences. In 1950, sociologist David Riesman published a study of adolescents’ listening habits in which he addressed Adorno’s assumptions about the power of the music industry over consumers. After interviewing 150 youths, Riesman found a minority group whose critical attitudes towards mainstream popular music led them to make alternative choices. For Riesman, this minority group was characterized by “an insistence on rigorous standards of judgment and taste in a relativist culture; a preference for the uncommercialized, unadvertised small bands rather than name bands; the development of a private language (the same is true of other aspects of private style) and then a flight from it when the private language is taken over by the majority group, [and] a profound resentment of the commercialization of radio and musicians.”⁷

⁵ Theodor Adorno, “A Social Critique of Radio Music,” *The Kenyon Review* 7 (1945): 211.

⁶ Dwight Macdonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture,” in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957), 69.

⁷ David Riesman, “Listening to Popular Music,” *American Quarterly* 2 (1950): 365.

Riesman's study suggests several important things. First, the preference for uncommercialized bands implies that there were spaces in which popular music, whether through sound recordings or live performance, was exchanged outside mainstream outlets. Second, the minority's commitment to aesthetic standards in a variable context confirms that, contrary to Adorno's claims, individual agency did exist among music consumers whose tastes were not necessarily dictated by the industry. Third, their cultivation of cultural practices and the subsequent abandonment of them when "taken over" by the majority indicate tension between the two. While the minority clearly wielded some influence over majority behaviors, mainstream acceptance was not considered a desirable outcome. Maintaining a marginalized status was a key component in this social environment. For the active minority, the consumption of music seemed to occur at a more critical level, defined by the desire to develop a viable alternative to mainstream or dominant culture.

Riesman's findings suggest that independent social practices have a history in American music that began before the 1970s. This presents a line of inquiry that has not yet been examined in ethnomusicology or popular music studies, and it provides the basis for my dissertation. The aim of my study is twofold: 1) To understand how the concept of independence has been musically and socially manifested in the cultural field of American popular music, and 2) To explore some of the ways in which it has subsequently influenced how popular music has been created, distributed and consumed.

Discovering Independence

My involvement in college radio beginning in 2003 sparked my interest in independent music. I had been a fan of a number of popular music genres prior to that, marked by my coming of age in the 1990s grunge era when I experienced my first personal connection with a style of music that seemed to echo the attitudes of my generation. And, like so many middle-class Americans, my tastes expanded during college as I emerged from the suburban bubble in which I grew up into a more diverse social setting. Although I was working on a degree in clarinet performance, I soon discovered a world of sounds beyond Western art music. I developed a stronger affinity for blues and jazz towards the end of my undergraduate career, and a subsequent internship at the University Musical Society, an organization in Ann Arbor that hosts over eighty concerts a year, exposed me to a much greater range of musical forms such as Japanese drumming, Brazilian folk music, Irish dancing, South African choral music and Tuvan throat singing. My personal music collection expanded considerably with the advent of Napster in the early 2000s. Coming into possession of hundreds of artists and songs I hadn't heard or owned before fueled my enthusiasm for all types of music, which I loved to share with appreciative friends and family. By the time I arrived at Tufts to pursue graduate work in ethnomusicology in 2002, I considered myself a musical authority. I thought I would make an excellent DJ.

After a few months of learning about college radio, however, I realized that I still had a great deal to learn about the breadth and scope of popular music. Much of what I subsequently learned came from the recommendations of fellow DJs, who were just as enthusiastic about sharing their musical knowledge as I was. They told me about local

talent, up-and-coming regional musicians and artists from the past who were less famous than their contemporaries, but had created substantial discographies over the course of their careers. The station was my portal into a tiny facet of the music industry that skirted the mainstream just enough to stay relevant within it, while providing an outlet for the majority of musicians who would never have a Top 40 hit. My role as a DJ was more than simply sharing music; I had the ability to connect aspiring artists to an audience, however small, and fill some of the musical gaps that commercial radio deliberately ignores. I listened to other DJs' shows and gained an appreciation for those that emphasized the flexibility of college radio by featuring obscure artists and songs alongside those that were better known, challenging listeners' expectations while still resonating in familiar ways. Some shows were too outré even for my tastes, but I recognized their importance in demonstrating that extreme originality deserves a place on FM airwaves. When I moved to Maryland in 2004, I continued my work as a freeform DJ at Maryland's station WMUC.

Because college radio helped expose me to so many types of music (and because tickets to shows are often free for DJs), I have attended hundreds of concerts over the past nine years, presented by artists from a variety of genres, including folk, rock, bluegrass, classical, country, hip hop, jazz and blues. The internet has been an important tool for me as well, and I rely on it in order to regularly engage with indie music communities through social networks such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and the WMUC listserv. None of these will ever replace in-person exchanges, however, and sharing and discussing music with family and friends remains one of the best ways to inform and be informed about new artists and styles, past and present.

As I began pursuing my doctoral degree at the University of Maryland in 2004, I became increasingly fascinated by the ways in which social processes contribute to the development of popular music cultures. In particular, I wanted to consider how my own involvement in independent music fit into the larger history of do-it-yourself endeavors that have so often been the catalysts for significant changes in American popular music. My preliminary research began with three questions: what is indie music culture, who are its participants and what are the activities that comprise it? My intent was to study the ways in which practice and aesthetics articulate in opposition to the mainstream, and to see if I could link them to similar patterns in the history of popular music.

Overview

This dissertation is divided into two sections, the first of which focuses on independent labels and radio broadcasts in the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing from Peterson and Berger's study on cycles of symbol production in American popular music, I describe the rise and decline of independent labels in the 1920s and 1940s, in which African-American jazz and later rhythm & blues music were distributed through independent networks. I then address the evolution of popular music narratives on the radio, from the 1930s through the 1960s, in order to highlight the contributions of black DJs, followed by community and freeform DJs, all of whom subverted the standard, nationalized rhetoric of major networks' popular music programming.

In the second section, I show how the modern concept of independence developed as a more overtly social and political approach to popular music that emerged on the heels of the folk revival and evolution of rock in the 1960s. The do-it-yourself ethic

established by the punk movement of the 1970s fueled the formation of underground independent music communities in the following decade. They articulated with folk ideologies of community, authenticity and autonomy in order to define their distinction from the mainstream. They evolved from a solid, mostly person-to-person underground network in the 1980s to more fragmented and overlapping virtual communities with the onset of internet culture in the early twenty-first century.

Finally, I conclude with a present-day ethnography of independent music performances in order to understand how artists, mediators and audiences negotiate their independence in live settings. In doing so, I argue that while independence remains situated in ideas about community, authenticity and autonomy, it is subjectively understood and constructed by individual members of independent communities.

Popular Music Studies in Ethnomusicology

Studies of American popular music are relatively new to ethnomusicology. There has been a long-held bias that the study of an exotic “other” in remote sections of the world constitutes the most legitimate form of fieldwork.⁸ Furthermore, popular music, particularly that in the United States, has been historically stigmatized as a “lower” form of music, due in large part to its associations with mass culture, and the belief that it represents a less culturally-authentic area of study. From a practical standpoint, it is admittedly more difficult to draw research boundaries around music that is so widely disseminated and consumed. And Adorno’s staunch belief that classical and popular

⁸ Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, eds, *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13.

music belonged at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum prevented generations of scholars across disciplines from giving serious attention to the latter.

It wasn't until the 1970s that academics began to embrace popular music as worthy of investigation. Some of the first music scholars to focus on popular genres and musicians were musicologists, such as Philip Tagg, Robert Walser, Charles Hamm and Susan McClary, all of whom have done admirable work in analyzing popular music texts through social and musical theoretical frameworks. However, the tendency to rely on mostly secondary sources such as sound recordings, music videos and interviews from journalistic sources created some notable gaps. In 1993, anthropologist Sara Cohen addressed the need for more critical, participant-observation methods of examining individuals and social relationships:

An ethnographic approach to the study of popular music, involving direct observation of people, their social networks, interactions and discourses, and participation in their day-to-day activities, rituals, rehearsals and performances, would encourage researchers to experience different relationship, views, values and aesthetics, or to view familiar contexts from an alternative perspective.⁹

Cohen's 1991 study of rock music in Liverpool gave voice to local artists and audiences in order to understand the social and musical organization of the culture. Two years earlier, fellow British scholar Ruth Finnegan published an ethnography of local music-making in Liverpool, which also emphasized social practices, and the attitudes and values of local musicians.

As a fieldwork-based discipline, ethnomusicology is particularly well-designed to undertake studies of popular music that emphasize first-hand experience.¹⁰ Although such

⁹ Sara Cohen, "Ethnography and Popular Music Studies," *Popular Music* 12 (1993): 135.

¹⁰ David Pruett, "When the Tribe Goes Triple-Platinum: A Case Study Toward an Ethnomusicology of Mainstream Popular Music," *Ethnomusicology* 55 (2011): 6.

studies remain on the periphery of the discipline, a number of ethnomusicologists have made significant contributions to the literature. In 1997, Rob Bowman's book *Soulsville, U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records* presented a thorough account of the rise and fall of an important American record label, based largely on a multitude of interviews he conducted with both personnel and musicians. In 1999, Harris M. Berger published *Metal, Rock and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience*, which examines four music scenes in northeastern Ohio. Berger focuses on individual perception and experience (of both his participants and himself) in order to understand how meaning is constructed and maintained in the musical process. Kai Fikentscher takes a similar perspective in his 2000 book "*You Better Work!*": *Underground Dance Music in New York City*. He, too, presents a vibrant music scene through both a historical and socio-cultural lens, bolstered by his own enthusiasm for and participation in the community. Finally, in his 2004 ethnography *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-class Culture*, Aaron Fox explores the role of country music in working-class life. Based in a honky-tonk bar in Lockhart, Texas, Fox's study takes an in-depth look at the construction of social and musical identities through sound and text.

Previous Scholarship on Independent Music

Although Riesman made great strides in showing that popular music had more social facets than previous scholars assumed, subsequent studies of independence in popular music in the 1970s and 80s tended to perpetuate the idea that it was the ideological opposite of commercial culture. This argument is frequently framed in terms of industry, in which independent labels nurture creative, grass-roots cultural forms, and

major labels push for standardization and formula in order to sell in high volumes. In their 1977 study of the history and politics of the popular music industry, Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo presented indie labels as representatives of creative cultural expressions that were eventually co-opted and “manhandled by a corporate society.”¹¹ In the early 1980s, Nelson George and Peter Manuel described the role of indie labels in the production and distribution of rhythm and blues and salsa music, respectively. Both authors claimed that once the music achieved mainstream popularity through major labels, it lost its intrinsic cultural vitality. While it’s important to acknowledge that various levels of commercialization does have an effect on audiences and aesthetics, the idea that independents and majors represent a clash between art and commerce has since been challenged.

More recent scholarship, most of which has been undertaken by British scholars, has focused on independent labels as smaller subsets of the music industry rather than companies operating outside of it. Britain’s history of independence shares many similarities with those of the United States, including its modern roots in the 1970s punk movement that flourished in London, and has exerted a global influence. Ethnomusicologist Tony Mitchell published a study of independent music in New Zealand in 1994, in which he discussed the Flying Nun label and its distinctive non-commercial approach to a heterogeneous range of artists. He examined Flying Nun’s position in both the social and political context of New Zealand’s independent music scene, as well as its relationship to the global music industry. Stephen Lee took a similar approach in his 1995 ethnography of the Chicago independent record company WaxTrax!

¹¹ Steve Chapple and ReebeeGarofalo, *Rock n’ Roll is Here To Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1977), xiv.

Lee framed the relationship between indies and majors as a continual process of interaction in which indies seek to emulate major business practices, and the majors depend on indies for innovative musical styles. For Lee, independence and its related social concept “operate as a powerful site of cultural negotiation.”¹²

David Hesmondhalgh has been one of the most prolific scholars of independent music labels. In his 1998 case study of the British dance music industry, he emphasized the close ties between independents and majors. Citing out a range of licensing, distribution, ownership and financing deals, Hesmondhalgh points out that the relationship between indies and majors is becoming increasingly complex and often contradictory as music scenes and ideologies become more fragmented. A year later, he published an article on the institutional and aesthetic politics of British indie labels *Creation and One Little Indian*. He concluded that the 1990s marked a new era of major/independent collaboration in which indies abandoned “the autonomy sought by punk” in favor of more “arm’s length institutional ties with corporations.”¹³

In the last decade, two important studies of independent music as a social and cultural phenomenon have emerged. Communications professor Holly Kruse focused on the social and geographical spaces of independent music in the 1980s. In *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*, Kruse examines the practices and relationships that developed in the late-1980s and early-1990s as independent pop and rock became national and international cultural forms. She focuses on the ways in which narratives of independence positioned their ideologies in terms of peripheral geographic

¹² Stephen Lee, “Re-examining the Concept of the ‘Independent’ Record Company: The Case of Wax Trax! Records,” *Popular Music* 14 (1995): 29.

¹³ David Hesmondhalgh, “Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre,” *Cultural Studies* 13 (1999):56-57.

spaces that functioned in opposition to the centralized mainstream production. While she includes very little musical descriptions or analyses, Kruse's work gives important insights on the social and economic networks of "indie scenes" and how they contributed to the eventual popularization of "alternative" music in the 1990s.

In 2006, anthropologist Wendy Fonarow published the book *Empire of Dirt: Aesthetics and Rituals in British Indie Music*. Delineating her field as "the British indie community," Fonarow defines indie music in a variety of terms, including industry, genre, ethos and aesthetics, before presenting her ethnographic examination of performances as rituals. She claims that indie music "is generally played by slender white males in their late teens to early thirties," and that it is "primarily guitar rock or pop combined with an art school sensibility."¹⁴ While this may be true in Britain (though I suspect there are more styles of independence there as well), it is far too narrow a description to apply to independent music in the U.S. Neither can participants in American independent music be reduced to a single community, as Fonarow delineates in her study. But her work remains valuable as a comprehensive contextual examination of indie aesthetics and moral codes, and her focus on constructions of sexuality and creativity in particular offer new perspectives to gender research in popular music studies.

Methodology

My study builds on the work of these scholars in order to examine independence from both a historic and modern perspective. Unlike previous works, however, I do not

¹⁴ Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 40.

focus solely on independent labels as a reflection of cultural struggle, nor do I limit indie music to a single era. I also avoid a genre-based definition of independence or “indie” music, due to the fact that the term cannot be reduced to a single set of aesthetic criteria. Rather, I view independence as a broader tradition of social practices that challenge the cultural hegemonies of American popular music. Labels are one of many means through which this happens—others include broadcasting, print media, in-person and virtual social networks, and live performance. Independence also describes an approach to the production, distribution and consumption of popular music that circumvents mainstream outlets. For example, an independent artist may write and perform songs that use standard popular music idioms, but insist on self-releasing her albums in an effort to maintain the total control over her music that she would relinquish in working with a major label. Another artist whose music is not considered commercially acceptable might rely on an independent label to help distribute her music to a small, but appreciative fan base. A music fan with eclectic tastes will often seek out vinyl records at a local independent record shop in order to find obscure albums, as well as satisfy his preference for analog over digital recordings. Or, as many of the college radio DJs I interviewed confirmed, they broadcast “weird” music as an antidote to the repetitiveness and predictability of Top 40 commercial radio. Whatever the approach, I have found that independence is a concept that people care deeply about, and for nearly a century it has played a vital role in challenging the boundaries of American popular music.

Nine years of graduate studies in ethnomusicology have introduced me to a variety of perspectives on methodologies. Seminars in both fieldwork and the anthropology of music provided critical examinations of the evolution of the discipline

and influential theories regarding the researcher's role in writing about music cultures. We considered fundamental ideas such as systems of social organization, historical context, how musical meaning is conveyed, how performers and audiences interact and how performances can be represented analytically and experientially. The researcher's position with regard to her field is one that has been recently revisited by some of the discipline's leading scholars in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, edited by Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley. In the 2008 edition, they call attention to some of the issues facing twenty-first century ethnomusicologists, such as the inclusion of "virtual fieldwork" as the Internet has become an increasingly significant research tool.¹⁵ More significantly, the long-held tenets that objectivity and strict—or at least clearly-delineated—social boundaries constitute the most "accurate" ethnographies have given way to greater understandings of the complexities of the process. In his chapter on mediating field methods and experiences, Timothy Rice challenges the concept of the insider-outsider dichotomy, claiming that researchers enact a variety of social positions and move from "pre-understandings to explanation to new understandings."¹⁶ Kay Kaufman Shelemay also pointed out that ethnographies should not be built on the dated concept of a bounded field, but understood as a series negotiated relationships with a stream of individuals.¹⁷

When I made the decision to study independence for my dissertation, I did so with the understanding that my "field" would be synonymous with the activities of my everyday life. But bringing these activities under academic focus presented some

¹⁵ Barz and Cooley, *Shadows in the Field*, 14.

¹⁶ Timothy Rice, "Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology," in *Shadows in the Field*, 58.

¹⁷ Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "The Ethnomusicologist, Ethnographic Method, and the Transmission of Tradition," in *Shadows in the Field*, 153.

challenges, not least of which involved defining their relationship to independence, as well as balancing my own authority and self-reflection with the voices of my research subjects. Keith Negus's 1996 *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* was immensely helpful in illuminating how interdisciplinary approaches can be valuable to popular music scholarship. He provides clear and concise overviews of a variety of methodologies from sociology, cultural studies, musicology, and media and communication studies. In his introduction, Negus acknowledges that while scholars tend to feel a deep and intrinsic connection with popular music, "as soon as we try to communicate and share this experience we are caught up in language and culture—the range of concepts, communicative actions and social practices that we must use to formulate, convey and exchange meanings with other people."¹⁸ Combining perspectives that reach across several disciplines not only reflects the complexities of popular music cultures, but also encompasses broader understandings of social relationships, musical texts and media types. I used a similar multi-dimensional approach for this project, which includes historical musicology, archival research, ethnography, communication, media studies and participant-observation.

I outlined my field according to the spaces in which I regularly engage with independent music: college and noncommercial radio stations, websites, blogs and social networks, live concerts and in-person exchanges. I interviewed two dozen participants in these communities, including DJs, musicians, journalists and consumers, to which I also refer as fans, listeners, audience members and users, depending on the context in which they are engaging with the music. I asked them each to provide a definition of

¹⁸ Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 3-4.

independent music, what it means to them, how they became involved and what role they play in it. I asked the musicians to talk about their perception of the industry, and whether recording on an indie label was a priority. To the DJs and journalists, I directed questions regarding the categorization and possible stratification of indie music, as well as their perspectives on how it has evolved over the decades. I have also held countless casual conversations in which discussions of independent music arose as a matter of course, whether it was with a fellow audience member at a concert or through e-mail contact with a friend.

Because independent music is regionally-based, I expanded my work to other parts of the country. I made five field trips to areas of the Midwest, the West Coast and the South where I conducted both archival and field research. I traveled to my alma mater at the University of Michigan to interview student staff members at the campus radio station, and study the Edison sheet music collection in the Clements Library. I spent a week in Los Angeles where I toured KCRW and Pacifica's radio archives, and went to an indie show at the Troubadour. On one of my visits to my hometown of Minneapolis, I toured The Current radio's headquarters in St. Paul and interviewed their programming director. I spent three days exploring Nashville, where I sat in on a traditional bluegrass session at a local venue, followed by a trip to Memphis where I toured Graceland and took a tour of the legendary Sun Record Studios. Finally, I traveled to Austin, Texas, where I examined the papers of the Duke/Peacock record label at UT's Briscoe Center for American History, and attended several live music events near the campus. Back in Maryland, I attended more concerts at a variety of different venues in the D.C-Baltimore

area. I went to shows at the 8x10, the Black Cat, the 930 Club, the Rock and Roll Hotel, WMUC, Merriweather Post Pavillion and the National Mall.

My work as a sound archivist at the Library of American Broadcasting has given me access to a large number of resources in radio history. Over the past seven years, I have archived thousands of boxes of reels, digital audio tapes (DATs) and transcription discs from the 1920s through the 1960s. These have included both airchecks, which are engineer-produced recordings of on-air broadcasts, and syndicated programs, which are studio-produced records distributed nationally to radio stations for broadcast. I am familiar with popular music programming of commercial radio networks, particularly during radio's "Golden Age" between the 1930s and 1950s, which includes both local and national broadcasts.

Theoretical Approaches

The theoretical framework for this study draws from two sources: Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the social field, and Richard Middleton's theory of articulation both help explain how independent communities operate and function in relation mainstream popular music. Bourdieu describes the social field as a multi-dimensional system in which power is negotiated through the cultivation and distribution of capital, which may be either material or abstract.¹⁹ This includes cultural, economic and social capital, as well as symbolic, which may be translated as prestige, reputation or renown. Music can and does represent all of forms of capital, and is subject to changing ideas about its meaning and value. I locate the struggle between independent communities and

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," *Theory and Society* 14 (1985):724.

mainstream culture in the ongoing process of constructing and reconstructing the cultural, economic and social value of music.

Symbolic capital is of particular importance, as it is generated when the music of an independent community achieves legitimacy in the dominant culture. According to Bourdieu, distinction is synonymous with symbolic capital, and represents the recognition of difference within a social field.²⁰ In terms of music, styles developed within independent music communities, which frequently resist dominant cultural forms, achieve symbolic status when they are acknowledged by the larger music industry. This signals a paradoxical moment of both triumph and loss. In popular music, major labels depend on categorization in order to identify target audiences and clarify their marketing strategies. Once a musical style can be identified as a genre, it can be co-opted by the mainstream industry, homogenized to suit wider tastes and used as a vehicle for economic gain. This is a primary reason why independent communities usually fragment following the popularization of a given musical style, as music is no longer resistant when it becomes absorbed into cultural hegemony. As music journalist Michael Azerrad said of the commercialization of indie rock in the 1990s, “the struggle was much more fun than the victory.”²¹

In *Studying Popular Music*, musicologist Richard Middleton advanced a theory of articulation as a way of understanding how musical styles develop and challenge cultural hegemonies. Articulation, which operates “by combining existing elements into new patterns of by attaching new connotations to them,” arises from principles tied to class position. According to Middleton:

²⁰ Ibid.,731.

²¹ Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American IndieUnderground, 1981-1991* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 499.

The theory of articulation recognizes the complexity of cultural fields. It preserves a relative autonomy for cultural and ideological elements (musical structures and song lyrics, for example) but also insists that those combinatory patterns that are actually constructed do mediate deep, objective patterns in the socio-economic formation, and that the mediation takes place *in struggle*; the classes fight to articulate together constituents of the cultural repertoire in particular ways so that they are organized in terms of principles or sets of values determined by the position and interests of class in the prevailing mode of production.²²

Like Bourdieu, Middleton recognizes the importance of examining social divisions and hierarchies in order understand how cultural forms develop and change. Within this framework, Middleton divides the history of Western popular music into three distinct periods, each about fifty years apart, that were defined by radical situational changes caused by dramatic shifts in articulation. He, too, highlights the role of the middle class in defining the periods of bourgeois revolution (1850), mass culture (1900) and pop culture (1950), each of which will receive further explanation as it arises in the context of my timeline of independence. I also claim that internet culture (2000) constitutes the fourth period of radical change, given the irrevocable social and musical transformations that internet and digital technology have brought to popular music.

I also take an interdisciplinary approach with regards to my musical analyses. Some popular music scholars, especially musicologists, have incorporated Western music theory into their studies, which is one way to effectively show how cultural meaning is communicated through sound. For my own study, however, I have found it more useful to focus on a number of aspects in addition to musical style. Whether I am discussing a transcription of a radio program from the 1940s, or describing the atmosphere at a present-day indie concert, examining ideas, attitudes and values, historical processes and social behaviors offers a broader understanding of how independence is manifest both

²² Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 9.

socially and musically. I do use some basic theoretical elements, namely harmonic chordal progressions and popular song forms, to show how music is structured, particularly when striking changes in these forms were responsible for expanding the boundaries of popular music. But I favor verbal descriptions over theoretical ones in order to give an accurate impression about the sounds, feelings and effects of music.

Defining Independent Communities

I have chosen to adopt the term “communities” to describe groups of people engaged in the production, distribution and consumption of independent music. Previous scholars who have studied popular music’s minority groups have favored terms such as “subcultures” or “scenes.” In his 1979 book *Subculture*, Dick Hebdige examined British punk as an alternative way of life, and argued that punk subcultures cultivated specific styles of language, music, fashion and appearance that demonstrated their value systems. While his distinction between subcultures apart from the mainstream is similar to mine, I do not believe that independence can fit so neatly into a subcultural category, due to the fact that it has evolved and changed both musically and socially over the last century.

Nor do I wish to use Will Straw’s concept of music scenes, defined as “that cultural space in which a range of musical practices co-exist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization.”²³ I agree with Keith Negus’s criticism that Straw does not show “how scenes emerge and what social processes might contribute to

²³ Will Straw, “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music,” *Cultural Studies* 5 (1991): 273.

the establishment of audience alliances,” which are crucial factors in my study.²⁴ Straw also explicitly rejected the idea of community because it implies a stable, geographically-rooted space. This may be problematic in social sciences, but in studies of music communities are often perceived and understood as more fluid social entities, especially given music’s distribution through channels such as radio and the internet. For these reasons, I believe Anthony Cohen’s definition of community is the most pertinent:

Community exists in the minds of its members, and should not be confused with geographic or sociographic terms of ‘fact.’ By extension, the distinctiveness of communities and, thus, the reality of their boundaries, similarly lies in the mind, in the meanings which people attach to them, not in their structural forms.²⁵

Understanding community as a symbolic construction of its members resonates with my conception of independence as a fundamental approach. While some indie music communities are geographically situated, many of them base their connection on the types of practices and tastes that distinguish them apart from the mainstream.

Academic narratives of mass culture have often been rightly accused of over-generalizing the category of “the masses,” but the “us versus them” perspective expressed by Riesman’s active minority is an integral part of independent ideology. Kruse noted this in *Site and Sound*:

Without dominant, mainstream musics against which to react, independent music cannot be independent. Its existence depends upon dominant music structures and practices against which to define itself. Indie music has therefore been continually engaged in an economic and ideological struggle in which its outsider status is re-examined, re-defined, and re-articulated to sets of musical practices.²⁶

²⁴ Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 23.

²⁵ Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1985), 98.

²⁶ Holly Kruse, *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 149.

My references to “the mainstream” or “dominant media” as oppositional incarnations of indie are not intended to convey my own assumption that mass culture can be understood as a single entity; of course it cannot. But fears about the standardizing effects of culture industries have remained as much a part of public discourse on popular music as they have in scholarship. The perception of mass culture is a crucial element of resistance, which I define here as a public act of conscience that communicates itself with the aim to create change. And while academic perspectives have often regarded resistance as a struggle between art versus commerce in independent versus major label interactions, I believe this overlooks the fact that all popular music is commercial. Among the independent communities I studied, the concern was not about art *versus* commerce, but rather characterized by a struggle over the process through which art *becomes* commerce.

The concept of authenticity is central to this struggle. In 1994, anthropologist Edward Bruner presented four definitions of authenticity to describe historical reproduction: 1) credible and convincing; 2) historically accurate; 3) original; and 4) duly authorized, certified or legally valid.²⁷ In independent music communities, authenticity is understood in similar ways. In one sense, authenticity represents a creative process undiluted by the mainstream industry’s attempts to alter the original expression of an artist in order to enhance its marketability. It also refers to the expression itself as an accurate reflection of the artist’s own lived experience, which is original by nature. Audience appreciation is therefore socially validating, and the resultant formation of social groups “authorize” a style or genre of music based on their perception of the artist’s authenticity. Commercialization becomes problematic when “corporate

²⁷ Edward Bruner, “Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism,” *American Anthropologist* 96 (1994): 399-400.

cleansing,” or the processes of introducing formulaic elements to make music more widely appealing, compromises the artist’s distinctive voice. Fonarow’s arguments about performance expectations in indie music resonate with this idea:

Indie requires the performance to be imbued with the authentic spirit of the artist’s experience. In looking for the real, the authentic, the credible in a performance onstage, the audience and critics want the musician to *be* rather than act.²⁸

The independent communities in which I conducted my research were mostly comprised of white, college-educated, middle class Americans between the ages of 18 and 40. They represent the demographic to whom modern independence has been relevant, although the longer history of independence has involved people belonging to other age groups, classes and cultural backgrounds. African-American musicians, for example, were integral to the independent labels of the 1920s and 1940s. But since the 1950s, the white, middle class youth market has been the primary target of the music industry. When rock music evolved in the 1960s, this market was perceived as a culture in which music was a central component. Narratives of youth culture have since permeated popular music scholarship, thanks in large part to Simon Frith’s 1978 study *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock*. However, Charles Hamm has since pointed out that such narratives are often problematic due to the fact that they have a tendency to omit “other marginalized ethnic populations.”²⁹

However, white youth culture plays an important role in the independent music communities I am studying, as modern independence evolved from the members of that group who felt socially marginalized by mainstream popular music. Furthermore, they

²⁸ Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt*, 191.

²⁹ Charles Hamm, *Putting Popular Music In Its Place* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23.

have wielded the most economic and social power to change the existing structures of the industry. The do-it-yourself (DIY) philosophy that defined the punk and postpunk movements on the 1970s and 80s speaks to the fact that participants had the knowledge and resources to create their own parallel industries. And subsequent independent communities, while continuing to evolve among high school and college-aged youths who are notorious for being musically adventures, have also been shaped by older social groups as continuations of their own youth experiences.

My own social position within these communities is multi-faceted. I am a white, middle-class, college-educated member of the population I am studying, and at the age of 35, I fit into the older end of the 18 to 40 range. As a woman, however, I am in the minority, both in the music industry and in popular music scholarship. Bonnie Wade has noted that in many academic disciplines including ethnomusicology, “maleness is taken for granted, and male spheres of cultural action have received the lion’s share of attention.”³⁰ In every music community I have inhabited, there have been far fewer female musicians, conductors, mediators, producers, industry personnel and even audience members than male ones. And when I attended the annual conference for the International Association for the Society of Popular Music in March of 2011, I noticed that the majority of scholars in attendance were men. I have grown accustomed to working and studying within male-dominated fields, and thankfully, I have encountered minimal sexual discrimination. Yet I remain critically aware of gender constructions in American society, and the ways in which we are socialized with regard to them. In some ways, popular music offers more flexibility in terms of gender identity, insofar as artists

³⁰ Bonnie Wade, *Thinking Musically: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131.

periodically comment upon or negotiate definitions of femininity and masculinity through their musical performances. But it more often serves as a means of reinforcing traditional roles, which often means restricting their participating altogether. Current pop charts may have a healthy number of women artists, but in most other genres such as hip hop and rock music, men still comprise the majority.

Given its marginal status, independent music tends to be more welcoming of women, and provides room for wider definitions of femininity than in mainstream popular music. For example, folk musician Ani DiFranco founded her own label Righteous Babe Records largely to escape the androcentric climate of major labels. In a 1999 interview, she said, “I basically get stereotyped a lot in terms of being a girl and writing ‘chick’ music for teenage girls or something. I think, if anything, the press kind of, because of my gender and my age, tends to kind of relegate my work to this sort of special-interest group.”³¹ While founding her own label meant giving up a higher-profile career, DiFranco also cast off the narrow expectations for female musicians in a patriarchal system. She was able to focus on writing thoughtful feminist lyrics without being shoehorned into one of the few categories that major labels reserve for “chick” music.

For me, being female in independent communities is problematic not in terms of access, but representation. All of my interview subjects were male, and nearly all of the concerts I attended featured male musicians. But in our social encounters, none of them demonstrated any outward bias towards the fact that I am a woman. Furthermore, I was admitted to all the behind-the-scenes tours, backstage quarters and archives that I

³¹ Michael Mechanic, “Interview: Righteous Babe Ani DiFranco,” *Mother Jones* online, September 8, 1999, accessed May 4, 2011, <http://motherjones.com/media/1999/09/interview-ani-difranco>.

requested. And while radio is and always has been a male-dominated realm, I was never discouraged from pursuing my goal of becoming a freeform DJ, nor was I barred from participating in any of the music events that I sought. I cannot speak to the experiences of other women in positions similar to mine, and I have chosen not to focus on gender in my examination of independent social practices. This is work I intend to do in the future. In the meantime, I hope my willingness to navigate areas traditionally controlled by men—namely radio and scholarship—might inspire more women to do the same.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter Two focuses on independent record labels in the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning with the sheet music trade, I show how popular music evolved from a publishing enterprise into a mass-mediated recording industry, and describe how the development of cultural hierarchies redefined the social fields in which music was created and consumed. I then focus on two eras when independent labels rose to prominence, first in the 1920s and again in the 1940s, to illustrate how their alternative approaches to production and distribution subverted those hierarchies. I argue that through their agency, musicians and audiences brought changed pervading ideas about the nature of popular music as social and cultural capital.

In Chapter Three, I turn my attention to radio, beginning in the late-1920s and early 1930s when popular music narratives began to address listeners as a national public. I trace the transition from live music to sound recordings in order to highlight the development of the disc jockey as the primary agent of distribution. I emphasize two eras

in which popular music narratives went through dramatic shifts, first in black radio broadcasts in the 1940s, followed by the FM underground in the 1960s, and describe how each ultimately effected long-term changes in the broadcasting of music.

Chapter Four introduces the era of modern independence, which developed from the folk revival and evolution of rock in the 1960, which brought ideas about socially-conscious expressions and artistic integrity into popular music. I analyze how the further conglomeration of the music industry commercialized those forms, precipitating the punk era in which underground networks rebelled against the centralization of rock music. The remainder of my study concentrates on the development of post-punk independent music communities in the 1980s, and how their social fields were shaped and defined by ideological struggles of resistance.

Chapter Five investigates how the developments of digital and internet technology have affected independent communities. Beginning with a discussion of the state of the music industry in the final decade of the twentieth century, I link the next wave of independence to Napster, when millions of music consumers overtly rejected the economic structures of the recording industry. I then focus on the ways in which independent social fields shifted to virtual spaces as internet culture evolved in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

I present a series of ethnographic case studies in Chapter Six, and look at independent music performance from several perspectives. I define what independence means in the twenty-first century based on my own involvement in indie music communities, as well as the definitions solicited from audience members, mediators and artists. Next, I describe five performances, contextualized by artists' backgrounds,

reception and career paths in order to illustrate the ways in which each of them negotiates his or her independence in the present-day music industry.

In my seventh and final chapter, I offer some present-day perspectives on the fragmentation and proliferation of independent music, followed by a review of the previous six chapters and the conclusions to which they have led me. My closing thoughts include suggestions for further research in independent music.

Chapter Two: The History of Independent Labels, 1920-1960

American musical culture began a profound transformation in the 1890s, when the mechanical reproduction of sound and the centralization of the sheet music business began to shape the production, distribution and consumption patterns that would form the popular music industry. The few powerful agents that controlled recorded music fashioned their approach similar to the systems of mass production favored by other developing industries. Popular songs were designed to reach as many consumers as possible, treated as commodities and manufactured under systemized labor. The resulting market tended to serve middle-class, European-based musical sensibilities at the expense of other forms of cultural expression, creating a standardized, homogenous market. But advancements in technology soon presented new opportunities for smaller enterprises to challenge those limits by responding to the needs and tastes of marginalized communities. Beginning in the early 1920s, independent record labels established a tradition of filling the musical chasms left by major labels' large-scale commercial goals and have subsequently played a vital role in broadening the spectrum of American popular music.

This chapter examines independent record labels in the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning with the sheet music trade, I show how popular music evolved from a publishing enterprise into a mass-mediated recording industry, and describe how the development of cultural hierarchies redefined the social fields in which music was created and consumed. I then focus on two eras when independent labels rose to prominence, first in the 1920s and again in the 1940s, to illustrate how their alternative

approaches to production and distribution subverted those hierarchies. I argue that through their agency, musicians and audiences changed pervading ideas about the nature of popular music as social and cultural capital.

The scholarship of Antoine Hennion and Keith Negus serve as points of both introduction and departure for this study. In his research on the relationship between production and consumption in popular music, Hennion posits the idea of collective creation. He conceptualizes the music producer as an intermediary between the artist and the public whose main function is representation. In other words, the producer reconciles public tastes with artist expression in order to create a satisfactory musical product. He claims that “outside the studio-laboratory the entities [were] clear and strong (Art, the Public, the Market, Technology) and their relationships were incomprehensible; in the studio, the act of equation introduces variables everywhere but constructs the relationships between them very clearly.”¹ I agree that producers, whether they’re understood as a label or an individual, should be viewed as collaborative agents who mediate between musicians and the market. However, Hennion seems to take public tastes for granted, and he neglects to consider how sociocultural contexts inform the production process. As I will illustrate, major and independent labels have approached production in many dissimilar ways, exemplifying their differing relationships to both the artists and audiences they serve.

Negus takes a more expansive view in his study of genres and corporate cultures in popular music. He positions his argument on the pivotal idea that an industry produces culture and culture produces an industry. On the one hand, he argues that entertainment

¹ Antoine Hennion, “An Intermediary Between Production and Consumption: The Producer of Popular Music,” *Science, Technology & Human Values* 14 (1989): 415.

corporations are organized and constructed in order to create distinctive products, commodities and intellectual properties. However, these can only be understood within “broader culture formations and practices that are neither within the control nor the understanding of the [recording] company.”² Like Hennion, Negus treats the mediation of commercial music not as unidirectional process but as a series of exchanges between corporate agents and consumers. He has argued elsewhere that it may be more useful to treat independent labels not as binary opposites to majors, but as part of a larger web of major and minor companies.³ Patterns of ownership in the music industry are indeed complex, and there have always been overlaps in personnel and business practices between independents and majors. But the fact that waves of independent activity have historically arisen in response to the homogeneity created by the dominant industry suggests that they are separated by some significant social and economic differences.

These patterns were the subject of a 1975 sociological study on the cycles of symbol production in American popular music. After studying a 26-year period of music production between 1948 and 1974, Peterson and Berger arrived at two conclusions: 1) that the degree of diversity in musical forms is inversely related to the degree of market concentration, and 2) that cycles of concentration and homogeneity tend to be followed by bursts of competition and creativity.⁴ While this study encompasses only the second era of music I explore, it can be also applied to the earlier one, as the centralization of the popular music industry in 1920s bears resemblance to that of the 1940s. Both periods of independent label activity were precipitated by changes in media technology and

² Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, *Popular Music in Theory*, 43.

⁴ Richard A. Peterson and David E. Berger, “Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music,” *American Sociological Review* 40 (1975): 170.

ownership, as well as the development of musical styles that fell outside the major labels' domain. Their innovations would have significant impacts on American musical culture, proving David Sanjek's assertion that "despite the fact that power always seems to lie in the hands of the few, hegemony never becomes a permanent state in a perpetually volatile marketplace and multicultural society."⁵ The story of independents and majors in the first half of the twentieth century can therefore be understood as a process of negotiation between the boundaries of social fields and the cultural value of music.

The Early Sheet Music Trade

In his 1983 study of the sociology of rock, Simon Frith astutely noted that "the ideological power of popular music comes from its popularity."⁶ The evolution of this ideology can be traced to the promotional style of the American sheet music trade, which began to develop in the late 1700s when small bands of musicians in New York, Boston and Baltimore began publishing songs to add to their means of support. The spread of home music-making among the middle-class in the early 1800s fueled sheet music sales, and by 1850 publishing was a substantial business.⁷ Even before musical styles were identified by categories, the notion of popularity was a strong selling point. A song from the early 1800s called "The Young and Blooming Bride" was touted as being "sung with unbounded applause by Mr. Brennan at His Vocal Concerts."⁸ "A Celebrated Duett" from the same era entitled "No Danger My Love is Now Near Thee" received the "greatest

⁵ David Sanjek, "One Size Does Not Fit All: The Precarious Position of the African-American Entrepreneur In Post-WWII American Popular Music," *American Music* 15 (1997): 556.

⁶ Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock* (London: Constable, 1983), 61.

⁷ Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: Norton, 2001), 223.

⁸ John Addison, "The Young and Blooming Bride" (New York: G.E. Blake and R. Meets, ca. early 1800s), Thomas Edison Collection, Clements Library, University of Michigan.

applause” when it was performed “by Mrs. Waring and Mr. Nichols.”⁹ The evolving social context for popular music appears to have been driven in part by the desire to be part of a shared experience. For consumers, cultivating knowledge of a common repertoire of songs either by rote or practice signaled their participation in a larger, oral music culture.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, songs were primarily being imported from Britain, as there had not yet been any formal recognition of American musical idioms. After the Civil War, however, the spread of black spirituals in printed form and the prominence of minstrel shows began to show evidence of more distinctive musical elements. The combination of European harmonies and African rhythmic patterns appeared with increasing regularity in popular songs, particularly through the influence of Stephen Foster, considered by many to be America’s first professional songwriter. He combined various styles including ballads, opera, English and Irish folk tunes and African-American spirituals to create “simple but memorable combinations of melody and text.”¹⁰ His use of verse-chorus form and the repetition of memorable and catchy musical statements (usually four bars in length) would become the template for success.¹¹ His songs circulated more widely than any others in antebellum America, aided by their performance in minstrel shows and the growth of music education, which enabled more people to perform them at home.

In describing the social fields for popular music in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Nicholas Tawa identifies some important seeds for the growth of an industry:

⁹ Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, “No Danger My Love is Now Near Thee” (New York: W. Dubois, ca. 1815) Thomas Edison Collection, Clements Library, University of Michigan.

¹⁰ Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.

¹¹ Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 441.

The post-Civil War audiences for popular song were really an aggregate of several overlapping publics, each large in number, and was characterized by heterogeneity. From the countless offerings of composers and publishers, the songs that became the most popular were those that were highly entertaining and communicative to one or more of those audiences. Moreover, their lyrics and music reflected some commonly held set of principles of taste and worth.¹²

Tawa suggests that there was a variety of styles and traditions that fell under the rubric of popular music, but that certain sonic characteristics made some songs more broadly appealing than others. The development and stratification of public tastes during this period receives substantial explanation in Lawrence Levine's study *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Levine examines how and why musical entertainment was bifurcated into two distinct categories: a mass-produced commercial sphere and an intellectual, individually-oriented realm of high art. The performance styles and aesthetic standards in which Americans were enculturated shaped both spheres, but the elevation of one as more "serious" trivialized the musical and social values of the other. This process of cultural transformation offers a key to understanding the formation of more strictly defined social fields based on the enforcement of segregated consumption patterns.

Prior to about 1850, formal public performances of music were characterized by a diversity of cultural expressions and audience types. Among the most popular genres was opera, which was treated with flexibilities unknown in present-day practice. For example, it was common for a vocalist to perform a well-known Scottish air alongside a Verdi aria, for arias to be translated and sung in English and for operas to appear on the same bill as

¹² Nicholas Tawa, *The Way to Tin Pan Alley: American Popular Song, 1866-1910*. (New York: Schirmer, 1990), 4.

comedic plays, circus acts or even minstrel shows.¹³ Audiences of similarly eclectic social and economic classes had access to a variety of cultural forms, intermingled in the common spaces of public theatres and opera houses. Symphonic music was also a fluid category, and military bands and orchestras often shared musicians, repertoire and performance spaces. According to Levine, “numbers like ‘La Traviata Quickstep,’ which Union soldiers marched to during the Civil War, or ‘The Bandit Quickstep,’ derived from Verdi’s opera *Ermani*, might cause us some problems of categorization today, but in the nineteenth century they were widely disseminated and easily accepted blends of two of the most popular musical genres.”¹⁴

Both African and European musical forms comprised a large part of shared public tastes. The millions who attended these performances became well-acquainted with Mozart, Beethoven, Berlioz, Handel, Haydn, Wagner, Rossini and Schubert, and therefore with tonally-based melodies and harmonies, sonata form, motivic elements, wide dynamic ranges and patterns of phrasing that combined step-wise and intervallic motion. The folk songs, ballads and airs that performers took the liberty to insert (often invited by the composer’s own notations) may have been simpler in form, but shared many of these attributes so as to sound congruent with the operatic pieces. Likewise, the verse-chorus ballad forms and rhythmically-emphasized songs of minstrel shows, while not necessarily entirely accurate representations of black culture, introduced mixed audiences to a version of it.

As the century progressed, however, operas and symphonic music underwent a period of sacralization that was part of a larger effort by cultural leaders to rescue “pure”

¹³ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 90. Minstrel shows themselves often featured many operatic elements.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

art from rising social and technological threats. The number of voices lamenting the practice of mixing musical genres began to grow, as did the number of critics who decried the rowdy behavior of less refined members of the audience; it was not unusual for concert-goers to talk, clap, holler, smoke, drink, cheer, arrive late and leave early during a performance. The onslaught of European immigrants in the 1880s, most of whom ironically came from the very places that Americans esteemed as meccas of high art, added to fears of cultural corruption and social instability. The emergence of the mechanical reproduction of sound was equally troubling as it signified inauthentic, mass-produced music removed from its proper context.

The growing polarization of cultural forms gradually separated the social fields of music. For Middleton, this was the moment of “bourgeois revolution,” in Western music cultures when there were “immense struggles over what form music should take and what role it should play.”¹⁵ Classical and romantic art music was relegated to a more disciplined setting, in which concert halls only accommodated passive, polite audiences with knowledge of middle and upper-class social codes. Rowdier forms of entertainment such as circuses and minstrel shows, long considered culturally inferior, were removed altogether from classical music programs. Levine links these developments to the misguided nineteenth-century anthropological belief that intellectual capacity was based on cranial shape. Europeans’ higher brows supposedly indicated more advanced intellectual development over the comparatively lower brows of Africans. The terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” as descriptors of cultural expression entered American consciousness at the turn of the century through the agency of British cultural critic Matthew Arnold. His writings on the laudatory aspects of “high” culture deeply

¹⁵ Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 13.

influenced American consciousness, and by 1927 had become “completely absorbed in the mainstream of American thought.”¹⁶ According to Levine, adjectives such as “beautiful” and “modern” countered the “vulgar” and “rude” and “clustered around a congeries of values, a set of categories that defined and distinguished culture vertically, that created hierarchies which were to remain meaningful for much of [the twentieth] century.”¹⁷ It is important to note that not only did the dichotomization of culture perpetuate the concept of race, it also conflated blackness with a lower class identity.

The creation of institutions and criteria of high culture became part of the working world in which the popular music industry developed. The classification of music would become especially important to a burgeoning recording industry that decided which kinds of music to record and for whom. But reconciling the ideal of “good music” with the reality of public tastes would prove challenging after the centralization of sheet music publishers expanded the market for popular songs.

Tin Pan Alley

In the 1880s, vaudeville was fast becoming the leading form of musical entertainment in the United States. Its blend of music, skits, acrobatics and dance evolved from variety theatre, which was directly related to minstrel shows.¹⁸ Although the more licentious elements such as smoking, drinking and sexual humor were removed in order to appeal to the middle class, vaudeville never fully shed its associations with lower class leisure. Nevertheless, vaudeville troops traveled all over the country to audiences of

¹⁶ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 224.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 25.

increasingly large numbers. Popular songs were at a premium, and publishing houses began to hire staff songwriters to keep up with demand.¹⁹ A concentrated legion of publishers and songwriters became centralized in New York City, where urban growth and the influx of immigrants—particularly Eastern European Jews, who struggled to find work in more well-established industries with equally established prejudiced hiring practices—led to the formation of Tin Pan Alley.²⁰ Located on West 28th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues in Manhattan, Tin Pan Alley was supposedly named for the cacophony of pianos on which songwriters continuously attempted to hammer out hit songs. It would become the epicenter of the popular music business.

As an organization, Tin Pan Alley was structured in ways similar to that of other capitalist industries. It was divided into categories of specialized labor, with a hierarchy of publishers, composers, lyricists, arrangers, pluggers and cover illustrators.

What set Tin Pan Alley firms apart from others was twofold: their focus on serving only the popular song market and their aggressive approach to promoting music.²¹ Their location in the urban hub of New York, long established as a leader in entertainment, enhanced Tin Pan Alley's business relationships with theatre companies, including Broadway. Song pluggers, or those who publicly performed music in order to promote sales, were strategically placed not only on the stage, but in restaurants, hotels, department stores, saloons, supper clubs, sports events, festivals, fairs, amusement parks and busy street corners throughout the country. According to Charles K. Harris, a successful songwriter, publisher and one of the architects of Tin Pan Alley, "A new song

¹⁹ Ibid.,43.

²⁰ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 29.

²¹ Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 473.

must be sung, played, hummed and drummed into the ears of the public, not in one city alone, but in every city, town and village, before it ever becomes popular.”²²

For their part, Tin Pan Alley’s songwriters placed commercial success as their highest priority. It would be misleading to claim that they standardized popular music into a single format, as there was a fair assortment of song types that were considered popular, but they certainly used standardizing elements in order to achieve widespread appeal. Taking their cue from Stephen Foster, songwriters used verse-chorus structures and created simple melodic lines that could be easily remembered and repeated. The hook, a particularly compelling string of notes that individualized a song, was often paired with the song’s title in order to identify it with a product name. Contrast between step-wise motion and dramatic leaps in melody served to heighten expression, as did the inclusion of chromatic variations and modulations to the dominant (V), submediant (vi) or subdominant (IV) chords of the tonic key.²³ Preferred time signatures were usually duple, either 4/4 or 2/4, and occasionally triple meter, which was often used in the chorus as a contrast to a duple-meter verse. The addition of lively rhythms, particularly the syncopated patterns that animated minstrel shows, added a sense of vitality and motion to the music.

An increasingly common form, which became one of the most important in the twentieth century, was the four-section song with AABA melodic structure.²⁴ The statement of two verses, identical in melody, is followed by a bridge into a new key area before returning for a restatement of the main melody. The final A section usually includes some variations, such as extra ornamentations, modulations or a coda, to signify

²² Quoted in Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 14.

²³ Tawa, *The Way to Tin Pan Alley*, 164.

²⁴ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 24.

the climax and subsequent closing of the song. The AABA structure shares many similarities with sonata form, which emerged in the classical period of Western art music towards the end of the eighteenth century. It features three main sections in a two-part tonal structure: the exposition, which introduces a main theme in the tonic key; the development, which modulates into a new key; and the recapitulation, in which the exposition is restated with some variation. Given Americans' enculturation in European symphonic and operatic music, it follows that the basic elements of sonata form would resonate as familiar in popular song structure.

While European and African musical elements dominated popular music, they were by no means the only styles that songwriters integrated. Latino, Asian, American Indian music and sacred songs all offered attractive musical ideas. Homogenization resulted from the practice of incorporating a particular style's most striking features into familiar structures and formats. Lyrics, too, had to cover issues and sentiments that applied to everyone. As Tawa points out, the "talent for freshening standardized verbal and musical statements was essential for songwriters, but the main attributes attached to a composition would be unchanged."²⁵

Tin Pan Alley was successful in organizing a consumer-based market that responded to the public's affinity for popular music. By 1910 annual sales of sheet music reached an unprecedented thirty million copies.²⁶ But the overwhelming presence of Tin Pan Alley songs in American musical life also had some limiting effects, as Suisman observes:

[The songs] developed in tandem with a promotional system whose tendency was to crowd out alternatives, a tendency that increased as

²⁵ Tawa, *The Way to Tin Pan Alley*, 87.

²⁶ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 29.

competition within the industry grew. Music that was serious, complex, or demanding, noncommercial, or bound to local or regional identities and concerns—such music did not disappear, but it was forced to compete in the new musical culture with sounds deliberately crafted and promoted to capture as large a share of the public’s attention as possible.²⁷

Middleton identifies the formation of “mass culture” as the second moment of situational fracture in Western music, when monopoly-capitalist structures strove to create homogenous markets.²⁸ The musical styles of local or regional communities that were not embraced as viable commodities grew more scarce in their circulation. A number of outspoken critics complained of the ubiquity of popular songs, comparing their incessant repetition to deadly epidemics that threatened a cultural decline.²⁹ Unfortunately for critics, the emergence of recorded sound would give popular songs even more public prominence, at the same time complicating the structures of the industry and the struggle for dominance in the cultural field of music.

The Dawn of the Recording Industry

When Thomas Edison introduced his phonograph machine in 1877, he did not imagine his invention would precipitate a global music industry. He thought the most useful function of sound recording would be letter writing and business dictation, and concentrated on perfecting his machine to capture the human voice.³⁰ The first recording format Edison experimented with was a tinfoil-covered cylinder, a malleable but

²⁷ Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 58.

²⁸ Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 123.

²⁹ Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 56.

³⁰ Peter Copeland, *Sound Recordings* (London: British Library, 1991), 8.

cumbersome medium that made playback difficult and reproduction nearly impossible.³¹ It would be another ten years before he founded the Edison Phonograph Company after scientists discovered that wax cylinders were more viable for both recording and playback. And it wasn't until 1901 that a process for mass-producing them was put into effect. Meanwhile, a German manufacturer named Emile Berliner instigated the industry's first format war when he developed a more practical machine. Berliner's gramophone used flat discs, first made from rubber then from shellac, to record and replay. While Edison found modest success with his wax cylinder phonographs, the ease of replicating, distributing and playing flat discs soon surpassed the wax cylinders and Edison was forced to start manufacturing both types of machines.³²

By the turn of the century, Edison was in competition with two rival companies. The first was Columbia Records, which had been a subsidiary of Edison's North American Phonograph Company until 1894 when the latter broke up. The other was the Victor Talking Machine Company, whose founder Eldridge Johnson had produced phonograph machines to play Berliner's records. Through World War I, Edison, Columbia and Victor retained exclusive control of the nascent industry. Together they held so many patents for phonograph and recording technology that they successfully prevented competitors from encroaching on their success.³³ Like the sheet music publishers who preceded them, these first purveyors of sound recordings aggressively promoted their products. In doing so, they fostered new types of social practices centered on the mechanical reproduction of sound.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Rick Kennedy and Randy McNutt, *Little Labels-Big Sound: Small Record Companies and the Rise of American Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), xiii.

³³ Ibid.

Coin-operated Playback Machines

Before sound recordings reached American homes, they entered the public sphere in the form of coin-operated playback machines, later known as jukeboxes. On November 23, 1889, the Palais Royale Saloon in San Francisco was the first public space to be outfitted with two such devices, which came with multiple listening tubes. For five cents, patrons at the Palais Royale could choose from a number of popular songs, most of which came from military bands, vaudeville and minstrel shows. It was a personal listening experience that was at once public and private. While the venue itself was part of a bustling urban space, the listening tubes, an early form of modern headphones, enabled the listener to hear the music in his or her ears alone, “thereby deepening the social and psychological impact of their introduction to recorded sound.”³⁴

Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, coin-ops flourished in large public areas such as train stations, ferry boat landings, shopping areas, amusement parks, hotels and cafes. The phonograph companies also developed phonograph parlors, arcades in which patrons could become acquainted with the new technology before crowds of potential consumers. As the United States entered a period of industrialization, public listening venues became an important form of popular entertainment, and the simple and pleasurable experience of listening to a three-minute song for mere cents helped to create a demand for recorded music.

But the fears of cultural assimilation and industrialization described by Levine were heightened by the nature of the social fields that developed in many of these sites. Members of the working class, particularly recent immigrants, flocked to coin-op venues

³⁴ Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 24.

in pursuit of cheap entertainment and lively social gatherings. The sense of uneasiness this brought to members of the cultural elite was shared by the leaders of the phonograph industry, who sought to disassociate their products from the vulgar masses. With the exception of marching band music, popular music at the turn of the century had been relegated to the lowbrow end of the cultural spectrum.³⁵ Mass-oriented music was frowned upon, as was the sexual and racial content of many of the songs' lyrics. The leaders of the recording industry were therefore faced with the paradoxical challenge of promoting phonographs as instruments of cultural uplift while also appealing to the "unrefined tastes" of a broad consumer base.

The Phonograph Enters the Home

Preparing the phonograph for the domestic parlor involved some refinement of its own. Manufacturers and machinists worked to improve the sound quality of discs and playback equipment, while designers grappled with the issue of appearance. Victor was the first to build phonographs into ornate cabinets and consoles in which the less attractive mechanical parts could be concealed.³⁶ The transformation of the phonograph into a stately piece of furniture perfected its image for lofty promotional campaigns. Advertisements in magazines and newspapers often depicted living rooms as concert halls, with formally-attired couples and families gathered around their phonographs gazing at the ghostly figures of their favorite performers. The phonograph's mediating role was also downplayed as promotional banners referred directly to the musicians instead of the machine playing their music. A 1918 Victrola ad from *Outlook* magazine

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

³⁶ Ibid., 51.

featured a phonograph cabinet next to a Christmas tree, flanked by a long line of operatic stars and the question, “Will these great artists sing in your home on Christmas morning?”³⁷

Victor was the first of the three labels to distinguish its cultural superiority with establishment of its Red Seal label as the imprint of its classical catalogue. Due to the sonic limitations of primitive acoustic equipment, opera music proved the most viable for sound recordings. Italian tenor Enrico Caruso became the music industry’s first platinum-selling artist through his two-decade recording career on Red Seal, initiating the celebrity performer that would become the industry’s economic mainstay. Columbia and Edison sought to emulate Victor’s success by building their own catalog of classical and operatic music, and marketing their performers with the same lofty campaigns that reinforced their high-class appeal.³⁸ While popular songs far outsold classical music, the promotion of the latter was vital in establishing the phonograph and sound recordings as cultural capital.

Indeed, none of the three companies could ignore consumer demand for other types of music. All three offered a variety of music similar to that which was available on coin-ops, including military marches and songs from vaudeville and minstrel shows, as well as instrumental solos or duets, children’s records and European folk songs.³⁹ Columbia led in the production of popular music, and promoted it more overtly than Victor and Edison, who invested most of their resources in showcasing their classical offerings. Victor even segregated its catalogue both economically and visually by

³⁷ Victrola advertisement, *Outlook* magazine, November 27, 1918, accessed March 12, 2011, <http://www.ioffer.com/i/vintage-outlook-magazine-nov-27-1918-victrola-print-ad-112932052?source=eisi>.

³⁸ Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 145-146.

³⁹ Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 62.

establishing the Black Seal label, which sold more cheaply than Red Seal and featured non-classical artists.

But all music was subject to the same narrow requirements regarding which recorded best, and which fit the two-to-four minute time constraint of a record, resulting in “flattened distinctions between styles.”⁴⁰ The opera music on which the three labels relied for their commercial identities encompassed any song performed in an operatic voice, which meant stars like Caruso and Geraldine Farrar recorded, or “waxed” Stephen Foster songs as well as Verdi arias. The ethnic recordings aimed at the immigrant market were produced without deference to regional or religious distinctions; German, Polish, Czech and Irish folk songs were equally subject to “cultural and musical reductionism,” filtered through American ideas of ethnicity.⁴¹ African-American musicians and bandleaders were almost totally ignored, reflecting the racial prejudice upon which cultural hierarchies were based—marketing black artists meant compromising prestige. This did not prevent songwriters from using elements of black music in their work, however, or from employing white artists to interpret blues and jazz. In 1911, Irving Berlin scored his first hit with “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” on Columbia. And in 1917, Victor made its first jazz recording with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, an all-white ensemble that was promoted to a white audience.

The three majors’ stranglehold on the industry had narrowing effects on American music culture similar to those of Tin Pan Alley. The geographical and racial barriers that had restricted access to concert halls and enforced social divisions were no longer a factor when music was available for home phonographs. But the corporations that maintained

⁴⁰ Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 123.

⁴¹ Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 13.

tight control over the distribution of music exploited and reinforced cultural hierarchies by limiting the breadth and availability of musical styles. This slowly began to change in 1915, however, when several key patents expired and the number of phonograph manufacturers grew from a couple dozen to more than one hundred fifty in the span of three years.⁴²

Peter Manuel examined the liberation of technology in his 1993 study of Indian cassette culture, and raised a number of important issues that may be applied to the proliferation of record labels in the U.S. after World War I. Among them is H.M. Enzenberger's concept of emancipatory media, which Manuel adopted in order to describe its effects on regional music communities:

If we interpret 'emancipatory' to refer not necessarily to socialist revolution, but to more modest goals of local identity reassertion, the spread of interactive, grassroots media could ideally revitalize community values, enhance local sociopolitical participation, offer greater diversity and richness of media content, and, in general address the needs of small-scale communities, interest groups and taste cultures.⁴³

An increasing number of small enterprises producing and distributing sound recordings in the 1920s caused some of the first significant shifts within the social fields of popular music. The story of Gennett Records as a pioneering force among independent labels illustrates how alternative forms of control, content and effects of music can exert lasting influence on musical culture.

⁴² Kennedy and McNutt, *Little Labels*, 25.

⁴³ Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 4.

Gennett Records

Gennett Records was founded in 1915 by the owners of Starr Piano in Richmond, Indiana. The Gennett family was largely responsible for establishing Richmond as an important part of the Midwest's industrial expansion at the turn of the century. After a series of partnerships and mergers, Henry Gennett acquired sole ownership of the Starr Piano Company in 1903, and employed his three sons to help him run the business.⁴⁴ Their enormous success for the next two decades can be attributed both to shrewd business practices and the piano's growing popularity among the middle class; they managed to expand their company even as the phonograph began replacing pianos as the primary medium for domestic musical activity. The family's subsequent decision to become involved in the recording industry seemed logical. In addition to being prominent instrument manufacturers, they were also active patrons and supporters of local culture.

The Gennetts' first years in the recording business were tentative as they grappled with distribution methods and competition with the majors. The biggest obstacle for the fledgling Indiana label was the patent for lateral-cut recording technology held by Victor. Lateral-cut records could be played on most types of phonographs, so they naturally had the highest selling potential. Victor launched a lawsuit against Gennett in 1919 when the latter issued lateral-cut records without paying a licensing fee. A three-year court battle ensued, resulting in a vital decision that changed the course of recorded music history: In 1922, a U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Victor did not invent lateral-cut recording technology, thereby invalidating the patent and allowing Gennett and other

⁴⁴ Rick Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix and Hogie: Gennett Studios and the Birth of Recorded Jazz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 7.

labels to produce and distribute records alongside the majors.⁴⁵ With a recording studio in New York as well as Indiana, Gennett established a geographical presence and modest involvement in the country's popular music hub, but the recording revolution would take place in their grey wooden studio back in Richmond.

Gennett and Chicago Jazz

With its headquarters in the Midwest, Gennett was situated in a musical region that was vastly underrepresented in the industry. Although they initially recorded the same classical and popular fare of the majors, they soon saw potential in the untapped markets that surrounded them. In the early 1920s, Fred Wiggins, the manager of the Starr Piano Co.'s Chicago store, informed the Gennetts that new and exciting sounds were prospering all over the city. He was referring to the jazz musicians who had recently migrated to Chicago from New Orleans' infamous Storyville district, and were playing nightly shows in front of enthusiastic audiences, both black and white. Fred Gennett was sent to the Windy City to investigate and immediately began inviting bands to the recording studio in Richmond.

Black music was just beginning to enter the recording industry's periphery. Blues achieved a breakthrough in 1921 when Okeh, another independent label in New York, released two albums by Mamie Smith. By early 1921, the second one sold a million copies and established a clear market for African-American music.⁴⁶ The first black-owned label, Black Swan, was also founded that year by Harry Pace. Black Swan's catalog included classical pieces, spirituals, blues, ballads, piano and violin solos and

⁴⁵ Kennedy and McNutt, *Little Labels*, 4.

⁴⁶ Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix and Hoagy*, 50.

character songs, all recorded by black artists and aimed at black audiences.⁴⁷ Pace was unable to compete with white-owned companies, however, and sold the label to Paramount Records in 1924. But, as the *Chicago Defender* noted, he had succeeded in proving there was a large market for recordings by black artists.⁴⁸ Major and independent labels alike began to build small catalogs of “race” records. At the same time, however, Victor co-opted jazz for white appeal by synthesizing it with “late Victorian sentiment and propriety.”⁴⁹ Song arrangements featured some elements of black music, such as syncopation, blue notes and the occasional improvised solo, but were showcased within a framework of familiar Tin Pan Alley tunes with acceptable social themes. Victor’s greatest star was Paul Whiteman whose all-white dance band became so successful throughout the 1920s that he was deemed the “King of Jazz.” While other labels capitalized on the success of white jazz bands, Gennett turned its attention to the New Orleans-based black jazz bands that had yet to be documented.

For nearly three years the Gennett studio hosted hundreds of gifted jazz musicians, many of whom went on to legendary careers. Among them were Earl “Fatha” Hines, Freddie Keppard, Bix Biederbecke, Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, which featured a young Louis Armstrong in a supporting role. The label’s studio staff generally took a hands-off approach during recording sessions, which meant the musicians had an experimental freedom unmatched by many major label artists who were pressured, if not strictly contracted, to play the popular published songs of the day.

⁵⁰ Gennett’s jazz records were therefore full of original pieces and improvisations, and

⁴⁷ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed (New York: WW Norton, 1997) 371.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix and Hoagy*, 63.

⁵⁰ Kennedy and McNutt, *Little Labels*, 7.

featured a wide variety of expressions that documented New Orleans jazz in the early stages of its evolution.

An examination of a 1923 recording of “Canal Street Blues” by King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band reveals some singular differences from the form and texture of standard popular songs. The instrumentation consists of two cornets, trombone, clarinet, string bass, piano, drums and banjo, and the song is twelve-bar blues in classic ragtime style. There is no string section, a traditional symbol of European refinement and a common feature of dance bands, nor is it set in the verse-chorus structure typical of popular songs. In jazz, the chorus is considered the theme, where both melody and harmonic structure are stated and then varied.⁵¹ Melodic statements are not relegated to a single voice, but traded as a kind of dialogue among the horns throughout the song. In “Canal Street Blues” the twelve-bar blues cycle is played nine times. The full ensemble plays the first two, fifth and the ninth choruses (A) with the cornets featuring the basic theme. The most dynamic melodic and rhythmic movement comes from the clarinet, which plays countermelodies over two registers, with the greatest variation occurring in two B and C verses. In the B section, the clarinet showcases lively eighth-note arpeggiations over sustained whole notes in the horns. In the C section, he alternates sliding whole notes and sixteenth-note runs in a call-and-response pattern while the other melody instruments insert short, complementary phrases. The buoyancy of the tempo is reinforced in each return to the A section in which all the horns repeat the syncopated theme. The bass and drums are faint, and the piano inaudible, but the rubbery twang of the banjo’s bass line both gives the song weight and propels its momentum. The excitement of the piece lies in the tension between spontaneity and polish, the contrasting melodic and rhythmic

⁵¹ Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 630.

patterns and the unrelenting pulse. It is little wonder that listeners were compelled to bounce along with it.

The rapid commercial success of New Orleans jazz had major labels clamoring to sign recording contracts with the black musicians they had formerly overlooked. More importantly, the circulation of jazz further broadened the social fields made possible by the diversity of sound recordings. In his exploration of the effects of the phonograph in American cultural life, William Kenney notes the particularly enthusiastic reception of jazz records by both Europeans and middle-class white youths. For Europeans, the music represented an authentic black American identity, and helped inspire independent political ideals as well as serious collecting habits. Attracted by the lively rhythms and “forbidden” nature of music they could not access in live settings, young white audiences participated in jazz through both dance and imitation.⁵² These new social fields created a kind of cultural bridge “that wedded the alienation of youth to empathy with African American suffering and renewal.”⁵³ Imagined and romanticized though it was, this attitude no doubt planted the seeds for a healthier approach to race relations in the coming generations. At the time, it brought African-American musical expressions into socially segregated realms where it both flourished and inspired new interpretations.

In addition to jazz, Gennett also recorded Appalachian vocal and string-band music, as well as country blues, which they sold as budget records to a rural market. One of their primary sources for country artists was an “old-time” music program that debuted in 1924 on Chicago’s WLS station. *National Barn Dance* was one of the longest-running

⁵² A story about three suburban youths whose first taste of a Gennett record in a local soda shop caused them pick up instruments and learn the music note for note is famous in jazz history—the trio of youths was Jimmy McPartland, Bud Freeman and Frank Teschamacher, all of whom went on to become professional jazz musicians. Cited in Kennedy, *Jelly Roll, Bix and Hoagy*, 57.

⁵³ Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 20.

country music shows in radio history, and its roster of stars regularly visited Richmond to record for Gennett. The studio had earned a reputation for being readily accessible to artists who were from local communities, as well as those who were passing through on a touring circuit. While many of those records were never commercially released, they helped document and preserve some important cultural traditions.

Unfortunately, Gennett's success did not last. By the early 1930s, the entire recording industry suffered a major setback with the onset of the Great Depression and radio's replacement of the phonograph as the primary home entertainment. In just five years, between 1927 and 1932, phonograph disc sales collapsed from 106 million down to 6 million, reflecting a society with far less disposable income and a new outlet that offered continuing free musical entertainment.⁵⁴ Major labels survived by expanding their resources through corporate consolidation, but most of the independents were either swallowed by a major or wiped out. Columbia bought Okeh in 1926, and signed many of the artists that had formerly recorded for Gennett, including Louis Armstrong. It was a lucrative acquisition, as Columbia reported a net profit of over \$270,000 in 1927 in contrast to an \$875,000 loss in the previous year.⁵⁵

In Indiana, Starr Piano was suffering from the waning household popularity of the piano, and family disputes over the direction of the company compromised their formerly solid business structure. Gennett, which did not sign its artists to exclusive contracts, lost their most valuable recording stars to major labels towards the end of the decade. By the mid-1930s, Gennett had closed its New York studio and made only occasional recordings in Richmond until that studio shut down as well. Unfortunately, Starr Piano sold nearly

⁵⁴ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 117.

⁵⁵ Gary Marmorstein, *The Label: The Story of Columbia Records* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), 63.

all of the original metal masters for scrap in the mid-1930s when cash flow was particularly tight.⁵⁶ What remains of them are now considered among the most valuable musical artifacts in American musical history.

The period of competition initiated by Gennett's court victory democratized the music industry and broke the color barrier. After 1923, jazz music by both black and white musicians was preserved and circulated on recordings.⁵⁷ Race record catalogues began to grow as talent scouts sought more African-American blues, jazz and gospel musicians with strong local followings, and their music influenced and inspired people well beyond racial and geographical boundaries. But the burst of creativity and competition that expanded the record industry in the 1920s had reached the end of its cycle. Major labels swallowed up labels and artists, and once again took control of production, limiting their output to the best-selling, most widely appealing songs in order to maximize their dwindling profits. A particularly grim example is the purchase of Cameo and Regal, two small labels that specialized in jazz and budget records, by the American Record Corporation for the sum of \$1 apiece.⁵⁸ Edison also went out of business in 1929, two years before the inventor's death. One reason may be that he despised jazz and therefore never joined the record boom that helped make it the most popular music in the country.

⁵⁶ Kennedy and McNutt, *Little Labels*, 17.

⁵⁷ Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 629.

⁵⁸ Marmorstein, *The Label*, 70.

Records versus Radio

The recentralization of the popular music industry involved an economic strategy called vertical integration, which means that a corporation controls every aspect of production from raw materials to wholesale sales.⁵⁹ In 1929, Victor merged with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). Columbia was bought by the American Record Corporation (ARC) in 1934. Four years later, William S. Paley of the Columbia Broadcasting System bought ARC—which included the Columbia Phonograph Company, the Brunswick Record Corporation, Master Records and Okeh—for \$700,000.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the British label Decca had replaced Edison as one of the major label giants in the U.S, and would eventually become affiliated with the film and radio talent agency Music Corporation of America. With close ties to the radio and film industries, major labels once again privileged publishers in the selection of popular songs. Songs with the most hit potential would often be recorded by multiple artists on more than one label, and the competing versions would be released at the same time.⁶¹ The songs circulated through films, record stores and radios. Jukeboxes became important outlets as well when they began to reemerge in the social spaces where live music had thrived in a better economy. Through recentralization, a few dominant media companies reclaimed their cultural agency in defining popular music. They streamlined styles in order to fit broad American tastes, and plugged the most promising tunes by placing them in every public and private space that had speakers.⁶²

⁵⁹ Peterson and Berger, “Cycles in Symbol Production,” 161.

⁶⁰ Marmorstein, *The Label*, 94.

⁶¹ Chapple and Garafalo, *Rock n’ Roll is Here to Pay*, 7.

⁶² Kenney, *Recorded Music*, 158.

The 1930s would be musically defined by swing and big-band music, dominated mostly by white dance bands who continued to play lilting arrangements of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley songs. They became part of national culture in 1935 when *Your Hit Parade* debuted on the NBC network as the first radio show to feature a list of songs ranked by popularity. As record sales began to recover, the majors maintained their race music catalogues as side projects, promoting them to African-American and European markets. Yet with a few prominent exceptions such as Duke Ellington and Count Basie, very few black musicians were permitted to participate in network radio. The cultural hierarchies that had been subverted by the distribution of jazz records in the previous decade were reasserted as the music industry attempted to define the new social spaces that developed with radio. (I will discuss those social spaces in greater depth in the next chapter.) But tensions over musical ownership were once again threatening to destabilize them.

ASCAP versus BMI

Despite the corporate mergers that consolidated the entertainment industry, the relationship between the music and the broadcasting industries has never been entirely comfortable. One major issue that continually arises is copyright, which is redefined and renegotiated whenever technological changes alter the means of distribution and consumption. In 1914, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) was founded as a performing-rights society that licensed the published music of its members for a fee that was paid whenever the music was performed in a public space. At the time, this included live or recorded music played in concert halls, hotels,

restaurants, dance halls and theatres. ASCAP's membership included the majority of composers, songwriters and publishers from Tin Pan Alley, Broadway and Hollywood.

With sheet music sales and record royalties declining, ASCAP looked to radio to reap some of its lost profits. Music licensing issues had been problematic since the early 1920s, and in 1923 the government responded to station owners' complaints of ASCAP's monopolistic practices by activating the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB).⁶³ Struggles over licensing fees and royalties continued for the next decade as network broadcasting became more successful. When ASCAP called for a 100 percent increase in the royalty rate in early 1940, the broadcasters refused, and started their own licensing organization, Broadcast Music, Incorporated (BMI). Their mission was to provide competition in the field of performing rights, assure royalty payments to non-ASCAP members and provide an alternative source of licensing for all of its users.⁶⁴ The cultural effects of the split were similar to those that occurred following the fracture of the major labels' monopoly a decade earlier—music that had been marginalized gained greater access to public spheres.

Unlike ASCAP, BMI did not require its songwriters to have a minimum of five published songs to gain membership, nor did they need to have hit potential to get played on the radio. Whereas ASCAP essentially represented the industry's songwriting royalty, BMI came to be identified with more regional artists and genres such as hillbilly, Latin, folk and African-American popular music. The two organizations also fundamentally differed in their approach to production. Tin Pan Alley was built on a prescriptive tradition of songwriting where a composition was written down, published and then

⁶³ Sanjek and Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press), 27.

⁶⁴ "About," Broadcast Music, Incorporated, accessed January 5, 2011, <http://www.bmi.com/about>.

circulated. BMI adopted a more descriptive process based on musical development through live communication between audiences and musicians.⁶⁵ When ASCAP's existing radio agreements expired in 1941, all the music under its licensing domain was banned from the airwaves. Broadcasters were left with songs that were either in the public domain or published by members of BMI. The latter found increasing favor among radio audiences—country music especially flourished on the air—signaling a return to more diversity in popular music.

The opportunities for competition would grow even wider after two more watershed events further destabilized the music industry: America's entry into World War II and the union strike by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). Wartime rationings of shellac, a crucial binding agent for the compounds in the manufacture of records, meant that record companies had to scale back their catalogues.⁶⁶ In order to remain financially solvent, they dropped the regional records that sold fewer quantities and concentrated on promoting their hits. Race and hillbilly music were the first to go. AFM president James Petrillo dealt another blow in 1942 when he called for a strike against the recording companies for not properly compensating the union's performers. As sound recordings had become increasingly favored for radio music programming, Petrillo wanted to secure royalties for the musicians whose records were played on both radio programs and jukeboxes, while increasing cash flow on behalf of the unions.⁶⁷ For more than a year, none of the majors made any recordings with instrumentalists, although vocalists still had free reign to perform as they were not considered to be musicians.

⁶⁵ Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 722.

⁶⁶ John Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers: Voices of the Independent Rock n' Roll Pioneers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

Hence, the musical arrangements at this time featured singers backed by choirs, a peculiar stylistic change that characterized the early part of the decade.

The industry had reached a stalemate. Majors clung to their old catalogues of increasingly outdated hits for income. ASCAP's disputes severely restricted public performance. And the AFM strike and shellac shortage effectively halted the production of any new popular music. It would take several years of negotiating and reorganizing before all the parties involved arrived at mutually satisfactory terms. In the meantime, independent labels began cropping up all over the U.S. to mine the new and exciting styles of music that had continued to evolve unabated. An untapped market for new music, as well as developments in both sound technology and distribution, enabled the number of independent labels in the U.S. to nearly quadruple by the end of the decade.

Rhythm & Blues

Rhythm & Blues (R&B) is an overarching term for a genre of music that developed from a number of styles, including blues, gospel, ballads and swing. R&B ensembles were smaller than big bands, and usually featured a lead singer or instrumentalist accompanied by a rhythm section and backup band. They performed fast-paced, duple-meter songs driven by backbeats (accents on the second and fourth beats of each measure), shout-style, call-and-response vocals and brash instrumental solos often featuring the saxophone. Lyrics were rooted in the blues tradition, and often described hardship or sexual frustration, as well as the desire to dance.

R&B developed in live venues in African-American communities in the 1940s, particularly in cities such as Chicago, Memphis, Houston and Detroit where wartime jobs

had lured millions of African-Americans away from the rural South. One of the first major artists to bring national attention to R&B was Louis Jordan, a tenor saxophonist and former member of Chick Webb's big band. He recorded for Decca and sold millions of records to crossover audiences from the late-1930s to the mid-1940s.⁶⁸ In spite of Jordan's success, however, R&B was ignored by the other majors for the same reasons they shunned jazz—the music was considered socially and racially lowbrow, its overtly sexual lyrics and rhythms full of corrupting influences.

In the late-1940s, live performances of not only R&B, but jazz, country music and gospel proliferated throughout the United States. For Peterson and Berger, the growing prevalence of such “communal music” indicated a divide between industry and consumer:

As long as the market-controlling mechanisms...continue to operate unchanged, the trend to greater homogeneity continues because each of the oligopolists focuses on winning the greatest share of the market. As a result, the total market may be static or even shrink because potential consumers, whose tastes are not met by the homogenized product, withdraw from the market. Thus under conditions of oligopoly, there is hypothesized to be a growing *unsated* demand.⁶⁹

While this argument takes for granted a correlation between live musical activity and the availability of sound recordings, the point that public tastes evolve beyond the industry's jurisdiction is important. Adorno's claim that a “culture industry” takes standardizing approaches to production can be validated in many ways by the practices of the American entertainment industry described above. However, he was erroneous in assuming that the effects of this approach would lead to the stultification of cultural expression. As Negus explains, all industries “are producing products or services which carry cultural

⁶⁸ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 20.

⁶⁹ Peterson and Berger, “Cycles in Symbol Production,” 163. Italics in original.

meanings, and which do not speak for themselves as products but which continually require interpretation.”⁷⁰ When a particular set of sound recordings are no longer relevant, audiences will invariably turn to other outlets for music.

In 1945, the production and distribution of popular music was still controlled by only four major labels—Decca, Victor, Columbia and Capitol—which continued to churn out songs by swing bands and crooners singing sentimental tunes. A list of the top ten most popular songs of that year illustrates some of their redundancies:

1. Sentimental Journey (C major)—Les Brown with Doris Day
2. It’s Been a Long, Long Time (F major)—Harry James with Kitty Kallen
3. Rum and Coca-Cola (C major)—The Andrews Sisters
4. On the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe (C major)—Johnny Mercer
5. Till the End of Time (D major)—Perry Como
6. Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive (F major)—Johnny Mercer
7. Don’t Fence Me In (F major)—Bing Crosby with the Andrews Sisters
8. Chickery Chick (F major)—Sammy Kaye
9. My Dreams Are Getting Better All the Time (A major)—Les Brown with Doris Day
10. I Can’t Begin to Tell You (C major)—Bing Crosby⁷¹

With the exception of two, all of the above songs are either in C or F major. They are also similar in tempo and rhythm, with moderate syncopated shuffles emphasizing the dreamy, wistful lyrics of love and longing. The artists are among an elite group of so-called “hitmakers,” who were defined by having top ten hits in at least three of the preceding four years. By the end of the decade, hitmakers accounted for sixty percent of the artists in the popular music record market.⁷² These artists were responsible for the bulk of the major labels’ profits, as well as for the songwriters who were still reaping publishing royalties. Labels continued to distribute competing versions of the same songs

⁷⁰ Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, 23.

⁷¹ “Popular Songs 1945,” PopularSong.org, accessed February 10, 2011, <http://www.popularsong.org/1945.html>

⁷² Peterson and Berger, “Cycles in Symbol Production,” 163.

to keep them active in the market. For example, “It’s Been a Long, Long Time” was also recorded in 1945 by Irene Day and June Christy, backed by the Charlie Spivak and Stan Kenton orchestras respectively. And Kay Kayser, Artie Shaw and Johnny Green all released versions of “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive.”

But American society was full of R&B enthusiasts, especially youth communities, who responded to the fresh new sounds being generated elsewhere. Many of them, both within and outside the music industry, decided to start labels of their own in order to respond to the demand. At the same time, industrial manufacturers and engineers were ready to experiment with the new forms of technology that made sound recordings cheaper and easier to produce. As with the independent labels in the 1920s, the emancipation of media helped new entrepreneurs to address the needs of developing taste cultures. When Allied forces captured the studios of Radio Luxembourg in 1944, they discovered the Germans had been using magnetic tape recorders, which had higher sound fidelity than discs.⁷³ They also offered longer running time and could be erased and reused, reducing the cost of the recording process and making it more accessible to startup companies. The music the record companies subsequently commissioned and distributed not only led to profound changes in the social fields of popular music, but “would eventually change what America thought popular music should sound like.”⁷⁴

The Indies Rise Again

The first R&B labels emerged in 1942, and they entered the industry by devising creative ways to meet the challenges of material shortages. Excelsior Records in Los

⁷³ Copeland, *Sound Recordings*, 29.

⁷⁴ George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 30.

Angeles, for example, was founded by brothers Otis and Leon Rene, black men of Creole descent who had written a handful of hits in the 1930s. Because they were having difficulty getting major labels to record their songs, they decided to start their own label. They met the demand for new records during the shellac rationing by setting up their own manufacturing plant. They bought used records from people in the area, melted them down and produced 78s out of recycled material.⁷⁵ Syd Nathan, founder of King Records in Cincinnati, employed a similar do-it-yourself strategy when he hired workers to rebuild old record-pressing equipment to start his label in 1944. Nathan eventually created a vertically-integrated business that thrived for twenty years. And Irving Green of Mercury Records in Chicago actually traveled to the shellac plant in India and arranged for regular shipments to come directly to the label's headquarters.⁷⁶

Over the next two decades, enterprising indie labels would enliven the stagnant market with a variety of innovative approaches to distribution. Most of them weren't driven by opportunism alone, but by a genuine appreciation for African-American and country music. When a furniture store owner in Jackson, Mississippi named Lillian McMurry was charged with the task of selling old merchandise from a recently acquired rival store, she stumbled upon a musical revelation: she found an old Wynnonie Harris 78rpm record and listened to it. "It had a great beat," she reported years later, "and the vocal was the most unusual, sincere, solid sound I'd ever heard."⁷⁷ She began selling spiritual, gospel, country and R&B records that she picked up in New Orleans, and soon established a Record Mart alongside her furniture store. Eventually, she opened a recording studio and founded a label called Trumpet Records.

⁷⁵ Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 37.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁷ Quoted in George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 30.

McMurry's story highlights not only the consumer demand for regional sounds, but also the social orientation of indie label owners. Record shops were especially important spaces for becoming acquainted with consumer habits as well as cultivating personal music tastes. Ahmet Ertegun, co-founder of Atlantic Records, credits his patronage of a New York record store for his later success:

I had very much of an understanding of what it was that brought about the kind of satisfaction in a listener that would make them buy a record. [That was a result of] my spending years of hanging around with people like Waxie Maxie in the shop, seeing who comes in and buys what, and listening to R&B music continuously...I listened to R&B music as I listened to jazz. R&B music always had a lot of blues in it, and I loved the blues. The blues to me was the key to jazz and R&B and everything. Blues was then the expression of Black Americans.⁷⁸

Back on the West Coast, Ross Russell was operating a small jazz store in Hollywood when his young customers alerted him to the music of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Russell started the Dial Records label in 1946 so he could record the jazz revolutionaries at the forefront of bebop in Los Angeles. He said, in retrospect, "I would have never understood Bird's music if not for the hipsters in the store."⁷⁹

Far from ASCAP's prescriptive songwriting and cultural hierarchies, the BMI-supported world of R&B took shape through live exchanges among listeners, performers, producers and distributors in increasingly desegregated spaces. Johnny Otis, stalwart of the R&B indie scene, recalled the charged atmosphere of a club in Los Angeles:

In 1948 the whites used to turn up at the Barrelhouse every Friday night; they ranged from the young up to forty [years old]. The accent was far more on rhythm on Fridays. Big Jay McNeely was my tenor man, and the crowd went wild when he played on his knees, then on his back shaking his legs.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Quoted in Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 63.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Kennedy and McNutt, *Little Labels*, 40.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 35.

An iconic photograph of McNeely performing in front of an enthusiastic white crowd appears on a number of blogs and biographical sites on the internet. He is lying on his back on a small stage blowing into his saxophone, eyes closed. The audience before him is within striking distance, and the faces of the young, white (mostly) men depict various expressions of awe, rapture and passion. This image harkens back to Kenney's description of white youth's identification with African-Americans through the jazz records that began circulating in the 1920s. The social alienation that characterized the connection then was arguably even more pronounced in the 1940s and 50s, as the postwar cultural image of white masculinity encouraged obedience and conformity. In his study of black radio, George Lipsitz confirmed that, "white Americans may have turned to black culture for guidance because black culture contains the most sophisticated strategies of signification and the richest grammars of opposition available to aggrieved populations."⁸¹

On a more basic level, R&B represented musical progress. Unlike the major label's slow-swinging pop hits, R&B was music that the kids could dance to. British novelist and music lover Nick Hornby cited this basic human need when he said, "Popular music needs to keep flowing. If the fresh supplies stop, it's you that becomes stagnant."⁸² Thus, R&B recordings represented a new kind of social capital in American culture by legitimizing the generational and racial rebellions against the status quo. The agents that produced them expanded their power in the music industry by establishing networks of distribution that catered to the social spaces in which the music thrived. Their ability to capture two formerly segregated markets was the cornerstone of their

⁸¹ George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 305.

⁸² Nick Hornby, "The Thrill of It All," *Observer Music Monthly*, September 9, 2009, 3.

success, and relied on the postwar reinvention of two of the most important outlets for popular music: the jukebox and the radio.

Jukebox, Radio and the Networks of Distribution

The Depression years saw the return of the jukebox to public spaces that had once hosted live musicians. The repeal of Prohibition in 1933 also resulted in a proliferation of taverns and cocktail lounges, for which jukeboxes served as the primary source of musical entertainment. Younger crowds could find them in soda shops and drug stores. The coin-operated playback machines that once resembled the wooden cabinets for home phonographs were redesigned to attract more attention. Modern jukeboxes were now flashy entertainment portals, illuminated in bright colors and decorated with shiny, ornate art deco plating. Phonograph equipment was no longer concealed, but prominently displayed behind glass above the title strips so patrons could watch the record change. This process was expedited by RCA Victor's invention of the 45-rpm record in 1948, for which they also designed a mechanism that took only three seconds to drop the next record onto the turntable.⁸³

One of the first indie labels to forge a distribution network with the jukebox industry was Modern Music Records, another L.A. label, founded by brothers Jules, Joe and Saul Bihari. As jukebox operators, they were compelled to start their own label when they were unable to find enough blues recordings to stock their machines. Their first hit record by classically-influenced blues pianist Hadda Brooks reached local shops when Joe made door-to-door sales from his car. The Biharis realized how powerful the coin-op

⁸³ Marmorstein, *The Label*, 170.

market was when fellow operator Jack Gutshall subsequently ordered five thousand copies of the record and promptly sold them all.⁸⁴ The brothers began sending records to operators in Denver, Houston, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Memphis and New Orleans, encouraging them to start expanding into distribution and retail. Their symbiotic relationship, built on the high demand for both records and jukeboxes, became a fixture of the R&B world. Indie labels eventually established franchised territories that operated outside the major labels' domains, an important outgrowth of which were the one-stop merchants. These functioned as subdistributors who catered to all labels, enabling regular distributors to pick up a supply of records in one place instead of having to visit each individual label's distributor to stock up.⁸⁵

The most critical segment of the labels' distribution networks, however, was the disc jockey. After the war, radio networks began to turn their focus towards television, and by the 1950s, radio stations were forced to become more locally-oriented. Station managers took notice of the increased presence of African-Americans in many urban areas, and began to reconsider their value as consumers. Black appeal stations, of which WDIA in Memphis was among the first, meant more African-American participation in radio. The dynamic voices of black DJs began to draw listener attention, especially as they often incorporated rhyming and signifying into their rapid-fire deliveries.⁸⁶ Young audiences were especially attracted to the distinctive speech patterns of music program hosts, who developed on-air personalities and adopted surnames in the tradition of blues and jazz musicians, such as Jocko Henderson (WLIB in Philadelphia), "Chattie" Hattie

⁸⁴ Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 43.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁶ Barlow defines signifying as "the art of humorous verbal warfare in which the combatants employ a range of devices—from ridicule to cockiness—in order to humiliate their adversaries and enhance their own status," *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 104.

Leeper (WGIV in Charlotte, North Carolina) and “Hot Rod” Hubert (WDIA in Memphis). Al Benson of WGES in Chicago was the first among them to regularly feature the latest R&B music on his show. The overwhelming positive reception by black and white youth audiences triggered a nationwide trend in which the “personality jock” became R&B’s most prominent advocate. (Benson’s pioneering role in popular music radio narratives receives closer examination in the next chapter.)

Black DJs grew so popular that white DJs began to imitate them. They turned away from the generic styles of announcing that characterized swing shows in the 1930s, and started to speak in the same gravelly-voice jive that was selling R&B records and attracting young listeners. With names like Poppa Stoppa and Wolfman Jack, it was nearly impossible to distinguish them from their black counterparts, which was crucial to their success. This was exemplified in the 1973 film *American Graffiti*, in which Wolfman Jack’s nighttime show serves as a mystical backdrop to the action, and a twelve-year-old girl tells her friend that she’s not allowed to listen to him “because he’s a Negro.” Douglas explains how radio blurred sociocultural boundaries:

As men who could become invisible and inhabit the voices of black men, voices that went out in the lush darkness to white teen bedrooms, these DJs, to their enemies, personified miscegenation let loose on a whole new scale. Just at the moment when so many white, middle-class parents had spirited their families off to safe, segregated suburbs, the kids were imbibing forbidden music, language and attitudes from the cities through that box in the corner that ignored demographic demarcations. Listening in from a safe distance, kids could accept yet subvert segregation at the same time.⁸⁷

In terms of desegregation, radio was the ultimate frontier in which black cultural expressions constructed social spaces for white youth culture. Their emergence as a

⁸⁷ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos n’ Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Random House, 1999), 245.

powerful consumer group became the mainstay of the indie labels, who began to exert greater efforts to keep their attention.

Payola

Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records remembered the first calls from their Southern distributors reporting that white high school and college students were buying the R&B records they were hearing on the radio. “It was a very odd confluence,” he said, “because the disc jockeys were white, the entrepreneurs were white, while the intended audience and music were all black.”⁸⁸ Wexler also recognized that disc jockeys were crucial for indie labels. Getting a record played on a station that reached twenty states was the most valuable advertising they could get. Furthermore, DJs’ personal tastes wielded considerable influence among their audiences, and with a few repetitions of a new record, a DJ could make hit out of a song and a celebrity out of an artist. Marshall Chess of Chess Records described the magnitude of this phenomenon:

The excitement of a hit was the closest thing I’ve seen to looking at those old movies where they get oil gushers. That’s how it used to be when you got a hit. It was just amazing; it would be going like a wave across the country. Records would break, and the phones would start ringing. We’d yell up and down the hall, like “Detroit 13,000!” I mean, you’d be running and running trying to get the pressings, and it would just roll across the country.⁸⁹

With their financial success depending on hits, label owners sought airplay by any means necessary, which usually meant resorting to full-scale bribery. (Chess also recalled

⁸⁸ Quoted in Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 94.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

his father Leonard giving Al Benson a red Lincoln convertible.⁹⁰) Payola, also known as pay-for-play, was a practice as old as the industry. The Copyright Act of 1909, which insured royalties to song publishers, had increased the commercial value of a song. As competition also increased, publishers began offering inducements to song pluggers in order to secure a place in the market. Such payments were common in practice (and perfectly legal) in many retail businesses. The practice was seemingly restricted by the Radio Act of 1927 in which the FCC decreed that “sponsorship” of any on-air content must be announced at the time of broadcast. Anyone receiving such sponsorship was legally required to report it as income, although few actually did so. Payola was therefore enacted relatively discreetly among industry personnel as music programming developed in the 1930s.

In the 1940s, however, R&B labels and DJs made payola a more integral and overt part of their business practice. What began as small “favors,” such as free meals, clothes and plane tickets blossomed into more elaborate gifts like cars, vacations, prostitutes and, as competition for airplay intensified, bundles of cash. None of this was new to contemporary American commerce, as many industries have their own methods of exchanging favors for mutual benefits. But it does present an economic and social paradox. On the one hand, payola was a means of survival for indie labels which, as small regional entities, relied on radio’s reach to get their records heard across the nation. And for black disc jockeys, most of whom commanded only modest salaries and received no percentage of the advertising revenue they generated, payola represented a way of “balancing black capitalism with the realities of a white-dominated society.”⁹¹ At the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 117.

⁹¹ George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 57.

same time, payola also narrowed the content of music programs and limited DJs autonomy in choosing songs. This became increasingly problematic in the next decade, and finally culminated in the dramatic undoing of the indie world.

R&B Becomes Rock n' Roll

By the end of the 1940s, hundreds of independent labels were producing and promoting R&B records. In 1949, *Billboard* renamed their Race Records chart Rhythm & Blues. Being the trade paper of mostly major labels, *Billboard's* decision to rename their African-American music category illustrates the significance of the independents' impact on the industry. Their success would continue to rise over the next decade as they expanded their catalogs with new styles and artists, until payola scandals and greater media consolidation shifted the industry in favor of the majors once again. The tide began to turn in 1951, when a white DJ named Alan Freed took to the Cleveland airwaves.

Freed was hosting a classical music program on WJW when the show's sponsor asked him to host a late-night R&B show. Already familiar with the music and its audience, Freed attacked his new post with gusto, launching his *Moon Dog Show* with a long howl over Todd Rhodes's saxophone solo on "Blues for Moon Dog."⁹² Like other white DJs of the era, Freed affected a black persona over the air. His vocal charisma and affection for whiskey fueled his outrageous antics, which delighted Cleveland's black and white youths alike. "Rock n' roll," was a phrase that often appeared in black music as a euphemism for sex, and Freed started using it to refer to the music he featured.⁹³ His following increased when he began hosting live concerts. He received national attention

⁹² Barlow, *Voice Over*, 181.

⁹³ George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 67.

when his 1952 “Coronation Ball” erupted in a riot after twenty thousand teens were told that the show had to be cancelled on account of exceeding the venue’s capacity. This resonated with the rebellious spirit of adolescent social spaces, where Freed’s image was bolstered by the scandal. He moved to New York in 1954 to host a show in WINS, and became the “top DJ in the number-one radio market in the country.”⁹⁴

The white youths that had been rallying around R&B music in the 1940s had finally caught the attention of major labels, who were starting to realize that “teenagers” constituted a lucrative consumer market. Rock n’ roll, a somewhat safer term less overtly tied to the music’s black origins, became the category that defined their purchasing choices. Initially, this encompassed the great variety of styles that were being showcased by radio DJs and television hosts, including the distinctive regional music that labels such as Sun Records in Memphis and Ace Records in New Orleans were producing. But in order to recapture the mass market, majors had to placate the racial concerns of the dominant culture. They released cover versions of R&B songs, performed by clean-cut, white artists who altered the racy lyrics and aggressive-sounding arrangements. Musicians like Pat Boone and Ricky Nelson covered songs originally recorded by Little Richard and Fats Domino. As with the white jazz bands in the 1920s, these “bowdlerized versions kept an important element of black culture from wider exposure.”⁹⁵ In 1955, the song “Rock Around the Clock,” recorded by white band Bill Haley and the Comets on Decca, was featured in the film *Blackboard Jungle*. It was the first rock song to appear in a movie, as well as the first to reach the top of *Billboard*’s pop charts, signaling the majors’ co-optation of R&B.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Peter Fornatale and Joshua E. Mills, *Radio in the Television Age* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1980), 41.

Yet the staunch attitudes held by older generations regarding R&B's—and now rock n' roll's—corrupting influences were further inflamed by its growing presence in American culture. Public officials, clergymen, teachers and even advertisers expressed their continuing outrage over the sexual threats posed by the music. Print publications from *Variety* magazine to *The New York Times* regularly featured articles claiming the music was dangerous. At the root of their complaints lay fears of miscegenation and juvenile delinquency, which were approaching levels of mass hysteria as new Top 40 radio formats and television shows like *American Bandstand* institutionalized rock n' roll. The competition between ASCAP and BMI, which had initially expanded the range of musical expression on the radio, became the site of a cultural showdown.

For the remainder of the 1950s, both the radio and music industries reaped the benefits of rock n' roll's popularity. Record sales nearly tripled between 1954 and 1959, with the indies still on top. In 1958, *Billboard* reported that seventy-six percent of all hits were on indie labels, with only twenty-four percent belonging to the four majors, Capitol, Columbia, RCA Victor and Decca.⁹⁶ But the indies sealed their fate with an ostentatious showing at the annual Disc Jockeys Convention in 1959 in Miami when all the excesses of their trade, including a large number of prostitutes, received national press coverage. Having been left out of the R&B boom, ASCAP used the negative publicity to spearhead a payola investigation based on the argument that the only reason rock n' roll was on the radio was because DJs were paid to play it. It was the DJs, and not the labels, who were at the center of the investigation. At the end of the Congressional hearings in 1960, only eight men were charged with commercial bribery, among them Alan Freed, who would never recover his career or his health and died broke at the age of 43. But the proceedings

⁹⁶ Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers*, 416.

had made an example of the entire industry. More specifically they led to amendment of the 1934 Communications Act making illegal the illicit payment for providing specific content. The re-centralization of radio formats was already underway with the advent of Top 40 radio, a subject to which I will return in the next chapter. Personality DJs lost much of their star power and cultural agency, and many forced to either switch careers or migrate to different markets.

The R&B indie labels suffered, too, not only from the payola scandal which had wiped out their most important allies, but from larger industrial and social changes. The majors were regaining their cultural agency once more, an event foretold by Sun Records' sale of Elvis Presley's contract to RCA Victor in 1955. Manufacturers, who had once enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with distributors and labels, enacted their own self-protective policies and distanced themselves from their former practices of oral agreements, credit lines and freebies. In the meantime, the majors took full advantage of the indies' dwindling resources and began signing away their best-selling artists with large advances and long-term contracts; Ray Charles, Bobby Darin, Fats Domino, Sam Cooke, B.B. King and Curtis Mayfield all signed with majors in the early 1960s. Furthermore, the market was reaching a point of saturation, as evidenced by the growing number of crossover hits between the R&B and pop charts. The audience was changing, too, as the members of the youth culture that had supported the music for over a decade grew older, and began to develop new tastes and consumption habits.

The Majors Regain Control

In October of 1967, *Billboard* marked the end of an era on its front page with the headline “Atlantic Sold in Big \$\$ Grab Era.” Atlantic Records, the biggest and most successful indie, had been bought by Warner-Bros. “The pure independent record company of substance has become an increasingly rare entity,” announced the article’s opening sentence, “It is a victim of the trend toward bigness, mergers and corporate maneuvers for diversification.”⁹⁷ Five years earlier, Johnny Vincent of Ace Records in New Orleans had decided to merge with the stronger VeeJay Records in Chicago in order to prevent financial ruin. He explained his decision to *Billboard* that year:

It’s the only real answer for an indie record company today. We simply did not have the power to keep pushing out the volume of releases that give you a chance of having a continued string of hits. And if you don’t have a string of them, the little guy, like me, gets hung up for the money. The distributors will eat you alive.⁹⁸

There are two salient points here, one cultural and the other economic. The notion of the “pure independent company of substance” anticipates the social ideology of indie music by alluding to a divide between musical integrity and the more overt economic interests of the majors. But Johnny Vincent’s honest claim that without a string of hits indie labels could not survive reveals another truth. While the independent labels of the 1940s and 1950s represented marginalized cultures, they were operating under the same commercial guidelines as the majors: hits equal success. All of them pursued popularity in order to survive. And while the majors had sufficient financial resources to ride out periods of

⁹⁷ Paul Ackerman and Mike Gross, “Atlantic Sold in Big \$\$ Grab Era,” *Billboard*, October 28, 1967, 1.

⁹⁸ *Billboard*, “Ace-VeeJay Deal Called Biggest Ever of Its Kind,” July 28, 1962, 6.

market stagnation, the indies did not. Furthermore, as was the case with Elvis Presley and Sun Records, the smaller labels were ill-equipped to handle popularity on a large scale.

The success of rock n' roll was an important benchmark in the history of the music industry. The emergence of a white teen culture turned popular music into a youth-oriented medium, and teens' articulation with black culture underscored the generational divide that became a defining element in the social fields of rock n' roll. But as the music became more formalized, those social fields fragmented once more as growing numbers of consumers sought musical expressions that represented new ideologies. Their development will be my starting point for Chapter Four.

In the next chapter, I trace the evolution of popular music narratives on the radio, which also played a crucial role in shaping the social fields of popular music. As with the recording industry, the centralizing tendencies of broadcast media standardized many elements of American culture including music, for which meaning was framed through a variety of narrative devices. And, like their record label counterparts, independent agents in the broadcasting industry effected important and lasting changes in the ways that music was valued and understood among radio audiences.

Summary

In this chapter, I tried to show how independent record labels in the first half of the twentieth century expanded the social fields of American popular music. I argued that this process is best understood through Negus's pivotal concept that culture produces industry and industry produces culture. I also claimed that the cycles of market

concentration and homogeneity studied by Peterson and Berger in 1975 apply to both the 1920s and the 1940s when competition and creativity altered the recording industry.

I began my historical exploration with the development of the sheet music business and consumption practices in the nineteenth century, followed by the formation of cultural hierarchies that led to the establishment of more strictly enforced social fields. I then described the ways in which Tin Pan Alley created an industry for popular music, and how the subsequent recording industry navigated the paradoxical challenge of maintaining those hierarchies while catering to market demand. This resulted in a homogenized market that privileged white, middle-class musical sensibilities.

Beginning in the 1920s, however, independent labels began catering to marginalized cultures, instigating the first cycle of competition and creativity that characterized the patterns of the recording industry. Using Gennett Records as an example, I showed how the distribution of jazz and blues records expanded the social fields in which popular music was created and consumed. The rise of radio and the Depression shifted music production back to centralized media, but the subsequent formation of BMI once again brought marginalized music cultures into the public sphere. I focused on the development of R&B to illustrate the next cycle of independent music production in the 1940s, and examined the social and cultural shifts that resulted as young audiences became increasingly socialized through the consumption of popular music.

Chapter Three: Popular Music Narratives on Radio, 1930-1970

In the previous chapter, I described how social fields within American popular music evolved and changed with the development of the recording industry. Using Negus's dual concept that an industry produces culture and culture produces industry, I focused on the ways in which cycles of independent record label production responded to the sociomusical chasms left by the centralized, major label-dominated industry. The subsequent expansion in types of popular music recordings eventually reconfigured the social fields in which music was produced and consumed.

As the phonograph before, radio precipitated new social practices and listening habits in the cultural field of music. By the mid-1920s, radio broadcasts played an important role in disseminating both music as well as information about it in distinctive ways. Musical presentations on the radio were almost always framed by narratives, or spoken-word announcements preceding and following a single or series of musical selections. Whether these narratives simply informed listeners about the name of a piece, enlightened them with facts about the performers or described their degree of popularity, they provided a context through which listeners interpreted not only the kind of music they were hearing but what it meant. They also constructed meanings about their individual and collective identities, a psychological process that Douglas describes as being unique to radio:

When radio listening as a craze, and then as a daily pastime, swept through America in the 1920s and '30s, it disrupted the cognitive and cultural practices of a visual culture and a literate culture in a way that neither the telephone nor the phonograph did...Here was a giant auditory

prosthesis that extended people's range of hearing to distances previously unimaginable.¹

The act of listening to the radio generated a powerful sense of connection in listeners' imaginations. In his 1983 study of nationalism, Benedict Anderson introduced the concept of "imagined communities," which is cited by most modern radio historians as a key reason radio broadcasts have exerted such profound socializing effects. Anderson theorized that "the image of communion" exists in the minds of those who imagine themselves belonging to a larger entity comprised of people they will likely never meet.² Because such communities are distinguished by the style in which they are imagined, imagined communities can be interpreted as social fields. The focus of this chapter will be the ways in which independence became manifest in radio broadcasts from the 1930s through the 1960s, and how it influenced the social fields that developed in conjunction with the recording industry in American popular music.

As academic studies of popular music developed in the twentieth century, scholars who studied mass media's influence on public culture tended to fall on either side of a polarized debate. Some embraced the production-oriented model generated by Adorno and other advocates of the Frankfurt School who saw radio transmissions of popular music as tools of corporate manipulation to promote consumerism. Other writers, such as Isaac Goldberg and Bill Malone, advanced more positivist theories on radio's role as a vehicle for authentic cultural expression and preservation. More recently, however, media scholarship has allowed for a broader understanding of radio, taking Michele

¹ Douglas, *Listening In*, 29.

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1983), 6.

Hilmes's approach to its history as "a series of small crises of cultural control."³ As a public institution, radio constitutes a central social structure where cultural forms are mediated by agents. In the case of broadcasting popular songs, narratives function as discursive elements in the ongoing negotiation over the meaning and value of music.

Michael Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics provides a useful way of understanding the nature of these social groups, and how they come into being through radio broadcasts. Like Anderson, Warner conceptualizes a public as a social phenomenon in which individuals imagine themselves as part of a unified group bound by a mode of address. Publics are plural, self-organized and constituted by their attention to a particular discourse. He writes:

Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption.⁴

For Warner, the boundaries and organization of a public are contingent on a discourse that openly addresses strangers, which creates the perception of commonality. Radio broadcasts produce publics through the distribution of any number of different texts, be they sports, speeches, drama and comedy, advertisements, news reports or music. They establish an empirical sense of stranger-relatedness through the rhetoric of a mutual listening experience. The historically centralizing tendencies of mass media in the United States have enabled a few powerful agents to create the idea of a dominant public via radio, which emerged in the late 1920s as commercially-oriented networks circulating a limited menu of music types under the heading of universally-shared tastes.

³ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xiii.

⁴ Robert Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 16.

But radio has never been entirely subject to pure corporate manipulation, and just as Riesman discovered an active minority that pursued separateness from the mainstream in his youth survey, so too have socially oppositional groups arisen to challenge the cultural hegemony of the commercial broadcasting industry. Warner recognizes these groups as counterpublics, which define themselves by their separation from the larger, mainstream public. Counterpublics typically function with more self-awareness than dominant publics, as subordinate status is a precondition of their formation. They may circulate discourse in ways similar to those of dominant publics, but do so with the aim of being socially transformative.⁵ And while addressing undefined strangers is a practice intrinsic in all publics, counterpublics must also recognize the shared differences that distinguish them from the mainstream.⁶ Although Warner does not elaborate on how counterpublic discourse may eventually influence that of the dominant public, I argue that their agency in radio played an integral role in the development of popular music programming.

The evolution of popular music narratives on the radio may be understood in social terms as a cyclical exchange between publics and counterpublics based upon the continual negotiation of the social, cultural and economic value of music. The overlap with Bourdieu's theory on the use of capital within social fields is clear, as he claims that the ways in which capital is distributed among agents in a social field defines the state of their power relations.⁷ Though the first network music programs were guided by the cultural hierarchies that had already been established by the recording industry,

⁵ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 122.

⁶ On an individual level, it is possible to listen to a radio broadcast counterpublicly. For example, when I (very briefly) tune in to a Top 40 station I imagine myself as an outsider to the station's target audience.

⁷ Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," 725.

developments in technology and industry created opportunities for independent movements to establish alternatives. Their efforts to redefine music's symbolic worth challenged the faculties that limited programs to commercially-safe styles. By examining the content of music programs and the patterns and effects of their narratives, it becomes possible to identify some of the social processes that contributed to the establishment of audience alliances, and to understand how those alliances served as responses to the inherent tensions between the centralized control of the mainstream music industry and the subversive impulses of marginalized communities. As Douglas points out, "The radio audience, it turns out, has always been filled with rebels."⁸

My study begins with the emergence of network radio in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when popular music narratives began to address listeners as a national public. I trace the transition from live music to sound recordings in order to highlight the development of the disc jockey as the primary agent of distribution. I then turn my focus to black radio in the 1940s, followed by the FM underground in the 1960s as examples of counterpublics that ultimately effected long-term changes in the broadcasting of music. While the mainstream industry eventually co-opted their music and modes of address after they proved to be commercially viable, autonomous voices would remain strong in the relative stability of college radio.

⁸ Douglas, *Listening In*, 16.

Radio Becomes a Hit-maker

In 1930, Orrin Dunlap, the first radio editor of the *New York Times*, claimed that “radio is now a musical instrument.”⁹ The previous decade had shown that airing music was one of the surest ways to attract listeners, and by the mid-1930s music constituted approximately sixty percent of radio time, becoming “by far the most favored of all types of program.”¹⁰ In the previous decade, jazz had been the subject of much debate over which kinds of music were appropriate for national broadcast. Its African-American origins and associations with sex provided the basis for passionate public outcries against its perceived vulgarity and corrupting influence by government officials, writers, critics, academics and religious leaders. Members of middle- and upper-class African-American communities also condemned jazz for its lowbrow associations. Although jazz records sold very well, commercial broadcasters sought to avoid controversial content at all costs in order to appease their sponsors and maintain their broad appeal. When Congress passed the Radio Act of 1927, barring “obscene, indecent or profane language” on the air, hundreds of jazz songs were blacklisted by the networks.¹¹

As with the phonograph twenty years earlier, tensions over race and class were at the center of the argument that radio should be culturally edifying and uplifting. Jazz seemed to threaten this objective. However, when orchestra leaders like Paul Whiteman, Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey started blending some rhythmic elements of jazz with more mainstream popular song structures, broadcasters soon found the path towards conventional middle class acceptance. As Hilmes explains, the new narrative forms that

⁹ Orrin Dunlap, Jr, “Music Sets the Pace,” *New York Times*, May 30, 1930.

¹⁰ Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), 217.

¹¹ Neil Leonard, “The Impact of Mechanization,” in *American Music: From Storyville to Woodstock*, ed Charles Nanry (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1972), 53.

were evolving on the air at this time were comprised of “a standard repertoire of representational structures” that addressed a new conception of the American public.¹² Swing music, a safely hybridized form of jazz, was energetic and danceable, but it was closer to the American cultural ideal that relegated blackness to the margins. With some prominent exceptions, such as Duke Ellington and Count Basie, popular swing was dominated by white bands whose lilting arrangements of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley songs helped nationalize the genre’s identity.

Another major factor in the spread of swing was the centralization of the entertainment business. Not only did NBC and CBS become the dominant networks in the 1930s, they also took over the leading phonograph companies—Victor merged with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in 1929, CBS bought the American Record Company in 1938. The cost of achieving and displaying talking films starting in 1928 brought even more media companies under their corporate umbrellas.¹³ When motion pictures became a sound medium, producers recognized the lucrative possibilities of exploiting popular songs through film. Rather than compete with east coast publishers they either purchased them outright or acquired controlling interests in New York’s leading music firms.¹⁴

Independent publishers could barely keep up, as the costs of promoting songs grew with the expanding entertainment industry. Between 1938 and 1939, less than a fifth of the top radio tunes and best selling songs of that year were published by

¹² Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 75.

¹³ Leonard, “The Impact of Mechanization,” 57.

¹⁴ Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, eds, *Radio Research, 1941* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941), 76.

independents.¹⁵ (This is an important number, as it remained a steady ratio between independent and major label output throughout the century.) This pattern recalls Suisman's description of Tin Pan Alley's impact two decades earlier, when the song pluggers' aggressive promotional tactics tended to "crowd out alternatives" and infringe upon the "social and cultural environments...people had for making music and listening to it."¹⁶ Swing, of course, was not the only type of music to be found on the radio. The commercial forces which controlled swing placed it among the listening spots when radio audiences were at their largest and presumably their most receptive: in evening prime time and at night, periods when the middle-class engaged in leisure activities with minimal distractions.

There are two elements of discourse in Warner's conception of publics that can help explain why radio was so effective in defining musical trends. Radio audiences became oriented towards one another through the act of listening to a common broadcast, and their sense of belonging to a single social entity was reinforced by temporality. In other words, the serial regularity and continuity of broadcasts made crucial "the sense that discussion is currently unfolding," thus conferring a vital sense of agency through action on the part of the public.¹⁷ When listeners turned on their radios, they were not only entering a large social space, but their simultaneous engagement in a shared experience heightened their imagined connection to and involvement with broadcasters, program stars, advertisers and even one another.

¹⁵ Ibid.,77.

¹⁶ Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 58.

¹⁷ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 97.

The second element is reflexivity, through which “an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence.”¹⁸ The following examination of *Lucky Strike Hit Parade* illustrates how this idea became an effective strategy for a thorough nationalization of public tastes.

Your Hit Parade

In 1935, the first network program to feature songs ranked by popularity debuted on NBC, initially named (for its sponsor) *Lucky Strike Sweepstakes*.¹⁹ Lucky Strike’s advertising agency was in charge of the music selection process, the details of which were kept closely guarded. George Washington Hill, president of American Tobacco, oversaw the songs’ arrangements in order to ensure that the music was always upbeat and familiar.²⁰ The only information they imparted to the public regarding their methodology was that a “large staff” studied statistics gathered from sheet music sales, radio requests, dance-hall favorites and jukebox tabulations.²¹ While numbers from these sources were no doubt invaluable to the programmers of *Hit Parade*, the fact that the program was owned by an advertising agency also meant that the weekly outcome had high financial stakes. Because they were essentially song pluggers, radio dance orchestras were likely bribed by song publishers. According to *Hit Parade* bandleader Harry Sosnick, “There were pay-offs to get the ‘right’ song up there...if you

¹⁸ Ibid.,67.

¹⁹ Philip K Eberly, *Music in the Air: America’s Changing Tastes in Popular Music, 1920-1980* (New York: Hastings House, 1982), 126.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 739.

could get to that [dance orchestra] leader, he didn't care what he put down as his most requested song if there was a little money involved."²²

Whatever the exact methods of song selections were, the show's announcer claimed it was "an accurate, authentic tabulation of America's taste in popular music," and the mass audiences followed.²³ Within a few years of its debut, Lucky Strike had honed the format of the show as a countdown to the number one song, which was presented in a climactic ending that included a drum roll before the announcement of its title.

The same year that *Hit Parade* debuted, the first comprehensive study on the psychological effects of radio on the American public was published. In *The Psychology of Radio*, Cantril and Allport used a wide range of research methods to understand how different types of programming impacted audiences. Their findings about music confirmed something the networks already knew; that familiarity was a key factor in the enjoyment of a musical composition. Familiarity means "knowledge, it means associations, tied-images, and correct anticipation of the sequence of melody and words...Familiarity means progress towards aesthetic mastery, and so long as the progress is *under way* the sense of enjoyment is retained."²⁴ Maintaining this process was tricky because, as the writers observed, popular tunes had a tendency to "wear out their welcome" more rapidly than other types of music.²⁵ However, by making hit songs contestable week after week, the show's executives kept them relevant to public discourse. They reinforced their reflexivity by emphasizing that the listeners' consumer

²² Quoted in Eberly, *Music in the Air*, 127.

²³ *Your Hit Parade*, radio broadcast, audio reel, December 18, 1943.

²⁴ Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), 219-220. Italics in original.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 218.

choices alone determined the resultant lists, which meant they had a shared, vested interest in tuning in. A song's "shelf life" could therefore be considerably extended.

Though a variety of singers, musicians and bandleaders performed over *Hit Parade's* twenty-four year span, the show's biggest star was Frank Sinatra, who had left Tommy Dorsey's Orchestra in 1942 to forge a solo career. His presence on *Hit Parade* in 1943 and 1944 helped to make these the program's most popular years. His performances, which were broadcast by remote connection to Philadelphia, were framed by screeching "bobby soxers" whose rabid fandom clearly helped enhance Sinatra's on-air appeal. The Lucky Strike Orchestra, regular vocal ensemble the Hit Paraders, and weekly guest performers rounded out the show's polished, upbeat character, which made it an ideal Saturday night broadcast. The musical repertoire came from composers and songwriters employed by Hollywood, Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, including Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin, Sammy Fain, Jimmy Van Heusen, Al Dexter, Johnny Mercer, Cole Porter and Mack Gordon.²⁶ Their melodies were easy to remember, and the lyrics tended to center on themes of love, longing and memories, sentiments that carried particular resonance during the war years.²⁷

The following transcript comes from a broadcast of *Your Hit Parade* on December 18, 1943:

Harp flourish, followed by the Lucky Strike Orchestra, which plays the four-bar fanfare theme twice

Announcer: Lucky Strike presents *Your Hit Parade*, starring Frank Sinatra! (*sound of fans, mostly female, cheering and clapping*) For the song that's number one every week, for the song that's at the very top of *Your Hit Parade*, one million Lucky Strike cigarettes are sent free to the boys of our armed services abroad. Yes, friends, with the number one song on *Your*

²⁶ Eberly, *Music in the Air*, 128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

Hit Parade, another million Lucky spree greet our boys across the sea, and on every package a greeting from *Your Hit Parade* star, Frank Sinatra.

(harp flourish, Lucky Strike Orchestra plays the opening bars from the upcoming song "Pistol Packin' Mama," fans scream)

Your Hit Parade gets going with the song that's fifth on *Your Hit Parade*. And here we go to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Frank Sinatra's all ready to sing it for you. All right, Frank, let's hear this week's number five song, "Pistol Packin' Mama!"

(fans cheer, Lucky Strike Orchestra plays the intro and Sinatra begins to sing)

Clearly, repetition was a key factor in the program's appeal. Announcer Ben Grauer repeats the name of the show no less than six times in his introduction, each time emphasizing the word "your" in order to remind the listening audience of their own personal involvement in the content of the show. The sense of collectivity was enhanced by the added sound of cheering fans, and the interjections of musical fills, which fused the public and private by transposing the enthusiastic atmosphere of nightlife into the living room.

With its enormous success, *Your Hit Parade* helped formalize American popular music as a single, national body of songs. Hit songs were framed by compelling narratives which invited radio audiences to congregate on a regular basis. How much of a role listeners actually played in determining the weekly outcomes is debatable but also inconsequential since the mere *belief* that they wielded so much influence was the vital factor in maintaining their attention. The more powerful agents by far were the teams of ad agency executives who enhanced the strength of their program by presenting popular songs as a conflation of cultural and economic capital. In other words, that which had the most musical value was that which also sold the most products.

Your Hit Parade managed to survive into the early 1950s, an unusual feat for any network radio show as music styles and types of program began to change dramatically in the late 1940s.²⁸ One of the most significant of these changes was the shift from live performance to sound recordings on popular music programs, a move that altered the role of mediators as well as the ways in which they constructed popularity through narrative texts. No longer would the sonic impressions of a vibrant concert venue constitute the framework for showcasing popular songs. Set announcers, resident stars and house orchestras were replaced by disc jockeys, and musical agency was transferred to the individual voice.

The Evolution of the Disc Jockey

In the years of network-dominated radio, between the late 1920s and late 1940s, stations thrived on the prestige of live entertainment that radio helped to heighten, and had the resources to feature top-name musicians and leaders backed by lush orchestras and big bands. Small independent stations had to contend with the stigma that using sound recordings instead of live performers amounted to second-rate programming, as conventional wisdom “shared by many broadcasters and listeners alike [was] if these announcers that play records were any good, they’d be working at a network station.”²⁹ The advancement of this attitude was no doubt part and parcel of the mainstream entertainment industry’s ruthless efforts to retain its position of power.

Although the disc jockey boom would not arrive until the 1940s, the technique of creating a colorful on-air personality who hand-picked popular songs began to develop a

²⁸ In its final six years, *Hit Parade* was actually broadcast on television.

²⁹ Eberly, *Music in the Air*, 277.

decade earlier. As record labels, musicians and broadcasters argued over the parameters of copyright, The World Broadcasting Service and RCA Victor recorded popular dance-music songs on sixteen-inch transcription discs intended for radio use only.³⁰ Stations could pay an annual subscription fee to the Music Publishers Protective Association for a maximum of 200 discs and the right to play the songs an unlimited number of times.³¹ It was essentially a stop-gap measure for stations that were unable feature live music because of its expense, but it helped set the stage for the change to come.

One of the first people to reinvent the presentation of recorded music on the air was Al Jarvis who, in 1933, developed *The World's Largest Make-Believe Ballroom* on KFWB in Los Angeles. His show was built around the illusion that he was actually presenting music from a live ballroom, but rather than adopting the traditional announcer's approach to keeping introductions brief and banter to a minimum, Jarvis cultivated an identifiable personality which he made an integral part of the show.³²

Two years later, Martin Block, who had been a junior assistant at KFWB, established his own "Make-Believe Ballroom" on WNEW in New York. Like Jarvis, Block injected his own character into the program, and established an intimate rapport with his audience through the presentation of popular records. Block's success as an on-air host was attributable to both the easy way in which he connected with his listeners, as well as a natural ease with speaking into a microphone. The following is transcript from an introduction to his show, circa 1944:

Block: Hello again, and welcome to the *Make-Believe Ballroom*. This is Martin Block up in the crystal studio, and in case you're listening to the

³⁰ Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Eberly, *Music in the Air*, 272.

Make-Believe Ballroom for the first time, may I tell you that the *Make-Believe Ballroom* is merely a ballroom that exists in our minds. It's all make-believe. But at this *Make-Believe Ballroom*, thanks to the magic of records, we have appearing for your entertainment the leading bands and singers in America. And, at the *Make-Believe Ballroom* on each of these broadcasts, we feature the very newest songs, the songs that all America is listening to and dancing to—the songs that we hope you're going to like.³³

Block's voice was clear, mellifluous, and most importantly, instantly recognizable. When listeners tuned in, they heard the sound of a reliable and easygoing friend, gently leading them through his carefully chosen repertoire of popular music. Furthermore, the atmosphere of *Make-Believe Ballroom* was very different than that of *Your Hit Parade*. Whereas Ben Grauer's booming vocal style, alternating with fanfares and screaming fans, heightened the perception of a large, collective audience, Block sounded as though he was addressing each individual listener. Although he still emphasized popularity—he assured his audience this is music “that all America is listening to and dancing to”—Block self-consciously penetrated the listener's imagination by repeating the phrase “make-believe” six times. He negotiated new parameters of broadcasting by asking his audience to accept the contrivance of a live context while he turned their attention towards pertinent facts about the music. In describing “the magic of records” he recast the once-maligned practice of using sound recordings in a positive, if not mythical light.

Block helped to invent the role of the disc jockey as not simply an authoritative voice, but as a curator of the music he played. He provided background information and illuminating details about the musicians he featured on his program in a conversational fashion:

³³ Martin Block, *Make-Believe Ballroom*, radio broadcast, transcription disc, ca. 1944.

Block: Eddie Howard. A name to conjure with in American music. Eddie Howard formed a small band about, eh, four years ago—five years ago, perhaps. And the band worked very hard and got no place. Until one day, a song plugger—that’s a man who comes to a bandleader and says, ‘Mr. Howard, I have a new song, will you play it for me so that the people can hear it?’—well, a song plugger came up to Eddie Howard and said, ‘I have a new song and nobody will play it. Will you play it, please, Mr. Howard?’ And Eddie listened to it. And he liked it. And he recorded it. And it was called ‘To Each His Own.’ And with the recording of that number, Eddie Howard was skyrocketed overnight into prominence in American music. He’s made many, many fine records since that first one. Here’s his newest: ‘A Roomful of Roses.’³⁴

Radio’s aesthetic as a “theatre of the mind” was one of its most powerful attributes; Cantril and Allport acknowledged this in their 1935 report when they credited radio for emphasizing “the listener’s visual imagery.”³⁵ Block relied on this aesthetic to create a dual narrative framework in which he guided his listeners between an imagined performance space and personal stories about the musicians. This introduction to Howard’s recording also exemplifies the public’s fascination with overnight stardom, which tied into the popular American ideal of rags-to-riches success. This singular phenomenon was made possible by radio broadcasts which had the power to instantly create fan-based publics.

In addition to *Make-Believe Ballroom*, which ran daily on WNEW, Block also hosted NBC’s *Supper Club* on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and wrote for the column “Facing the Music” in 1949 and 1950 in *Radio and Television Mirror* magazine. Block’s writing was as smooth and conversational as his broadcasts; he wrote short paragraphs detailing the current activities of artists in popular, country, jazz and classical music, making sure to mention their record labels as well. His predecessor for “Facing the Music” was none other than Duke Ellington who, in April 1948, announced Block as

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Cantril and Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*, 232.

the winner of the *Radio Mirror* Awards Favorite Disc Jockey. In the article, Ellington points out that in the early years of Block's career, both recording companies and bandleaders were "dead against the airing of what they respectively termed 'unfair competition' and 'self-competition.'" But time, and many figures on the profit side of the ledgers, convinced them that recorded programs such as *Make-Believe Ballroom* had given the ailing phonograph and record business a much-needed shot in the arm."³⁶

Initially afraid that if their records were played on the radio for free that no one would buy them, recording companies only slowly came around to the realization that doing so actually amounted to free advertising. And with the growing status and popularity of the DJ, they had a new ally to help promote their music. Throughout the 1940s and the 1950s, noted DJs emerged in major markets all over the United States, drawing advertising revenues for their stations and creating stars and hits for the popular music industry. In 1949, *Sponsor*, a trade magazine aimed at advertisers, began publishing a series entitled "Disk Jockey: Air Phenomenon." The first article cited programming flexibility as one of the greatest reasons for the success of the DJ format, and went on to describe the various styles in which American DJs featured all types of music, from "pop songs to the classics, from hillbilly music to bee-bop, from Crosby to spiritual singers...The elasticity and latitude in programming a disk-jockey show are limited only by the normal consideration of good taste and the imagination of those handling the program."³⁷

Featuring sound recordings rather than live musicians made it possible to expand the types of music played on any given show, and creative DJs with broad knowledge of

³⁶ Duke Ellington, "Facing the Music," *Radio Mirror*, April 1948, 12.

³⁷ *Sponsor*, "Disk Jockey: Air Phenomenon," August 29, 1949, 29.

musical styles imbued their programs with a sense of authority that was favorably received by listening audiences. However, “the normal consideration of good taste” suggests a lingering aesthetic hegemony that must have limited DJs’ playlists. That these limits were largely dictated by the major labels is supported by the overwhelming dominance of only a handful of record labels that were featured in popular magazines like *Billboard* and *Variety*. Because they had the resources, and were usually owned or backed by a major network, Decca, RCA-Victor and Columbia were able to regularly take out half- and full-page ads to promote their latest releases and best-selling artists. It is little surprise that their records comprised the majority of hits on the weekly top ten lists.

The unifying rhetoric that nationalized popular music in the 1930s did not disappear entirely from narratives when disc jockeys took over. The reflexive notion of songs’ popularity remained a crucial method of drawing in listeners, as was the temporal regularity of both music programs and the related print publications that ensured the ongoing discussion so important to maintaining public attention. What did change was the role of popular music’s mediators; the agency once conferred (if deceptively so) on radio audiences was transferred to the DJ, who now performed the role of the tastemaker, and whose personality-infused voice framed the musical content of a program. In a 1953 interview, Martin Block confirmed “the public preference in music is not so much determined by the public as the music played by the disk jockey.”³⁸ The DJ was perceived as an industry insider with superior knowledge of popular songs and artists, an agent of musical uplift and friend who chose music specifically for his listeners. But there

³⁸ June Bundy, “Star Record Shows Woo Web Listeners,” *Billboard*, November 13, 1953, 27.

was some deception involved in this, too, as most DJs were routinely bribed by labels to promote a song or artist just as bandleaders had been when the music was live. Selling records and ad space—making money—remained the primary goal of popular music programs.

Yet the influence of mainstream radio on listeners' consumption habits was fading fast, as public attention shifted to television and ASCAP disputes and the 1942 AFM strike limited the output of new popular music. The tightly-controlled economic and social capital of the network radio and music industries was losing its value amidst a changing social terrain. The "race" and country music that found industry support through the newly founded BMI was drawing audiences away from the Broadway/Hollywood/Tin Pan Alley music that had dominated radio. Soon, a new and unconventional crop of voices began to emerge on the airwaves that brought dramatic changes to the world of popular music and the publics that supported them.

Other Voices, Other Music: African-American DJs

Prior to World War II, commercial radio was an almost exclusively white domain. With the expansion of the networks in the 1930s, which was bolstered by advertising revenues, standard policies against hiring African-Americans in almost any capacity permeated the industry. The few portrayals of African-Americans on the air were rooted in the vaudeville and minstrel stages, and the handful of black or blackface characters who appeared in radio comedies were cast as familiar stereotypes—Mammies, simpletons, or hard-drinking womanizers. Most were performed by white actors in "blackface" roles, the most popular of which were Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll

who portrayed *Amos n' Andy* for over thirty years. Advertisers were under pressure, particularly in the South, to avoid sponsoring programs that featured African-Americans in prominent roles. Black singer and bandleader Cab Calloway, who starred on the short-lived NBC program *Quizzicale*, noted that “it was impossible for Negroes to get a regular commercial sponsor in those days.”³⁹

After World War II, however, both radio and society had undergone watershed changes. America’s involvement in a war that was predicated on the violent politicization of racial superiority forced Americans to begin to reconsider their own attitudes on the subject. (In 1948, for example President Truman banned segregation in the armed forces.) Although the Civil Rights movement was still two decades away, government-backed radio programs spread messages of tolerance during the war. As the networks shifted their emphasis to television in the late 1940s and early 1950s, African-Americans slowly found more opportunities to get involved in local radio—on-air hours were becoming available, and more stations were crowding on the air each year. The wartime and post-war black migrations had provided more jobs, increased income and made African-Americans a growing portion of the consumer market.

In 1949, a seminal, two-part series in *Sponsor* magazine entitled “The Forgotten 15,000,000” alerted radio advertisers to the fact that “the Negro market” had increased 113% between 1940 and 1944, and that “[the Negro] has the inclination and the money to buy the food, drug, clothing, household, and automotive products that are directly plugged to 125,000,000 other Americans whose skins are lighter.”⁴⁰ How exactly to sell products to an African-American market remained an elusive prospect, but the

³⁹ Quoted in Barlow, *Voice Over*, 30.

⁴⁰ *Sponsor*, “The Forgotten 15,000,000,” part 1, October 10, 1949, 25.

acknowledgment of a vast listening audience that had been largely ignored was an important step in radio's cultural and social development. A growing number of black radio personalities would soon reveal not only how to capture the interest of black communities, but that the desegregation of music on the air would have powerful and lasting effects on broader American culture.

Al Benson

Though he was not the first black DJ to gain local and national prominence, Al Benson is credited with being the first to use black-identified styles in his broadcasts. He was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, and gained performing experience as both a regional vaudeville entertainer and a preacher.⁴¹ He moved to Chicago in the 1930s, and started broadcasting a religious program under his original name, Reverend Arthur Leaner, on WGES in 1945. Later that year, he decided to become a secular disc jockey in order to sell advertising, and became an instant success.⁴² His natural Southern accent and use of street slang endeared him to Chicago's African-American communities, many of whom had migrated north just as Benson did. He was also an effective ad man, for he had intimate knowledge of his audience, and like the successful white DJs who preceded him, he believed in what he sold.

Musically, Benson was no less a revolution. Although R&B records were outselling jazz in the market, virtually no DJs were playing those records on the air. Even Jack Cooper, "the undisputed patriarch of black radio in the United States" sought a mixed audience by emulating white announcers in his speech and broadcasting culturally-

⁴¹ Barlow, *Voice Over*, 98.

⁴² *Ibid.*

approved swing and big band music.⁴³ The cultural stigmas that plagued the burgeoning genre resonated within both black and white communities that were comprised of educated and prominent individuals. But Al Benson dared to play the latest R&B releases on his show, establishing a new format in radio and helping independent R&B record companies grow.⁴⁴ By the 1950s, Benson was broadcasting ten hours a day on three different Chicago stations, helping new artists make hits, bringing in millions of dollars in ad revenue and blazing a trail for black appeal radio.⁴⁵

A transcript from Benson's *Swing and Sway* program on WGES, circa 1955, illustrates the unique way in which he constructed his show into a seamless blend of music and speech:

Show opens with two upbeat, unidentified R&B songs featuring heavy saxophones and lyrics about going out on a Saturday night

Announcer: Time, 10am. This is WGES 1390 on the dial. Now it's time for your old friend and swingmaster with "Swing and Sway." And now, here he is, Al Benson!

Benson: Thank you! And good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Here I am all ready and all set to bring to you thirty minutes of red hot beat-me-down bring-you-up swing tunes of today! And now it's on with show...and the name of our first tune as we bring it to you here is Ruth Brown doing "Five Ten Fifteen Hour!"

*Four 4-bar saxophone riffs open "Five Ten Fifteen Hour."*⁴⁶

It is significant that Benson opened his show with music, rather than immediately introducing himself. This helped to establish the character of his program in the same way that the screaming fans and orchestral fanfares characterized the grandiose opening of *Your Hit Parade* a decade earlier. But whereas *Hit Parade* provided a live venue for a

⁴³ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁶ Al Benson, *Swing and Sway*, radio broadcast, compact disc, ca. 1955.

broad listening audience, and Martin Block bent the listener's ear with conversational introduction, Benson allowed his recorded songs to grab the audience, and followed with brief and boisterous introductions to match the rhythm of his playlist. He maintained a steady, energetic flow by alternating songs and sales pitches. His upbeat, rapid-rhyming delivery style never interrupted the music, but rather flowed easily in and out of it:

"Five Ten Fifteen Hour" ends.

Benson: Yes, it's time now for Pickin Cleaners. Remember to be recognized, you got-ta be Pickinized. If you want that garment of yours cleaned in first-class condition, remember to take it to Pickin Cleaners. In before noon, it's out before four! That's Pickin Cleaners with forty stores all over Chicago's great south side. Remember for perfect cleaning and for superb cleaning, it's the one and only Pickin Cleaners stores here in Chicago. Remember to be recognized, you gotta be Pickinized! And now it's more music as we bring to you the Ravens doing "Old Man River!"

*"Old Man River" begins with two 8-bar piano and vocal doo wop intro.*⁴⁷

In describing the programmatic qualities of television, media historian Raymond Williams makes an important distinction between sequence as programming and sequence as flow. The latter results from the reorganization of previously discernible program and commercial units into a single experience that resonates as a whole.⁴⁸ The effect encourages lasting attention by linking the units together through an internal current in which program material and advertising rhetoric interact with one another, rendering the experience into a structure of feelings, and a consistent set of cultural relationships.⁴⁹ Benson reinvented the radio music show in precisely the same way, creating what rock music historian Carl Belz called an experiential folk reality in which "the records assumed the imprint of performances and the show assumed the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), 93.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

immediacy—although not the illusion—of a live folk gathering.”⁵⁰ In other words, Benson emulated the social spaces in which black and white youths danced to R&B records without the Martin Block approach to framing it as something other than a broadcast.

In terms of public address, Benson engendered a form of cultural expression that directly opposed the dominant paradigm established by the networks in the 1930s. His speech pattern was unabashedly African-American, and his unique personality was obviously not that of a polished, scripted emcee representing and appealing to a (white) mass national identity. Instead, Benson capitalized on his local appeal, and qualities once considered detrimental to DJs—a Southern accent and an affinity for R&B music—became his greatest strengths. Through his on-air support of local black-owned business, he also validated the African-American listener as consumer. Benson was, in every sense, fulfilling the counterpublic role: he “supplied different ways of imagining stranger sociability and its reflexivity” by making regional distinction an asset, blurring formerly racially-divided radio audiences by appealing to whites and featuring racially stigmatized music in a socially positive framework.⁵¹ According to Warner:

Perhaps nothing demonstrates the importance of discursive publics in the modern social imaginary more than this—that even the counterpublics that challenge modernity’s social hierarchy of faculties do so by projecting the space of discursive circulation among strangers as a social entity and in doing so fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger sociability.⁵²

What Benson achieved went further than simply granting agency to marginalized cultural forms; he pioneered a new era of broadcasting. For the first time, “sounding

⁵⁰ Carl Belz, *The Story of Rock* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 47.

⁵¹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 121-122.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 121.

black” was in a growing number of urban markets a positive selling point. The racial ventriloquism of white DJs such as Wolfman Jack was not new to radio, nor was it unproblematic in terms of its economic exploitation by the mostly white-owned stations. But the publicizing of black cultural expressions was a refreshing change in American broadcasting.⁵³ These exciting and spontaneous experiences appealed especially to adolescents, who responded enthusiastically to the new forms of public address that exploited their growing self-awareness as generationally and socially separate from their parents. The added portability of radio in the form of car systems and transistors removed the listening experience far from the family unit. They staked out new social spaces “by blanketing a particular area with their music, their sportscasts, their announcers.”⁵⁴ The static temporality that had drawn audiences into the living room for *Your Hit Parade* and *Make-Believe Ballroom* became increasingly characterized by a mobile listenership.

When Alan Freed started courting his white teenage fan base, R&B became rock n’ roll, and encompassed a variety of styles, including country and western, Chicago blues and even Tin Pan Alley-type music as these were among the records being purchased by large numbers of teenagers. For a brief time in the 1950s, radio enjoyed “a period of remarkable heterogeneity.”⁵⁵ But the days of the autonomous DJ would come to an end by the late 1950s. As I described in Chapter Two, independent radio stations were bought up by chain owners, and the payola scandal pushed many influential DJs off the air, including Alan Freed. With the major labels regaining control of the music charts, and radio stations coming under more centralized media ownership, popular music

⁵³ Barlow, *Voice Over*, 133.

⁵⁴ Douglas, *Listening In*, 221.

⁵⁵ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 194.

broadcasters sought ways to combine the most effective elements of R&B DJs' styles within more standardized formats.

Top 40 Radio

One version of the story of Top 40 has it that station owner Todd Storz, son of a wealthy brewer from Omaha, was struck by the way restaurant patrons played the same song over and over on public jukeboxes. He soon created a radio format in which the same hits were repeated in frequent rotation. Like many legends in the history of rock music, this is likely a gross oversimplification of a much more complicated process through which Storz and his associates arrived at the notion of hit radio. Neither was Storz alone in pursuing this venture, as other DJs such as Gordon McClendon and Jack Thayer made important contributions to its development. The format that would become known as the Top 40 would soon have a huge impact on both the music and the radio industries.

For Storz, "programming is based on the simple premise that what the public wants is popular music" and that "the hit tune is the common meeting ground."⁵⁶ To this end, he fashioned programs that emulated the lively and spontaneous atmosphere cultivated by black DJs, but featured tightly-controlled playlists gleaned from jukebox plays, sheet music and record sales, as well as listings in *Variety* and *Billboard*. And while he wanted his DJs to create identifiable personalities, Storz insisted that the disc jockey, "is usually above the audience mentally and financially, and lives within popular

⁵⁶ Quoted in Herman Land, "The Storz Bombshell," *Television Magazine*, May 1957, 86.

music, is not representative of the public” and therefore “his own musical preferences are a dangerous guide.”⁵⁷

These ideas were not new; radio audiences had shown for over two decades that popular songs and familiarity made for successful programs, and following the public song market made it easy to identify best sellers. But the recent growth in use of the personality DJ had provided an even more powerful connection between listener and music, bolstering the discursive strength of his or her public address. The claim that Top 40 radio was designed to “give the public what it wants” harkens back to broadcasters’ claims from the very beginning of the commercial business. Of course, the public *did* want Top 40, as evidenced by the format’s enormous success throughout the country and its continued presence on the radio today. But it also turned the process through which music became commerce into a deceptively cyclical one. Chapple and Garofalo explain the re-centralization of popular music:

DJs were reduced to an element in sound formula, rather than a creative force in their own right. Radio was integrated in a more specific way into the fabric of the music industry. For records to become hits, they had to get airplay, and with repeated and constant airplay available on Top 40, records were made into hits.⁵⁸

Storz sought to change the nature of popular music narratives by downplaying the chatter of individual DJs and returning to the discourse of collective tastes that had defined *Your Hit Parade*. Though it predated Williams by thirty years, Adorno’s “A Social Critique of Radio” identifies the problematic social effects of a hit-mongering industry in the overdetermination of public tastes:

The identification of the successful with the more frequently played is thus an illusion—an illusion, to be sure, that may become an operating social

⁵⁷ Ibid.,88.

⁵⁸ Chapple and Garofalo, *Rock n’ Roll is Here to Pay*, 60.

force and in-turn really make the much-played a success: because through such identification the listeners follow what they believe to be the crowd and thus come to constitute one.⁵⁹

Storz recognized that removing the autonomous disc jockey whose personal tastes were “a dangerous guide,” instead vesting control in a program director, would help standardize both the presentation and reception of weekly songs. The value of popular music shifted back to one of cultural-economic capital: a popular song is a good song. And, as *Your Hit Parade* and *Make Believe-Ballroom* illustrated, a song’s popularity was as much a narrative construction as it was a tabulation of broad public taste.

Yet in setting such limits on the broadcasting of popular music, Storz unwittingly created a new need among audiences who were dissatisfied with mindless and repetitive cycles of songs. As Jody Berland explained in her study of radio space and local narratives, “the more ‘personality is signified by the DJ, the less room there is for informal forms of public discourse to enter the airwaves.”⁶⁰ But with the advent of FM technology, a new counterpublic formed in the following decade around the idea that broadcasters and listeners alike were entitled to a public forum in which the exchange of ideas could occur more freely and without the constraints of profit goals.

FM Technology

Frequency modulation (FM) was developed by gifted radio inventor named Edwin Howard Armstrong, who spent the late 1920s and early 1930s in countless experiments seeking ways to eradicate the static that interfered with amplitude

⁵⁹ Adorno, “A Social Critique of Radio Music,” 210.

⁶⁰ Jody Berland, “Radio Space and Industrial Time: Music Formats, Local Narratives and Technological Mediation,” *Popular Music* 9 (1990): 191.

modulation (AM) frequencies.⁶¹ By 1933, he had succeeded in both eliminating static and improving sound quality. Armstrong demonstrated his new FM system for his friend David Sarnoff, president of RCA, whose own interest in eliminating static and achieving higher fidelity broadcasting prompted his initial support of Armstrong. But Sarnoff eventually decided FM was not what he sought. The new system posed too big a risk; consumers would have to buy new radios to receive it and there was no guarantee they could become competitive with existing AM stations. Yet Armstrong, initially on his own, continued to tirelessly promote FM technology, despite RCA's rejection and subsequent public denigration of it, and in 1939 the FCC allocated thirteen channels for experimental FM broadcasting. Three years later, after the commission approved regular FM broadcasting, there were more than forty FM stations in the country.⁶² In 1941, the commission first set aside channels for non-profit educational licensees on the new FM band, a decision continued in 1945 when FM's band was shifted higher in the VHF band. Twenty FM channels, located between 88.1 and 91.9 kHz, are still reserved for educational, noncommercial use.⁶³

Despite making some progress in innovating FM broadcasting, Armstrong faced mounting challenges. The FCC's decision to move the FM band to a higher spectrum in 1945 meant that existing FM transmitters and receivers were rendered obsolete. The FCC also ruled that FM would be used for television's sound transmission, but RCA refused to pay Armstrong royalties for it. Years of court battles culminated in the inventor's suicide

⁶¹ Jesse Walker, *Rebels on the Air, An Alternative History of Radio in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 47.

⁶² Douglas, *Listening In*, 262.

⁶³ Samuel Sauls, *The Culture of American College Radio* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2000), 11.

in 1954. What he left behind was not only a watershed scientific achievement, but a social legacy as well:

[F]rom the beginnings of its technical, business and regulatory history, FM was an antiestablishment technology marginalized by vested corporate interests. It is not surprising, then, that FM's renaissance would be pioneered by those very much outside of—and even at odds with—the media culture those corporations had created.⁶⁴

The process of social resistance through the development of alternative media can be explained through Williams's concept of determination and youth audiences.

Rejecting traditional notions of technological determinism for underemphasizing human agency, Williams instead defines “determination” in broadcast media as primarily social, in which “the setting of limits and the exertion of pressures,” have profound effects on social practices but can never be entirely controlled.⁶⁵ One of the unpredictable outcomes is the activities that explicitly reject those limits and pressures, and which help inform the process of determining future uses and understandings of technology. Here he reveals yet another facet of the active minority:

In the young radical underground, and even more in the young cultural underground, there is a familiarity with media, and an eager sense of experiment and practices, which is as much an effect as the more widely publicized and predicted passivity. Indeed, by prolonged use of a technology which had seemed to be contained and limited to commercial or paternal or authoritarian ends, many people...conceived quite different intentions and uses.⁶⁶

For “the young cultural underground” in the 1960s, Armstrong's invention provided the means to reinvent popular music narratives.

⁶⁴ Douglas, *Listening In*, 263.

⁶⁵ Williams, *Television*, 130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

Pacifica and Community Radio

On April 15 1949, a non-profit FM radio station went on the air in Berkeley, California. Lewis Hill, founder of the Pacifica Foundation, envisioned it as an accessible public space that encouraged “creative exchange between people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs,” as well as advocating for free speech and individual rights.⁶⁷ In a 1951 article entitled “The Theory of Listener-Sponsored Radio,” Hill echoed Adorno’s disdain for the standardizing effects of commercial radio when he decried the establishment of a “mass norm” that resulted from the effort to induce mass sales. His proposal for a listener-supported station would “give the genuine artist and thinker a possible, even a desirable, place to work.”⁶⁸ This was an idea that a few stations had tried in the 1920s, but Hill made it a viable option three decades later.

Pacifica Radio’s first decade was beset with uncertainties. Listener support was not as forthcoming as its founders had hoped, and the Foundation had to rely on exhaustive, grassroots fundraising in order to stay on the air until donations from community members began to trickle in at a steadier rate. Another problem was technology; few people owned the FM receivers needed to tune in to KPFA’s signal. (The station managers solved that issue by giving FM radios to its subscribers as acknowledgments for their contributions.) None of this was helped by the Cold War politics of the 1950s, when several political witch hunts led to an FCC investigation of KPFA’s operations (and a Congressional hearing) because of its left-wing broadcasts.

⁶⁷ Matthew Lasar, *Pacifica Radio: The Rise of an Alternative Network* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), xv.

⁶⁸ Lewis Hill, “The Theory of Listener-Sponsored Radio,” *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 7 (1952):166.

But Pacifica remained steadfastly committed to cultural uplift by reaching out to educated audiences frustrated by the program limitations of largely AM commercial radio. KPFA's musical programming exemplifies this approach. For Alan Rich, one of the station's early music directors, making contemporary classical music accessible to his listeners was a vital aim of his programs, and he did so by placing contemporary and "classic" classical music within the same program. Jazz enthusiast Phil Elwood spent the 1950s establishing an authoritative jazz show in which he featured selections from his vast record collection with commentary gleaned from his deep knowledge of American history.⁶⁹ The folk-music program *Midnight Special* showcased regional sounds and talents, ranging from traditional blues and bluegrass to more contemporary blends performed by live musicians in the studio; a young Jerry Garcia was a regular guest on the program before he went on to become the leader of the Grateful Dead.⁷⁰ The practice of broadcasting both "highbrow" classical music with traditionally "lowbrow" forms such as bluegrass and blues created a new context in which Western music was not divided by social class, but presented as part of a common historical trajectory.

One of Pacifica's most dedicated DJs was Carlos Hagen, who emigrated to the United States from Chile in the early 1960s. Hagen was also one of the co-founders of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC) and, in addressing members at the organization's 1985 convention in San Francisco, he described his native Latin American culture as one that encouraged freedom of information, inquiry and expression. Radio stations in Chile, he said, were open to record collectors who wanted to talk about their passions. When he arrived in the U.S. after college, he was "appalled" by the general lack

⁶⁹ Lasar, *Pacifica Radio*, 99.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.

of access to and knowledge of the richness of cultural life, but at Pacifica radio, he found “a place where a collector, an artist, an intellectual, a thinker could go and just talk, share his or her knowledge of record collections with the audience.”⁷¹

Hagen did exactly that when he began producing programs on music of the old American west, music of the Olympic Games, popular art songs of the Spanish-American War, music in the 1920s and 1930s and a critical history of standards of judgment and appreciation in American music. Whenever possible, Hagen used sound recordings from each era in order to accurately portray the sounds and styles of that period. He found many such recordings at the Library of Congress and the National Archives, including the collections of Alan Lomax.⁷² Enacting the role of a style leader and agent of cultural uplift articulated with Martin Block’s approach to broadcasting music, but on KPFA, the DJs could offer far more types of music. Without the constraints of advertisers’ need to reach large audiences, and broadcasting in a university town known for a wide spectrum of political and social views, they were free to develop shows that routinely challenged their audiences to listen to new music, to shed their ideas of what “good” music was, and to begin to create a new set of aesthetic standards that fell outside that established on commercial radio.

Pacifica’s innovative approach to broadcasting may be linked to a larger trend in American society in which cultural classifications began to blur. In the Epilogue to *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Lawrence Levine acknowledges how the shifting perimeters of culture in the last fifty years have altered to become more expansive. He cites the spread

⁷¹ Carl Hagen, “Radio Documentaries and Access Problems” (lecture presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, San Francisco, CA, 1985, audio reel).

⁷² Lomax hosted a similar program from 1948-49 on the Mutual Broadcast System called *Your Ballad Man*, which also featured American folk, blues and jazz, as well as international music.

of Modernism in the 1960s, “which called into question the distinction between high and low art,” for beginning to loosen formerly rigid categories and standards in favor of more a pluralistic sensibility.⁷³ Levine also notes the inclusion of subjects in university curricula that were once considered beneath academic notice, such as the study of film, radio, popular novels and magazines, leisure activities and general mass entertainment.

While Pacifica still subscribed to the idea of a cultural hierarchy, emphasizing their intellectual superiority over commercial radio, their inherent message was that its strength came from being culturally eclectic. Commercial radio executives had worked hard and very successfully to keep music strictly categorized for the benefit of their sponsors who relied on clearly defined markets to peddle their products. Pacifica hired DJs whose breadth of knowledge was intended to expand public discourse and give access to a much wider terrain of human musical expression—an entirely different goal.

The kind of public that Hill imagined in his conception of listener-supported radio was based in “a deeply optimistic belief in the power of the individual to reconstruct human relations,” an idea he drew from Kierkegaard’s philosophy of the willful construction of the self.⁷⁴ He believed the key to human understanding was communication, and ongoing dialogue among diverse groups of people. The circulation of a variety of cultural forms, especially music, was one way of creating a more pluralistic public space. Pacifica radio’s function as a community-oriented place of exchange falls within Warner’s definition of intellectual publics as spheres in which discourse circulates in contexts outside existing frames of politics. He claims such groups are uniquely empowered to create conditions of possibility for alternative public

⁷³ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 245.

⁷⁴ Lasar, *Pacifica Radio*, 8.

practices, and this is precisely what Pacifica achieved as the sociological, technological and musical changes of the 1960s combined to aid in the expansion of their approach to broadcasting.⁷⁵

The Birth of Freeform

By 1959, Pacifica had achieved sufficient success with its two stations on the West Coast to establish a third station on the other side of the country: WBAI in New York. When Bob Fass was hired as an announcer at WBAI, he lent his actor's voice to providing fill-ins between programs gaps, which were mostly poems, stories and mini-essays. But when the managers gave him permission to do an after-hours show following the station's official midnight sign-off, he gave his creative impulses free reign. A former fellow DJ observes:

He played all kind of records; he interviewed all kinds of people; he allowed musicians to jam, live, in the studio; he did news reports; he took listener calls, and sometimes, his colleague Steve Post recalls, simply rambled, 'free-associating from the innards of his complex mind.' Fass also pioneered the art of sound collage; he was surely the first DJ, and perhaps the last, to play a Hitler speech with a Buddhist chant in the background.⁷⁶

What Fass unwittingly created was a new radio format that was, essentially, a non-format in which program elements are broadcast spontaneously and without deference to any genre boundaries, musical or otherwise.

The slow spread of FM stations created a period of relative uncertainty on the part of commercial broadcasters, many holding both AM and FM licenses, but not yet knowing how to effectively program the latter. Most simply simulcast their AM stations

⁷⁵ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 150.

⁷⁶ Walker, *Rebels on the Air*, 73.

until the FCC issued rules in the late 1960s requiring separate programming for co-located stations. Lacking advertising and thus with little concern for ratings, many stations gave DJs who were willing to explore FM's possibilities free reign simply to fill broadcast hours.⁷⁷ Like the innovative black DJs who preceded them, these so-called "underground" DJs took advantage of this period of flexibility to adopt freeform approaches to their programming. An increasing number of new FM outlets provided alternatives to the cultural dominance of Top 40 formats, not to mention the conservative politics of the older generations.

The majority of those active in underground radio in the 1960s had been the rock n' roll teenage audience in the previous decade. Now college-aged, many of these mostly middle-class, mostly white, young adults identified with the so-called counterculture. Though the term tends to oversimplify the complexities of the era, counterculture commonly refers to "the more innovative, rebellious, and radical aspects of 1960s musical, political and social culture."⁷⁸ Among the targets of countercultural protest were government and corporate control, parental conservatism, the Vietnam War and, on the cultural front, the endless rounds of stale hits on Top 40 radio. Lee Abrams, a former radio consultant recalls:

God knows, things were tight at the pop chart outlets back then. Underground was a reaction to that and the growing popularity of a new generation of bands and sounds, which were too radical for the hit-single Top 40-driven stations. Guys like Hendrix needed their own format where their music could be exposed and thrive...Underground was also a reaction to the changing cultural climate. It was a vehicle for the new gestalt that was emerging in the air and on the street.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Michael Keith, *Voices in the Purple Haze: Underground Radio and the Sixties* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), 19.

⁷⁸ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 269.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Keith, *Voices in the Purple Haze*, 33.

Through underground and freeform radio experiments, members of the counterculture created a counterpublic by changing the content of popular music programs through narratives designed to reach an underserved niche that felt increasingly alienated. DJs reclaimed their agency by avoiding the economically-driven priorities of commercial stations and placing greater relevance on the cultural value of their music.

Among the first to achieve this was Tom Donahue. A veteran of Top 40 radio, he modeled his delivery style on Al Benson and the best R&B DJs of the 1950s while expanding the variety of songs played. On KMPX in San Francisco, Donahue featured longer cuts and artists whose albums sold well, but who had rarely appeared on AM radio: The Doors, Spirit, Richie Havens, Big Brother and the Holding Company, the Grateful Dead, Cream, Leonard Cohen, Procol Harum and Country Joe and the Fish.⁸⁰ He also played music in multi-song sets, often tied together with a particular theme or motif. Donahue's wife Raechel, also a DJ, remembers:

One of our favorite specialties was the 'round,' in which you might segue Aretha's 'Respect,' Otis Redding's 'Respect,' Otis's 'Satisfaction,' the Stones' 'Satisfaction,' the Stone's 'Red Rooster,' and Willie Dixon's 'Red Rooster,' and so on, until you would work your way back to Aretha.⁸¹

The practice of combining various styles of popular music—in this case, R&B, rock and the blues—changed the unit of musical meaning from a single song to collective *playlists* that shared a number of attributes besides popular chart success. In 1967, Tom Donahue told *Rolling Stone* that he believed “music should not be treated as a group of objects to be sorted out like eggs with each category kept rigidly apart from the others.”⁸² With

⁸⁰ Ibid.,54.

⁸¹ Ibid.,56.

⁸² Tom Donahue, “A Rotting Corpse Stinking Up the Airwaves,” *Rolling Stone*, November 23, 1967, 14.

freeform it became possible to present music not as a snapshot of the most popular songs, but as a much longer, more aesthetically complex and constantly developing continuum.

In addition to airing expansive song sets, freeform DJs also created subversive contexts, using music as tools of social and political criticism. KRAB in Seattle, for example, was home to a particularly irreverent collection of broadcasters. The station's founder, Lorenzo Milam, was a former member of KPFA's staff with ambitions that went beyond Lewis Hill's fledgling intellectual endeavor. Among other community volunteers, Milam recruited two notable ethnomusicologists. Robert Garfias, also a Pacifica veteran, moved to Seattle to establish an ethnomusicology department at the University of Washington and became KRAB's music director. Gary Margason, an amateur musician of Japanese court music, found KRAB a suitable outlet for his interests as well.⁸³ The station's DJs were known for using music ironically, as when they played a Ku Klux Klan record between two Folkways albums of Somalian and Angolan freedom songs, and for creating playlists that served as backdrops for current events.⁸⁴ For example, in 1964, between speeches by presidential candidates Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson, they broadcast the following "campaign concert":

"Two Pretty Boys" by Lucy Stewart
"Hellhound on My Trail" by Robert Johnson
"I Want My Crown" by Big Joe Williams
"Nice Work if You Can Get It" by Thelonious Monk
"After the Fight" by Mercy Dee Walton
"Txanarrenku (Dance of the Victor)" by Juan Onatibia
"Tomorrow is the Question" by Ornette Coleman⁸⁵

The listening experience was further enhanced by the development of stereo technology, approved by the FCC for use by FM radio in early 1961. Along with FM

⁸³ Walker, *Rebels on the Air*, 82.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁵ Cited in Walker, *Rebels on the Air*, 83.

itself, hi-fidelity or “hi-fi” sound developed through the 1950s and 1960s as a response to the relatively poor quality of both AM radio and analog sound recordings. The stereo system divided sound into a “right” and “left” channel, each emerging from a separate speaker. The effect was a more authentic re-creation of live music. Listening to both sound recordings and radio programs broadcast in stereo became a more rewarding sensory experience; in addition to building on lyrical and social similarities, songs could also be connected on numerous auditory levels. Freeform DJs strived to create smooth segues between songs, following threads of instruments, rhythms, timbres keys, or even a single common note. Douglas describes the physiological and psychological impact of this practice:

Active, engaged listening is led by anticipation, and we anticipate only what we already know: our brains reach out and latch on to the elements of music that are familiar. Once the auditory system is excited by certain pitches, it activates the limbic system, which governs our emotions. The limbic system wants to sustain this pleasurable, newly heightened state, so it asks for similar sounds. So there seems to be a cognitive pleasure when a song that ended with mandolins is immediately followed by a song that begins with mandolins. Even moving between songs with common bass lines—which many listeners don’t consciously pay attention to—is pleasurable because bass lines carry the energy and are the foundation on which songs are built. One song would set up musical anticipations in the DJ and his listeners; the next song satisfied them. At the same time, research has shown that cognitively, people also like surprise; we like music that somewhat defies our expectations, that is slightly challenging.⁸⁶

The most worldly and creative freeform DJs, in the true spirit of genre-less programming, could make a Scarlatti sonata, Balinese gamelan, Russian folk music and a Beatles song all fit together into a seamless and themed sonic set. The process of listening was both physical and cerebral, an experience well-suited to the drug-induced psychedelic experiments that accompanied listening to rock music within the

⁸⁶ Douglas, *Listening In*, 273.

counterculture. Like Martin Block, many DJs were curators; like Al Benson, they played their turntables like musical instruments; like Tom Donahue they were album-oriented auditory specialists; like Robert Garfias, some were enthusiasts and collectors. And, like many other musical outfits that found success on the margins, these progressive FM formats created sufficient success to become ripe for mainstream takeover.

In a 1974 article, *Broadcasting* magazine interviewed Mike Harrison of KPRI in San Diego who:

...detects an increase in the amount of 'research and format' going into progressive programming—more study of audience tastes as measured by sales and requests, more attention paid to national sales and airplay trends. 'We're seeing a nationalization of tastes,' he says.⁸⁷

By the early 1970s, venture capitalists were discovering a lucrative market in fast-growing FM radio. The increase in "research and format," which included marketing surveys and sales reports, represented chain owners' efforts to reach white, college-educated, middle- to upper-class people (mostly male) between the ages of 18 and 34.⁸⁸ Interest in post-Beatles rock music was flourishing among this demographic, many of whom had become acquainted with psychedelic and folk rock during their college years. Media companies consolidated operation of their AM and FM stations, and centralized the process of deciding what to play and when to play it. The music industry responded by pouring more money into promoting their most popular artists. Rock music fragmented into many subgenres, but commercial FM stations' need to maintain a growing audience to satisfy their new advertisers effectively froze the vibrant, eclectic, politically-charged freeform programming that had energized audiences.

⁸⁷ *Broadcasting*, "FM Rockers Are Taming Their Free Formats," November 25, 1974, 47-48.

⁸⁸ Douglas, *Listening In*, 277.

As with the counterpublic efforts of the R&B DJs in the 1950s, the progressive FM movement had established a discursive style that appealed to a growing segment of the youth population, a valuable market for the music industry. In its drive to shift progressive FM into a broader commercial format, the industry co-opted the stylistic innovations of freeform DJs but with (once again) more limited playlists. Stations adopted the anti-commercial sentiments into their promotional efforts with a kind of ironic wink at the irreverence of freeform.⁸⁹ Radio consultants were hired to help station managers apply demographic and market research to bringing back shorter cycles of proven hits. Learning about or sampling new music was soon no longer part of popular music broadcasts.

In discussing the agency of counterpublics vis-à-vis the dominant public, Warner suggests that the ultimate goal is the transformation of both policy and public life itself. The counterpublic of progressive FM radio achieved that to an extent, but not without cost. As with the independent labels in the 1920s and 1940s, the success of freeform and underground DJs became their undoing. The mainstream music and radio industries had greater clout when they reorganized the industry to best capitalize on these innovations. But this also enabled the counterpublic to showcase their economic weakness as a virtue among those who promoted an artistic agenda in the service of cultural edification. They didn't play songs, they played "sets," a term borrowed from live musical performances, and they thought of themselves not as mere announcers but as musical enthusiasts driven only by the passion to share it.⁹⁰ The commitment to these ideals enabled their preservation.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Keith, *Voices in the Purple Haze*, 35.

Progressive activities in the commercial arena may have been repressed, but innovative DJs continued to find haven in one public space where freeform had always flourished—college radio.

College Radio

Although college-based stations did not achieve collective importance until the late-1970s when it became a stage for up-and-coming artists, it is one of the older types of broadcasting in the United States.

In a March 1939 article, Harold McCarty, long-time director of Wisconsin State Radio station WHA, emphasized the responsibility of college and university broadcasting stations to dedicating “the new system of American radio” to “democratic ideals and methods.”⁹¹ On the air since 1917, WHA is probably the oldest university-based station in the country. It was among 168 educational institutions to receive a federal broadcast license in the 1920s—and one of only 38 that remained by 1938. According to McCarty, most university-based stations developed first as technical experiments, and with radio’s full potential yet to be discovered, many of them “were interested in the technical aspects of this new instrument, not its social usefulness.”⁹²

However, stations such as WHA were full-power noncommercial outlets, and professionally operated. What later became known as college radio were the stations primarily run by and for students, and whose low-watt transmission systems created from

⁹¹ Harold B. McCarty, “The Role of the College Radio Station,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 21 (1939): 342.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 339.

radiator pipes did not reach beyond campus buildings.⁹³ By this definition, some credit Haverford University as the first college “radiator” station, built by students in 1923. Brown University students created an inter-dormitory network in 1936, which later expanded to the campus community and became known as WBRU. George Abraham and David Borst, who created WBRU, also founded the Intercollegiate Broadcasting System (IBS) as a nonprofit corporation serving student-run stations in 1940. IBS members were part of the “gas pipe network” of radiator stations, which included Columbia, Cornell, Hamilton, Harvard, Haverford, Maryland, Ohio University, Rhode Island State, Swarthmore, Wesleyan and Yale, received national attention and even sold ad spots to major sponsors such as Camel Cigarettes and Readers Digest.⁹⁴

In 1941, and again in 1945, the IBS promoted the FCC’s allocation of educational channels. With the options offered by FM technology becoming clear by then, colleges that obtained licenses began to use them for a greater variety of purposes. For professional, university-based stations this meant serving as outlets for public relations and community education. When commercial radio shifted to a local market emphasis in the 1950s, more colleges designed programs to train reporters, editors and writers, as well as provide classes in broadcast management, broadcast law and hands-on production experience.⁹⁵ The number of college radio stations that broadcast beyond campus increased, though their approaches to musical programming varied. While most sought to

⁹³ Louis M. Bloch, *The Gas Pipe Networks: A History of College Radio, 1936-1946* (Cleveland: Bloch and Company, 1980), 15.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁵ Fornatale and Mills, *Radio in the Television Age*, 183.

offer alternatives to Top 40, the student-run stations—those with the least amount of institutional control—left programming decisions to music directors and DJs.⁹⁶

The experimental spirit and fluid programming of college radio helped to inspire the commercial underground and freeform movements of the 1960s. And, because so much of the counterculture was campus-based, universities' low-power stations made ideal spaces for students to use as public platforms.⁹⁷ This became especially important following the corporatization of progressive FM commercial radio in the 1970s.

Community radio suffered under the strains of infighting and financial losses as the counterculture's social cohesion of the 1960s began to splinter in the next decade. The establishment of National Public Radio by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) in 1970 exacerbated the struggle when, in 1972, the CPB asked the FCC to consider terminating ten-watt stations in order to open channels for full-power public radio affiliates. Despite a petition from the IBS vehemently arguing against such action, the FCC eventually decided not to issue further licenses to stations ten watts or less; these Class D stations had until 1980 to find another channel, or upgrade to at least one hundred watts.⁹⁸ Noncommercial FM outlets, once thought useless except to student-run stations, were now at a premium.⁹⁹ Tensions between college stations and NPR affiliates continue to this day.

⁹⁶ College radiator stations survive to this day as carrier current stations, though their relative impact on the music and broadcasting industries is lower than those with licensed transmitters.

⁹⁷ Referring to the level of output on a station's transmitter, low-power usually indicates 100 watts or less.

⁹⁸ Walker, *Rebels on the Air*, 145.

⁹⁹ Tensions between college stations and NPR affiliates persist to this day. Maryland's station WMUC occupies the same 88.1 bandwidth as Baltimore station WTMD, and in 2009 the latter launched a failed attempt to buy WMUC in order to combat interference.

With community stations being threatened inside and out, more college students advocated using campus stations for experimental radio.¹⁰⁰ (I exemplify one such student in the following chapter.) Institutions with more powerful transmitters that were not using reserved channels often adopted commercial formats. Those that were high-power but on reserved channels often became NPR affiliates with professional staffs. But the tiny, low-power stations had little to gain, since their signals rarely reached beyond their local communities. For this reason, most of those stations remained campus and community-oriented in their programming, particularly with regard to addressing underserved audiences. Swarthmore College, for example, still upholds a philosophy of “providing our outside listeners with programming that expands the range of listening options available to radio audiences.”¹⁰¹ For some colleges, this means allowing community members to host programs and contribute to the station’s local identity. Ken Freedman, former DJ at WUOM at the University of Michigan and later the program director at Upsala College station WFMU echoed this in 1987: “At best, college radio allows each station to develop its own personality...As for us, we’re dedicated to diversity—we’re specializing in not specializing.”¹⁰²

One aspect that makes college radio a relatively stable medium is the fact that its youth demographic is constantly renewed. Simon Frith’s definition of youth culture as “a culture that was apparently classless and rebellious but which rested on the gradual middle-class adoption of the trappings of working-class teenage life” is rooted in the setting of college campuses.¹⁰³ He points to its foundation in the Jazz Age of the 1920s,

¹⁰⁰ Walker, *Rebels on the Air*, 140.

¹⁰¹ Cited in Sauls, *The Culture of American College Radio*, 39.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰³ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 191.

suggesting its inextricable link with popular music, a claim corroborated by Eberly who identified college students in the 1930s as “important musical trendsetters” in the popularization of swing music.¹⁰⁴ And of course, the music industry’s promotion of rock n’ roll as a vital part of youth culture was an important stage in continuing popular music as a generational art form, though this encompassed a wider age range than college students. But Frith also claims that 1960s youth culture, while still campus-based, became more explicitly opposed to both peer-group and middle-class norms, and while social and political factors have certainly changed since then, college remains a distinct social phase in middle-class culture where the transition between adolescence and adulthood is fraught with experimentation.¹⁰⁵ In this sense, college radio became a kind of permanent counterpublic insofar as the stations with freeform formats encouraged their DJs to circulate non-mainstream music to local campus and community audiences.

The freeform era, in its strictest sense, did not last past the 1970s, although many student-run college stations continue to thrive in the present day, thanks to their expanded reach on the internet. Few feature the kind of radical programs that sandwich Klan speeches between cuts of African freedom songs. But the spirits of both independence and experimentation have remained at the heart of the low-power, freeform-style stations with passionate and committed student DJs.

College radio plays an integral role in the next chapter about modern independence, which became a more explicitly defined social and political approach to creating, distributing and consuming popular music. I begin in the 1960s with the folk revival and development of rock music which introduced new ideas about community

¹⁰⁴ Eberly, *Music in the Air*, 86.

¹⁰⁵ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 192.

and artistic autonomy to popular music. I then follow the emergence of the DIY ethic in the punk movement in the 1970s and show how it became manifest in 1980s independent underground networks.

Summary

In this chapter, I examined the development of popular music narratives on radio from the perspective of the various social groups that negotiated the value and meaning of music on the airwaves. I used Robert Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics to illuminate how the structure and circulation of specific styles of discourse contributed to the establishment of audience alliances. I began my study with an examination of *Your Hit Parade* to show how popular music was formalized into a canon of nationalized tastes. I then traced the evolution of the disc jockey to show how cultural agency in broadcasting media shifted from the presentation of live music to the individual voices of musical curators.

However, the decentralization of radio after World War II enabled local stations to serve more regional markets and independent voices began to emerge. I discussed the career of Al Benson to illustrate the increased involvement of African-Americans in radio, and showed how his groundbreaking narrative styles and musical presentations changed previously-segregated social fields by introducing R&B music to young white audiences. But the subsequent popularity of rock n' roll radio resulted in the re-centralization of popular music, and the playlists of relatively autonomous DJs were replaced by standardized, Top 40 formats. I described the next era of independence that developed with the advent of FM technology, with Pacifica Radio heralding the strength

of community and freeform stations that presented music in radical new ways. While their pioneering narrative and musical styles were also eventually co-opted by the dominant commercial institutions, they served as the basis for which many student-run college stations developed modern approaches to alternative broadcasting.

Chapter Four: The Era of Modern Independence

In the two previous chapters, I examined how independent agents expanded the social fields of popular music by challenging the social and cultural hegemonies of the dominant industry. In Chapter Two, I addressed two cycles in which independent labels produced and distributed the music of marginalized communities, which led to their absorption by major labels. Keith Negus's dual concept that industry produces culture and culture produces industry helped illuminate how the changing social practices of both musicians and consumers articulated with developments in the recording industry. In Chapter Three, I explored similar patterns in which autonomous DJs shifted popular music narratives away from nationalized rhetoric by broadcasting alternative musical styles aimed at a local listenership. I applied Warner's concept of publics and counterpublics to show how organizational structures and the circulation of alternative discourse led to the establishment of audience alliances that were eventually legitimized as consumer groups. But while threads of influential, independent activities had permeated both the radio and music industries for more than fifty years, the term "independent" itself was little more than an industrial description for a label with its own channels of distribution, or a radio station unaffiliated with a network. It was not until the late 1970s that "independence" took on social and political meaning with the establishment of an underground network that deliberately opposed mainstream culture.

Bourdieu claimed that the strategies for struggle between agents and institutions are dependent upon the "space of possibilities inherited from previous struggles, which tends to define the space of possible position-takings and thus orient the search for

solutions and, as a result, the evolution of production.”¹ The cultural struggles surrounding the popularization of R&B music in the late-1940s had been characterized by the social rebellion of a younger generation. As with jazz recordings in the 1920s, new forms of black music consumption forced major labels to re-evaluate the cultural hierarchies that dictated the contents of their record catalogues. Likewise, the development of black radio and then noncommercial FM stations challenged the cultural agency of dominant institutions that determined which types of music should be broadcast and to whom. The legacies of independent record labels and broadcasters therefore contributed to the expansion of the social fields of popular music in the 1960s. However, as the number of “possible position-takings” in the field of popular music increased, so did the capacity for commercial success. The struggle for distinction would become more explicitly defined by the rejection of economic gain.

This chapter focuses on the development of the sociocultural rationales that shaped the era of modern independence. I first describe some of the social and musical conditions in the 1960s, when the folk revival and the development of rock made popular music more artistically-defined and socially-conscious. I show how the further conglomeration of the music industry commercialized those forms, precipitating the punk era in which an underground network rebelled against the excesses of rock music.² The remainder of my study concentrates on the development of post-punk independent music communities in the 1980s, and shows how their social fields were shaped and defined by ideological struggles of resistance.

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 183-184.

²David Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), 13.

Music journalist Michael Azerrad's 2001 book *Our Band Could Be Your Life* will be an important resource for this study. It is considered by many to be the definitive history of American independent music scenes between 1981 and 1991. In profiling thirteen bands, all of whom were on independent labels, Azerrad presents both biographical details as well as broader social and cultural contexts in which independence was created and cultivated. He is a fan of the music, and gives insightful, insider accounts with a combination of zeal and affection. He defines modern independence as a fundamental approach:

To begin with, the key principle of American indie rock wasn't a circumscribed musical style; it was the punk ethos of DIY, or do-it-yourself. The equation was simple: If punk was rebellious and DIY was rebellious, then doing it yourself was punk...The breakthrough realization that you didn't have to be a blow-dried guitar god to be a valid rock musician ran deep; it was liberating on many levels, especially from what many perceived as the selfishness, greed and arrogance of Reagan's America. The indie underground made a modest way of life not just attractive but a downright moral imperative.³

This "moral imperative" meant not only creating independent channels for music, but also cultivating musical styles that aggressively rejected the glamorized, predictable and formulaic popular songs that were being promoted by the major labels. Of particular importance was the renunciation of economic capital in favor of the symbolic, where authenticity and integrity were predicated on the ability to remain self-sufficient in every stage of the musical and industrial process.

Because modern independence evolved from social practices that developed in the 1960s, my study begins there, when the post-rock n' roll era gave way to new expressions and meanings in popular music.

³ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 6.

The Folk Revival and Development of Rock

German philosopher Johann Herder was considered by many to be the first to define folk music in the late-eighteenth century as the natural, spontaneous and collectively-composed expressions of peasant life.⁴ Subsequent folklorists acknowledged the practice of collective transmission, but argued that folk music was also the expression of individuals, many of whom were not necessarily peasants. Nevertheless, Herder's links between folklore and authenticity have resonated in Western culture for centuries. His belief that folk music developed in the same communal way as language gave rise to the understanding of authenticity as "faithfulness to one's essential nature."⁵

Folk music has been part of the American recording industry since the early 1900s, when the three majors attempted to arrange folk songs according to "genteel standards of voice quality, diction, intonation and blend."⁶ However, they soon learned that their target audiences preferred recordings that more accurately documented their communities' musical styles. Gennett and Paramount produced such recordings in the late 1920s and 1930s. They worked with musicians who were featured on the earliest country music radio programs such as *National Barn Dance* on WLS in Chicago and *Boone County Jamboree* on WLW in Cincinnati. The announcers' regional dialect, the spontaneous nature of the performances and the communal atmosphere of the audience all conveyed a sense of cultural authenticity. This so-called "hillbilly" music was perceived as belonging to a sphere that was separate from the artistic ideals of Western art music and the mass-production of popular songs.

⁴ Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 597.

⁵ Wade, *Thinking Musically*, 140.

⁶ Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 607.

The advent of recording technology had not only enabled labels to produce folk records, but also instigated a period of folk music's institutionalization throughout the United States and Europe. In 1900, German anthropologists Carl Stumpf and Erich M. von Hornbostel established the first archive of non-Western field recordings in Berlin. Hungarian composer Béla Bartók spent several years amassing and arranging folk music in the 1910s, while Frances Densmore described and analyzed songs she collected from American Indian communities. (Their work became the foundation for the discipline of ethnomusicology.) In the 1920s and 1930s, as hillbilly radio programs grew in popularity, talent scouts, song collectors and preservationists scoured the American countryside for folk traditions. One of the best known collecting teams was John and Alan Lomax, a father and son who dedicated their lives to capturing and preserving folk culture. John Lomax received support from the Library of Congress to create the Archive of American Folk Song in 1933, symbolized by the belief that folk music represents a nation's cultural identity.

American popular music saw a resurgence of folk in the 1950s, when young musicians sang songs describing the realities of modern life to audiences of their peers. They drew from American blues and ballad traditions, performed in unrefined vocal styles and accompanied themselves on acoustic instruments in the manner of past folk musicians. The "folk revival" was part of an ideological belief system that opposed commercialized urban culture in favor of more rural, populist, organic expression. Oklahoma native Woody Guthrie was perceived as the embodiment of an authentic folk spirit. "Discovered" by John Lomax's son Alan in 1940, Guthrie's prolific output of socially and politically charged songs earned him a reputation as the voice of the

“common man.” He wrote his most famous song, “This Land Is Your Land,” as a statement against the bombastic and wildly popular “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin.⁷ Yet while Guthrie could lay claim to the communities he sang to and about, his most attentive audiences came from different social groups. According to Frith:

The radical tradition of American folk music was primarily the 1930s creation of this group of metropolitan, left-wing bohemians. Their account of “the people” was as rooted in myth, in their own circumstances, and in the political use of nostalgia as that of their more respectable, bourgeois, folk predecessors. Nevertheless, it was within the folk movement that musicians kept alive a popular music that was defined, politically and musically, in opposition to commercial pop...The songs may not have been sung by ‘authentic’ working-class singers, but they still represented authentic working-class experiences.⁸

One of the most supportive environments for folk music was college campuses, the social distinctions of which I described at the end of Chapter Three, where young, middle-class students asserted their independence through socially experimental behavior. This was especially important in the 1960s as college students became politically active, and a new generation of young folk singers began articulating their concerns. Against the backdrop of culturally hegemonic rock n’ roll music came Bob Dylan, whose reverence for Guthrie and whose own skill for writing densely poetic and pointedly critical lyrics articulated with both the modern social order and the folk heritage of the 1930s.

As I have shown, the middle-class youth identification with socially and culturally marginalized communities is a recurring social pattern in the history of popular music. In 1950, Riesman suggested that the music industry’s role in socializing the young was to manufacture an identity that glossed over the complexities and indeed diversities in the range of individuals that comprised such a large consumer group. And, as he found, “a

⁷ Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 614.

⁸ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 28.

small minority is not only aware in some fashion of the adult, manipulative pressures but is also resentful of it, in many cases perhaps because its members are unable to fit themselves by any stretch of the imagination into the required images.”⁹ In this sense, the active minority sought music that described social realities and demonstrated artistic freedom, two qualities that conveyed authenticity. In the 1940s and 50s, this meant rejecting the industry’s construction of a white youth identity by engaging with black cultural forms. Independent labels and radio stations had provided the means through which they could exchange these forms despite the social and geographical distances between them.

But in the 1960s, America’s social terrain became increasingly pluralistic, and expressing distinction was no longer simply a matter of black and white. Folk revival musicians and audiences openly interacted with African-American blues and gospel artists, as well as members of other ethnic groups whose outsider status was both musically and socially appealing. The music industry became more integrated, too, as exemplified by the crossover success of the black-owned Motown label in Detroit and the white-owned Stax/Volt Records in Memphis. Both labels showcased musical styles that combined traditional black expressions with pop sensibilities, and promoted them on national scales. And drawing heavily from the influence of rock n’ roll musicians like Chuck Berry and Little Richard, the Beatles burst into American culture in 1964 with charismatic charm and fresh approaches to songwriting and performance that signaled the expansion of popular music idioms. “Rock” became the term that described the wider variety of musical instruments, reliance on electricity (both for amplification in live

⁹ Riesman, “Listening to Popular Music,” 362.

performance in manipulation in the studio), more flexible song forms and intensely subjective lyrics.¹⁰ It formed the backdrop for the next sociomusical rebellion.

Rock music was about innovation and experimentation, as new artists broke long-held conventions of popular music. For one thing, they played their own instruments and wrote their own songs. This meant they had more creative control over their music than popular musicians had in the past. An increased emphasis on the importance of artistic integrity among musicians and audiences articulated with the old European-based cultural hierarchies in which composers were lionized as vessels of divine inspiration. The subsequent development of “intelligent” musical values in the 1960s, such as virtuosity and originality, were fueled by the emergence of stereo technology, elaborate concerts and the long-playing (LP) record.¹¹ “Fidelity listening” referred to “a new, avid, artistic celebration of sound itself,” but it can also describe the more serious attitudes with which artists and audiences embraced rock music.¹² The single-dominated market of the 1950s gave way to albums in the 1960s, which became more elaborate in scope, concept and sound. The record producer gained in prominence during this period. As the technical mediator of artists’ visions and talents, producers could become as famous as the musicians they worked with. And the final packaging of an album was also an important conveyer of its artistic value. Album cover art was often as highly conceptualized as the content of the record, and included sleeves with lyrics printed on them so consumers could appreciate their depth.

Rock ideology was similar to that of the folk revival. Many who participated in the countercultural movement felt that rock musicians were the voices of their own

¹⁰ Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 810.

¹¹ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 74.

¹² Douglas, *Listening In*, 274.

communities. Their song lyrics expressed a shared outlook, particularly in the social and political criticism aimed at the older generation, and the social spaces in which they performed were participatory events. Freeform and community FM stations aimed their broadcasts at active listeners who tuned in with the expectation that the DJ was going to manipulate their expectations. Audiences also engaged with live performances at concert halls, clubs and outdoor parks. Psychedelic rock shows especially encouraged active involvement, as their enjoyment was often predicated on the use of hallucinogenic drugs, and audience members danced and clapped along while musicians improvised long sets. The Grateful Dead, established in 1965 by former folk musicians, bridged the gap between folk and rock music in many ways. They became known for their vibrant, experimental live shows in which they wandered “through diverse musical styles and grooves” that terminated in unexpected places.¹³

Yet for all its emphasis on anti-commercialism, the counterculture was not entirely liberated from the music industry’s capitalistic goals. As far as the labels were concerned, there was nothing inherently problematic with the folk revival or rock music in the same way that jazz and R&B had challenged American cultural and racial hierarchies in previous decades. Values of honesty, integrity, self-consciousness and truth were, in fact, easily marketable. In writing on the commodification rock culture in the 1960s, Coten Seiler said, “However transgressive of mainstream values these countercultural markers were, they were nonetheless encouraged by entertainment corporations and myriad other producers of ‘lifestyle products,’ as they served to isolate a

¹³ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 304.

consumer demographic and thus enabled these industries to rationalize production and marketing techniques.”¹⁴

Middleton identified this era as the third period of a major situational change in Western popular music. For him, the moment of “pop culture” occurred when “the existing monopolistic cultural formation both confirms itself and, at another level, becomes noticeably fissured, through the development of an assortment of transient subcultures.”¹⁵ In the late 1960s, more elaborate structures of concert promotion and artist management, the expanded reach of FM radio and television and a larger presence in the printed press (*Rolling Stone* magazine debuted in 1967) directed itself “at a series of separate audiences whose distinctness [was] less subcultural than a creature of market researchers’ consumer profiles.”¹⁶ By the early 1970s, the music industry had undergone another period of consolidation. The result was six media giants—Columbia/CBS, Warner Communications, RCA Victor, Capitol-EMI, MCA and United Artists-MGM—controlling over 80 percent of record sales in the United States.¹⁷

For some artists, the industry’s mediation of countercultural youth ideologies became problematic when they clashed with the musicians’ intentions. Dylan described the alienating effects:

A few years earlier Ronnie Gilbert, one of The Weavers, had introduced me at one of the Newport Folk Festivals saying, ‘And here he is...take him, you know him, he’s yours.’ I had failed to sense the ominous forebodings in the introduction. Elvis had never been introduced like that. ‘Take him, he’s yours.’ What a crazy thing to say! Screw that. As far as I knew, I didn’t belong to anybody then or now...but the big bugs in the

¹⁴ Coton Seiler “The Commodification of Rebellion: Rock Culture and Consumer Capital,” in *New Forms of Consumption: Consumer, Culture and Commodification*, edited by Mark Gottdiener (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 207.

¹⁵ Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 313.

press kept promoting me as the mouthpiece, spokesman, or even conscience of a generation. That was funny. All I'd ever done was sing songs that were dead straight and expressed powerful new realities. I had very little in common with and knew even less about a generation that I was supposed to be the voice of.¹⁸

The growing divide between Dylan and his fans is often illustrated by the example of his performance on an electric guitar at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, which was received by a cacophony of audience boos. For them, it represented Dylan's abandonment of the folk community, despite the fact that he was still writing songs and performing in folk idioms. But the audience's interpretation of folk and Dylan's artistic impulses were clearly not part of a shared understanding.

Neither were the Beatles satisfied with their relationship to their audiences. They retired from touring in 1966, only two years after their American television debut on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. All four members complained that they could not hear themselves playing over the legions of screaming fans in massive venues such as Shea Stadium. Speaking on the subject of their image, John Lennon fumed, "All that business was awful, it was a fuckin' humiliation. One has to completely humiliate oneself to be what the Beatles were, and that's what I resent."¹⁹ In the social fields of rock, musicians wielded considerable musical agency, but their symbolic characters were compromised by the industry's efforts to control their images. Neither the audiences nor the artists could be fully independent of the corporations that defined their relationship to one another. Like other artists at the time—most notably the Beach Boys—Dylan and the Beatles took refuge in the recording studio where they still exerted enough creative control to communicate artistically, if not socially. Their 1967 release *Sgt. Pepper's*

¹⁸ Bob Dylan, *Bob Dylan: Chronicles, Volume One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004) 115.

¹⁹ Quoted in Frith, *Sound Effects*, 81.

Lonely Hearts Club Band opens with simulated concert and the declaration that they are not the Beatles. A studio-contrived audience laughs and claps at the appropriate moments during the “show.”

Rock became increasingly institutionalized as the music industry took over underground FM radio, bought up or merged with indie labels and co-opted youth-generated sites of exchange. What had been considered “underground” venues such as college theatres, newspapers, record shops and festivals were now part of the majors’ promotional circuits. Many of them also hired independent producers and launched subsidiary labels to give independent or progressive faces to their corporate images. British-based EMI and Decca established the Harvest and Nova labels, respectively. Some successful musicians also created labels, as the Beatles did with Apple and the Moody Blues with Threshold, under the guise of offering struggling artists and writers a means to commercial acceptance. But, according to Frith, “Neither of these labels lasted as much more than outlets for the stars themselves, and the independent British companies that were successfully established in the late-1960s—Island, Chrysalis, Charisma—were extensions of management and production companies, their independence based on financial rather than ideological considerations, their success based on their response to a new market rather than a new music.”²⁰ In the U.S., indie labels such as Elektra (established in 1950) and A&M Records (established in 1962) flourished by signing folk artists and psychedelic rock bands, but these, too, pursued large demographics, forged major distribution deals and eventually merged with larger companies. This is not to say that they weren’t innovative or important, but that they had more in common with major labels than the independent labels of the previous decades.

²⁰ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 98.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the decline of the freeform era in the early 1970s recentralized popular music on the radio. Both AM and FM programming formats were scrupulously standardized according to market research. The number of formats did expand, as audiences for popular music fragmented into more identifiable socioeconomic age groups. Pop rock, adult contemporary, singer-songwriters, soft soul, country pop, bubble gum, disco and oldies defined the commercial mainstream, and each format was designed to reach a mass audience.²¹ The most popular recording artists among these genres saw unprecedented success—multiplatinum-selling artists like Fleetwood Mac, Led Zeppelin, Crosby, Stills and Nash and the Rolling Stones, as well as solo artists such as Stevie Wonder, Elton John, Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell and Aretha Franklin were responsible for bringing in the majority of the profits to their respective labels. The labels in turn poured millions of dollars into recording sessions, concert venues and promotion.

With the emphasis on performers over the singles market, the popular music industry established a new hierarchy of success that was predicated on celebrity. As the names of famous artists got bigger, the public outlets for new music or new groups had dwindled to an alarming degree; in the early 1970s there were 300 progressive FM stations in the country, but by the mid-70s that number had shrunk to about 25.²² The economic demands of the rock market had risen to the point that most independent companies could not afford to keep up with the musician advances, studio time and promotion that inflated the cost of success in the industry.²³ Popular music was once again reserved for the most profitable artists. And while the majors' catalogs were not as racially restricted as they once were, the labels reasserted social boundaries with niche

²¹ Starr and Watermann, *American Popular Music*, 314.

²² Douglas, *Listening In*, 280.

²³ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 148.

radio formats, relegating black music to its own categories such as soul, urban contemporary, funk and reggae. Motown had lasting success throughout the 1960s and 70s, but by the mid-70s no longer dominated the crossover market.²⁴

Punk Music

As the pendulum of American politics began to swing back toward the right, social and political conservatism dominated the 1970s. The decade's energy crisis aggravated inflation and caused a decline in many blue-collar manufacturing industries, bringing economic hardship to working-class communities. Similar struggles over inflation and unemployment were brewing in Great Britain, which had been strongly influenced by American popular music since the earliest jazz recordings reached them during World War I. A common sense of social alienation among youth communities in both countries gave rise to more aggressively oppositional music. Waksman summarized the shift: "In a manner that paralleled the fears over teenage delinquency that had shaped U.S. culture in the 1950s, youth of the 1970s were routinely cast as agents of social and moral decline, a position sharpened by the presiding backlash against the perceived excesses of the previous decade."²⁵ The independent artists of the R&B era, most of whom were black or working-class whites, had established outsider identities that became part of the social structure of independent music. Rock musicians from the U.K. capitalized on their outsidership to American culture, as acknowledged by the term "British Invasion," which refers to their dominance of popular music charts in the 1960s.

²⁴ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 315.

²⁵ Steve Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 105.

They also borrowed and co-opted outsider musical idioms, writing songs that were heavily influenced by African-American blues, jazz and R&B. When socially marginalized youths of the 1970s created their own oppositional expressions, they fashioned punk as outsider music built on the exaggerated stylistic qualities that identified them apart from the mainstream.

However, punk historian David Laing points out that the emergence of punk bands, and the arrival of the punk concept occurred at two different moments in history. The first instance arose in the mid-1960s with groups such as The Kingsmen and The Troggs, who used fuzztone on their guitars and sang arrogant, snarling lyrics “concerned with unco-operative girls or bothersome parents and social restrictions.”²⁶ The construction of punk as a musical type *and* ideal developed in the early 1970s when musicians and audiences began deliberately rejecting the hegemonies of current popular music, as well as middle-class values. The music was about shunning virtuosity and excess, and rearticulating the “pure,” straightforward idioms of rock n’ roll in the 1950s, but with a more disturbing edge. Punk musicians developed minimalist approaches to playing instruments, creating two-minute songs out of a few simple chords, executed at extremely fast tempos at raucously loud volumes. Song lyrics—more often screamed than sung—centered on staunchly anti-commercial attitudes, themes of social alienation, sexual deviance and rage at the government. Punk musicians also showed their contempt for the mainstream by dressing in ways that emphasized a working-class identity: torn jeans, ragged t-shirts, heavy military-style shoes, multiple body piercings, tattoos and wild hairstyles.

²⁶ Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, 12.

Punk artists built audiences through live performances at small, noncommercial venues such as basements, churches, community centers, VFW halls and college campuses. Punk shows tended to be as violent as they were emotionally cathartic, as audience members routinely engaged in slam-dancing and fist-fighting. In many cases, these violent interactions also involved members of the bands, which underscored the idea that artists do not belong on pedestals. Performance spaces were designed with small or no stages in order to minimize social distinctions between musicians and their audiences. This did not necessarily mean that punk shows were always about unity—at least, not on the surface. Antagonistic, insulting lyrics often addressed the audiences themselves, further subverting the attitudes of peace, love and idolization of artists that characterized rock concerts in the 1960s. Iggy Pop, a former blues musician, was especially influential in making punk performance into a spectacle. Influenced by a disastrous 1967 Doors concert at the University of Michigan, where a drunken Jim Morrison assaulted the crowd with belligerent verbal insults, Pop and his band the Stooges made outrageous stage antics a signature style of their performances.

Punk Media Outlets

Fanzines and independent labels were the two “counter-institutions” that simultaneously situated punk within the music industry while keeping it outside its traditional corporate structures.²⁷ The do-it-yourself (DIY) approach to creating an alternative culture was the philosophy around which punk was organized as an alternative to the mainstream. Because they were related both socially and geographically, punk

²⁷ Ibid.,14.

collectives are usually referred to in scholarship as “scenes,” which Will Straw defines as “cultural spaces in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization.”²⁸ Fanzines were “the small-scale, semi-underground publications of music enthusiasts” that chronicled local punk scenes through art, photography and the printed word.²⁹ They resembled independent labels in a couple of ways. Fanzines, which were homemade magazines created by music fans, emerged throughout the country wherever local scenes were thriving. They were distributed at live shows and in record stores, and usually sold for a dollar or less.³⁰ And fanzines varied in terms of influence and continuity; some, like *Sniffin’ Glue* or *Ripped & Torn* lasted only a few years while *Maximumrocknroll* remains in print today. They were cheap to produce and reproduce, and circulated easily around the country through mail order. Fanzines documented punk’s self-image while lending a sense of cohesion to the movement.

Punk artists took a similar approach to music production. Many of them recorded and mastered their own albums, found their own pressing plants and printed their own labels and sleeves at low costs. The commitment to minimalism in music sound and production was aided by another technological development that emerged in 1979, when the TASCAM Portastudio 144 debuted as the world’s first four-track audio cassette recorder. Compared to the high-end recording equipment favored by major label studios, the Portastudio made homemade sound recordings easy, and with surprisingly good

²⁸ Straw, “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change,” 373.

²⁹ Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, 13.

³⁰ Sharon M. Hannon, *Punks: A Guide to an American Subculture* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), 38.

sound quality.³¹ The advent of cassette tapes also facilitated the exchange of music, as they were much easier to create and duplicate than vinyl records. Trading personalized collections of songs on “mixtapes” became a common practice among music consumers. Mixtapes provided a way of both identifying oneself with a particular set of songs, and distributing them outside the economic market.

The most staunchly independent punk artists maintained control over the marketing and distribution of their music—two spheres which the music industry has, historically, exclusively overseen—by selling recordings at concerts, local record shops and through mail order. Those who wanted to distribute on a larger scale either had to join forces with a major label that had the resources to distribute and pay a fee for the service, or find their own system of national distribution.³² (I will describe some of these ventures later in this chapter.) This is where Laing locates punk’s independent ideology:

To be ‘independent’ did not automatically signify a different type of music from mainstream rock. But if the independent sector was less than an artistic revolution, it was also more than simply an economic one. For this was the place where punk rock’s alternative discursive formation was to be found. A record signaled to a listener as ‘independent’ set up a different set of expectations, however faintly. Instead of the associations of leisure/relaxation/passivity characteristic of mainstream music, there were counter-associations of alternatives/seriousness/experimentation.³³

The term “independent” therefore took on social meaning in the late 1970s. It not only implied a more earnest and authentic artistic statement, but also presupposed a kind of intimacy between artist and listener. By controlling the process through which their music became commerce, as well as the means through which it reached their audiences,

³¹ Even major artists experimented with the Portastudio; Bruce Springsteen famously recorded his entire *Nebraska* album on it originally as demos, which he ended up releasing commercially in 1982.

³² Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 128.

punk musicians helped establish a counterpublic that rearticulated with the communal values of folk ideology. Frith claims that “the most important strand in [punk’s] development was a people’s version of consumerism, the idea that record buyers had a right to maximum market choice, that record buying should involve customer expression rather than producer manipulation.”³⁴

The First Wave of American Punk

In the United States, the first bands to herald the punk movement emerged in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The New York Dolls and the Velvet Underground both forged a path into “experimental” music. Coming on the tails of the psychedelic era, the Velvet Underground created songs that were unsettling and chaotic, with vocalist Lou Reed singing about subjects like heroin addiction and obsessive love in a monotonous, deadpan timbre. The New York Dolls also adopted a kind of anti-rock posture by caricaturing the English glam rock image spearheaded by David Bowie.³⁵ Their flamboyant costumes included fishnet stockings, tutus, feathers, scarves and makeup. Musically, the Dolls combined elements of the blues, psychedelia, rock and even Motown to create an edgy, rebellious sound that presaged the raw, rollicking style of later punk. They generated a small, but loyal cult following in New York as well as London.

The band most often cited as punk’s biggest influence by both artists and critics was the Ramones, an all-male quartet that promoted themselves as a family band, though the members were not actually related. In appearance, the Ramones resembled the

³⁴ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 159.

³⁵ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 364.

leather-jacketed, blue-jeans-clad, James Dean-style rebel look of the 1950s. In sound, their music straddled a unique line between the simple, catchy melodies of the most basic pop songs and the fast tempos, grating lyrics and minimalist instrumentation that would characterize the ensuing punk genre. Like their New York colleagues, the Ramones built a small cult following at CBGB's, a tiny punk club in Manhattan's bowery district founded by Hilly Kristal in 1973. Their first four albums were released in quick succession on Sire Records, then an independent label with major distribution, between 1976 and 1978. Their fame grew after a 1976 tour of England, which was well-received due in no small part to its timing in relation to the UK's own burgeoning punk scene: the Sex Pistols and the Clash were in the midst of defining British punk with subversive lyrics and anti-establishment politics.

The 1970s was undoubtedly an exciting decade for underground music, and punk communities developed in New York, Los Angeles and London where small labels were documenting local bands. Yet punk was "shot through with paradox at every level."³⁶ The first American wave in particular was problematic in part for its close relationship to the traditional structures of the entertainment industry. Lou Reed had been a songwriter for the well-known Brill Building outfit in the 1950s, and the Velvet Underground benefited from its promotion by pop artist Andy Warhol.³⁷ The New York Dolls' first album was released on Mercury, which had been acquired by major label PolyGram in 1972. Two years after Sire Records was acquired by Warner Brothers, the Ramones' recorded their fifth studio album with Phil Spector, whose signature "wall of sound" production style permeated much of 1960s popular music. The Sex Pistols were founded

³⁶ Laing, *One Chord Wonders*, 131.

³⁷ The Brill Building was located near Tin Pan Alley in New York City, and housed music industry offices and studios in which the next generation of songwriters churned out hits in similar fashion.

by Malcolm McLaren, former manager of the New York Dolls and owner of a sex boutique in London, who wanted to create a band specifically for the purpose of shocking London's middle-class.³⁸

The tenets of authenticity and the DIY approach that the punk movement embraced often seemed to operate at odds with the machinations of the mainstream industry, which accepted punk almost as quickly as it appeared, and institutionalized it in ways that resulted in the movement's fragmentation. This happened on both sides of the Atlantic. Frith points out that, "as in Britain, American majors sought to absorb punk as commerce, and they were more effective in excluding punk as ideology—licensing deals...were straightforwardly commercial."³⁹ Many punk bands ended up leveraging their first independent records to land major label contracts.

Much of the excitement of underground music is located in the sense of possibility, and the period of experimentation that occurs before a definable set of characteristics places boundaries around musical styles. In the cultural field of popular music, naming a musical style at once legitimizes its distinction and positions it for mainstream co-optation. Whereas fanzines and indie labels established a sociocultural identity for the punk movement, they also invariably joined a public discourse that resonated beyond the underground. This made it possible for major labels to identify punk as a genre category, and absorb it into their strategic business practices. According to Negus, this is one of the primary means through which labels cope with the uncertainties of the market.⁴⁰ And punk elements could be easily imitated. Fashion, which allowed non-musicians a way to identify themselves with punk culture, was one of

³⁸ Starr and Watermann, *American Popular Music*, 367.

³⁹ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 157.

⁴⁰ Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, 47.

the movement's most distinguishing characteristics. So, too, was its musical simplicity. The stripped-down elements of rock n' roll fundamentals—a 4/4 beat, shouted vocals and minimal chord progressions—were quickly formalized. Musicians who were conscious of the contradictions in the punk concepts of conformity and DIY began to seek new ways to define their distinction.

Indie Pioneers: Black Flag and SST

One of the first “postpunk” movements to take shape eventually became known as hardcore, which took punk rock's speed, power and aggression and intensified it, making the music faster, louder and more experimental. Lyrics were explosive rants about suicidal alienation, desperation and the mindless trappings of materialism. Thinking for oneself and questioning authority were central to the hardcore movement, which was as much a rebellion against the establishment as it was a commentary on the standardization of punk. Bands were mostly comprised of white, middle-class males, many of whom were college educated, and captivated by the nihilist philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. They re-appropriated a working class appearance by favoring simpler styles of dress, such as t-shirts, blue jeans and crew cuts, and often encouraged audience members to check their t-shirts at the door of the concert venues.⁴¹ If punk had been associated with the urban and androgynous, hardcore represented the suburban and hyper-masculine.

One of the first hardcore scenes to emerge in the United States was in Southern California, where the DIY punk underground sustained an infrastructure of fanzines,

⁴¹ At times, hardcore's hypermasculinity also clearly overlapped with homoeroticism.

venues, community radio and tiny labels.⁴² Such was the environment in which Greg Ginn and Keith Morris founded a hardcore duo called Panic, which described the feeling invoked by their tempos. They later changed their name to Black Flag—a symbol for anarchy—and released EPs (extended play albums) on their own label. Ginn, who had founded his own mail-order business selling radio equipment when he was twelve, found a pressing plant in the phone book, printed his own covers and started circulating their music around the community. The label bore the letters of his mail-order business: Solid State Tuners, or SST.

During their heyday in the early 1980s, Black Flag's members included Ginn, bassist Chuck Dukowski, guitarist Dez Cadena, a Colombian drummer named Robo and singer Henry Rollins. The band defined themselves through the DIY philosophy. First mired in L.A.'s hardcore community, in which constant police harassment often culminated in violent clashes between audiences and officers, Black Flag soon blazed a national touring circuit that was entirely supported by their own limited means. Much of their support came from Ginn's parents, who outfitted them with rental vans and food supplies. On the road, the band slept in the van or on the couches of their fans, and lived on strict food and clothing rations. In their early days, they made five dollars a day playing small venues that often attracted no more than two dozen people, and in their later years earned ten dollars per show playing to crowds of a couple hundred.⁴³ Their 1982 album *Damaged* was “a key hardcore document, perhaps *the* key hardcore document [that] boiled over with rage on several fronts: police harassment, materialism, alcohol abuse, the stultifying effects of consumer culture, and, on just about every track

⁴² Azerrad, *Our Band*, 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

on the album, a particularly virulent strain of self-lacerating angst—all against a savage, brutal backdrop that welded apoplectic punk rock to the anomie of dark seventies metal like Black Sabbath.”⁴⁴

A 1984 performance of the song “Rise Above” on YouTube illustrates the anthemic rage that Black Flag successfully channeled. The song opens with a series of jarring backbeat rimshots, followed by a guitar riff consisting of four chromatically-descending pitches each played in sixteenth-note triplet patterns. The metallic flourishes and hyper-speed of the main riff creates an immediate sonic blitzkrieg that is heightened by the chaotic scene of the five musicians thrashing on a tiny stage. Clad only in a pair of black speedos, Rollins creates a menacing presence by flailing his tattooed arms and throwing his body around the stage like a rag doll. The audience of mostly white males mimics his movements to a lesser degree, pumping their fists in the air and slam-dancing.⁴⁵

The verse-chorus structure of “Rise Above” follows a simple ABABAB pattern, which emphasizes lyrics over melody. The first two “A” statements consist of four lines, each followed by the lines “Rise above, we’re gonna rise above.” The chorus, or “B” section, consists of two lines, “We are tired of your abuse!/Try to stop us, it’s no use!” The final “A” statement is truncated to only two lines before going to the verse and then closing with a coda. The frantic, 2/4 punk tempos fuel the relentless free movement among both band and audience, who engage together in the call and response pattern of the lyrics:

Rollins: Jealous cowards try to control

⁴⁴ Ibid.,33.

⁴⁵ Black Flag “Rise Above” (Live-1984) SST Records,” www.youtube.com.

Audience: Rise above, we're gonna rise above!

Rollins: They distort what we say

Audience: Rise above, we're gonna rise above!

Rollins: Try and stop what we do...

Blank TV, the user who posted the video, included the comment “Knowing that you’re not alone in being alone. That’s what Boston hardcore and L.A. punk did for us. That was worth everything.” Fourteen people gave the comment a “like,” indicating the ongoing presence of a small, but loyal community of hardcore fans.

In a 1999 interview, Ginn explained how Black Flag and a handful of other bands created an independent community:

I would say the Dead Kennedys and DOA were bands that we knew and worked with to exchange every bit of information in terms of places to play. We did a lot of networking with people that we liked to play shows with or had common goals with, and those two bands, along with Black Flag, really broke a lot of ground in getting out there... We had to find individual clubs that were willing to do something, or some kid in some town who was setting up gigs on a certain night. So we didn’t do it in isolation. But there were only a few groups that weren’t waiting for somebody to do something for them and that were taking it on themselves, and we felt a lot in common with them.⁴⁶

With a highly disciplined work ethic, these bands spread their underground network across the United States and Europe. They helped to promote other bands whose music they liked by adding them to their shows and signing them to SST. The label’s broadening scope of styles, which included heavy metal, earned it the accolade “the most important underground label in America” in *Rolling Stone* in 1985.⁴⁷ In the same article,

⁴⁶ Richard Abowitz, “Waving the Punk Banner: An Interview with Greg Ginn of Black Flag,” *GadflyOnline*, January, 1999, accessed March 21, 2011, <http://www.gadflyonline.com/archive/January99/archive-ginn.html>

⁴⁷ Michael Goldberg, “Punk Lives,” *Rolling Stone*, July 31, 1985, 124.

journalist Michael Goldberg went on to define independent labels in broader sociocultural terms:

Like a handful of English indies — Factory, Mute and Rough Trade, for example — the American underground labels are not as interested in making money as they are in affecting culture. Which explains why a guy like Steve Tupper worked in a machine shop for several years, pouring all his extra money into Subterranean, recording bands that have absolutely no chance of ever being popular. "Our music is a real alternative to mainstream music," says Tupper. "Why that's important is that society as a whole is totally fucked. What we're looking at is using music to challenge a lot of the assumptions of what constitutes music and what constitutes an acceptable form of entertainment and expression."⁴⁸

The nature of the hardcore movement can once again be examined through Middleton's theory of articulation. Indie communities articulated with a number of ideas, the first being the countercultural notion that popular music could be an agent of social change. The second derived from the punk ethos of DIY and challenging hegemonic musical styles in aggressive and confrontational ways. Just as important as the do-it-yourself ethic for indie musicians was the discover-it-yourself practice of indie audiences, for whom the active pursuit of new music represented their own distinction as consumers. The third instance concerns the emerging dichotomy between economic and symbolic capital, where the rejection of the former legitimized the latter. Through this combination of patterns, bands like Black Flag mediated social struggle through their militant repudiation of the mainstream, inciting hundreds of bands to adopt a similar lifestyle.

For nearly ten years, independent artists, audiences and media agents embraced the idea of "commercial hopelessness" as they developed a thriving grassroots community.⁴⁹ But even before the next major label takeover in the early 1990s, indie

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 494.

bands, audiences and mediators often struggled with definitions and ideologies of independence. Waksman recognized this in his study of conflict in heavy metal and punk: “Nowhere were the meaning and the value of independence so subjected to scrutiny as in the context of hardcore punk, and no concept captured the sense of importance assigned to independence in those years more than the notion of DIY so central to hardcore’s formative years.”⁵⁰ A closer examination of the careers of two indie bands will illustrate some of the social and economic issues with which they struggled as the movement gained momentum, and eventually declined.

Case Studies: Hüsker Dü and Fugazi

I have chosen to focus on the bands Hüsker Dü and Fugazi for several reasons. In terms of research, there is an impressive number of both primary and secondary sources documenting their legacies, which loom large in independent music history. An online “Hüsker Dü Database” includes news, images, tour dates and magazine (mostly fanzine) articles about the band, dating between 1980 and 2009. And a documentary entitled *Instrument* provides an intimate retrospective on Fugazi’s first ten years, which includes tour and concert footage, interviews and snapshots of the band at work in the studio. These sources were compiled and filmed, respectively, by fans of the artists with the bands’ permission.

Both bands were also among the most influential of the era. Hüsker Dü, formed in Minneapolis in 1979, came to embody some essential traits of independent music, particularly regionalism and autonomous creativity. They would also become “a key link

⁵⁰ Waksman, *This Ain’t the Summer of Love*, 215.

between hardcore and the more melodic, accessible music that would eventually be termed ‘college rock.’”⁵¹ Describing Hüsker Dü’s musical achievements as they separated themselves from hardcore will not only reflect the challenges of artistic freedom, but also serve as a focal point for a discussion of the paradoxes of success in independent music. The band’s decision to move from an indie label to a major towards the end of their career in the late 1980s foreshadowed the decline of the indie underground several years later.

Conversely, Fugazi navigated success by refusing to relinquish control of any aspect of their career. The band’s frontman Ian MacKaye was a well-respected member of indie communities, having been in a number of indie bands before forming Fugazi. He co-founded the label Dischord Records in Washington, D.C, and became a kind of indie guru whose voice is still highly respected among indie artists and audiences today.

Azerrad describes Fugazi’s influence as:

... an ethical lodestar for bands and fans alike, revered bastions of integrity in an increasingly compromised and corrupt world, an impeccable benchmark for everything that pioneering bands like Black Flag and the Minutemen stood for: pragmatism, community, independence and engagement.⁵²

Founded in 1987, Fugazi formed after a number of indie bands had already signed with major labels. Their creation of a self-sustaining music industry was driven as much by the anti-commercial sentiments of the first punk movement as it was by the growing fragmentation of the indie scene. Fugazi relied on live performance to construct inclusive social spaces in which they enacted their ideologies through peacefully-enforced interactions with their fans. In contrast to Hüsker Dü, Fugazi’s lasting success as

⁵¹ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 159.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 402.

independent artists proved that an uncompromising DIY modus operandi could become a way of life.

Hüsker Dü

The following review of a Hüsker Dü show appeared in *Mac Weekly*, a student publication at Macalester College, on March 5, 1982:

As Hüsker Dü plays the last chords of the night, they become savages unleashed. Mould flings his guitar off with one hand, beating the strings with the other as though putting out a fire. His amp thunders in electric mayhem, a train grinding its brakes on at full-speed.

Hart, after abusing the drum set in his way for over an hour, hurls his body into it like a fullback on the goal line. The pieces crash across the stage.

Watching this from a safe distance are four motionless college boys, dressed in nylon sports jackets, attending their first punk show. They point and laugh at the spectacle under the lights.

Mould seizes the microphone, thrusting a finger back at them. "Why don't you fuckin' learn something, huh? Go kiss somebody else's ass, we're not gonna give you the show you wanted. You have to make the show for yourselves, you lame assholes."

The band stage stumbles off stage, through the crowd, and into the dressing room. "That was Hüsker Dü," the DJ says. "And the stuff on stage is what's left of our PA...."⁵³

In 1978, Bob Mould, a freshman at Macalester in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Grant Hart, a record store clerk still in high school, met at a Ramones concert.⁵⁴ They began listening to records together in Mould's dorm room, and before long they formed a band with Mould on guitar, Hart on drums and their friend Greg Norton on bass. They called themselves Hüsker Dü—a phrase that means “Do you remember?”—after a Norwegian

⁵³ Phillip Sudo, concert review of Hüsker Dü, *Mac Weekly*, March 5, 1982, accessed March 29, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/macw.html>.

⁵⁴ Terry Katzman, “Hüsker Dü, Whew!” *Sweet Potato*, November 26, 1980, accessed March 29, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/sp80.html>.

board game. Although both Mould and Hart grew up listening to fifties and sixties pop music, they were interested in taking the fast, aggressive sounds of hardcore music in new directions. For Mould, the project represented the opportunity to voice his disillusionment with the growing Reagan-era conservatism that replaced the formerly liberal atmosphere of Macalaster's campus. He said, "It wasn't so much about 'smash the system' but 'make our *own* system.' We had to make our own system to live inside of, that doesn't go along with this, because it's going to be ugly."⁵⁵

As much as Hüsker Dü did not want to be perceived as simply mimicking the style of hardcore bands, they soon learned that situating themselves within that social sphere was crucial to gaining acceptance and credibility in their indie community.⁵⁶ They played venues in the hardcore circuit, and relied on the hospitality of hardcore fans who attended their shows, reciprocating when other hardcore bands came through the Twin Cities. They also made a special effort to impress the members of Black Flag who attended a particularly raucous show in Chicago.⁵⁷ Along with fellow indie band the Replacements, Hüsker Dü helped to establish Minneapolis as a regional center of underground music. In staking out a geographical space, they articulated with the broader indie network "through the circulation of music, knowledge and style."⁵⁸ This operated on both a social and a spatial level, as the town and the bands associated with it enabled a discourse that linked indie music identity and authenticity with locality.⁵⁹

Hüsker Dü launched their first successful tour out of the Midwest in 1981. They made valuable inroads by embracing the spontaneous and communal nature of West

⁵⁵ Quoted in Azerrad, *Our Band*, 160.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁸ Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 114.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

Coast indie communities. They crashed at the homes of fellow hardcore band members and played both scheduled and pick-up gigs around British Columbia and Seattle. When they opened for prominent indie bands such as the Dead Kennedys and D.O.A., they played before audiences of hundreds; when they were the headliners they often saw crowds as tiny as half a dozen. As performing in front of almost no one was a certain rite of passage for indie bands on their early concert circuits, Hüsker Dü relied on an anti-audience punk attitude to make the best of these situations. Bassist Norton recalled, “[If] there wasn’t anybody there, we might as well see if we can piss everybody off and make them leave. You do what you have to do to entertain yourself.”⁶⁰

When they returned to Minneapolis, Hüsker Dü recorded their first full-length album. *Land Speed Record* was a collection of seventeen songs that collectively lasted less than half an hour—the hardcore traits of brevity, speed and cacophonous noise still characterized their sound. They managed to record it for \$350, but they lacked the money to release it on their own label. Once again, they tapped into the larger indie network, and sent a live tape to SST. Joe Carducci, co-owner of SST, liked what he heard and shared it with fellow L.A. hardcore band the Minutemen.⁶¹ SST was short on funds themselves, so the Minutemen agreed to release it on their label, New Alliance. This kind of exchange illustrates the cooperative spirit among indie musicians at the time, who used relationships as currency. As Jim Coffman of Boston hardcore band Mission of Burma

⁶⁰ Quoted in Azerrad, *Our Band*, 165.

⁶¹ Craig Schmidt and Diane Dittrich, interview with Hüsker Dü, *Coolest Retard* 19, Spring 1982, accessed March 30, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/cr82.html>.

said, “It was like a new frontier. Indie music... was do whatever you can, call whoever you know. Everybody was just figuring it out for themselves.”⁶²

By 1982, Hüsker Dü had become a well-established hardcore band with a decent following and a solid body of work. With their frugality and DIY approach, they earned the respect of fellow musicians, audiences and mediators within the independent community. They mastered the style through which their contemporaries had defined their opposition to the hegemony of mainstream rock while bringing some distinction to their own version of it. At the same time, their modest success signaled the need for a departure, as evidenced by a fanzine review of *Land Speed Record* in the spring of 1982:

I'm torn between commending their politics and cursing their conformity. Hardcore is an idiom/cliche/commodity. Hüsker Dü crank it out very easily. Still, it's head and shoulders above 99% of anything you can get on the radio. This is not a backhanded compliment!⁶³

As the 1980s progressed, hardcore music became trapped by its own boundaries in ways similar to punk only a few years earlier. Norton echoed this belief three years later in a 1985 interview:

The terms “punk” and “hardcore” have lost their meaning. When they were first coined, they stood for something, but are no longer representative of music. As far as today is concerned, they are reflections on style and fashion, and we are into music, not fashion.⁶⁴

In defining independent music as an ongoing reaction against dominant music structures and practices, Kruse points out that indie music “has therefore been continually engaged in an economic and ideological struggle in which its ‘outsider’ status is re-

⁶² Quoted in Azerrad, *Our Band*, 107.

⁶³ Lefty Glasgow, review of *Land Speed Record* by Hüsker Dü, *Op “K,”* April/May 1982, accessed March 31, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/opk.html>.

⁶⁴ Patrick, interview with Greg Norton, *Alternative Focus*, May 4, 1985, accessed March 31, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/af.html>.

examined, redefined, and re-articulated to sets of musical practices.”⁶⁵ But the same process intrinsic to separating indie music from mainstream is equally important *within* independent music. The DIY ethos is as much about artistic innovation as it is about industry autonomy. Not only must indie artists maintain control over their careers, they must also demonstrate their ability to avoid obvious trends current in both independent and mainstream music. In the previous chapter, Douglas explained how freeform DJs created rewarding sensory experiences by presenting familiar sounds in surprising ways. Hüsker Dü did exactly this when they began to abandon the formulas of hardcore and articulate with past popular music idioms in modern punk styles. But their creative triumph would also be their undoing; the same moment that marked the zenith of their career was also the beginning of their downfall.

Creative Autonomy

Hüsker Dü's last five albums represent one of the most brilliant hitting streaks in rock. Starting with Zen Arcade, an all-over-the-place smorgasbord that lifted them above being merely a hardcore band, each succeeding album has expanded and re-invented the group, creating a snowball effect not unlike the Beatles' journey after Rubber Soul.

-Allen, “Nobody Does It Better Than Hüsker Dü,” March, 1987

As quickly as they mastered the fundamentals of hardcore, Hüsker Dü began to liberate themselves from its musical and social limitations. They released their next EP *Everything Falls Apart* on their own label Reflex, and started taking a new approach to songwriting. They incorporated more melodic material and moved away from political

⁶⁵ Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 149.

lyrics toward more personal ones. In an interview with the fanzine *Flipside*, Mould explained the shift:

Politics will come and go, but we're still people. That will never change, and that's what we're gonna sing about. That is just what I've got in my head. We're not worried if Reagan gets re-elected that much anymore. I'll still be here, you'll still be here, you'll still be here.⁶⁶

When asked by Blake Gumprecht of the magazine *Alternative America*, why they started incorporating more pop-friendly hooks, riffs and the occasional guitar solo into their songs, Mould said, "It's what we felt like doing. It's not that we can't play fast, you can just hear a lot of other bands doing that now, so it's time to start looking for another outlet."⁶⁷

Hüsker Dü became increasingly candid about their artistic impulses, demonstrating both verbally and musically a greater range of influences, including jazz and psychedelia. They also announced that they were ready to perform with bands who did not identify as hardcore.⁶⁸ And both Mould and Hart repeatedly publicly rejected the hypocrisy of the hardcore community for pressuring artists and fans to conform to its message of non-conformity. They showcased this attitude in their songs as well. Their next EP *Metal Circus* included two songs of great significance. On the track "It's Not Funny Anymore," Hart's lyrics "Play what you want to play/Hear what you want to hear/Don't worry about the result/Or the effect it has on your career" are sung over the kind of catchy pop chords that hardcore musicians had openly rejected for years. The

⁶⁶ *Flipside* 54, interview with Hüsker Dü, February, 1983, accessed March 31, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/fs37.html>.

⁶⁷ Blake Gumprecht, interview with Hüsker Dü, *Alternative America* 1, February, 1983, accessed April 1, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/altamer.html>.

⁶⁸ Mike Ross, interview with Hüsker Dü, *Brand New Age* 2, April 24, 1983, accessed April 1, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/bna2.html>.

lyrics articulate with hardcore's original rallying cries to think for oneself, a pointed reminder that when style becomes formula, the message is lost.

The other song, "Diane" featured a half-sung, half-spoken account of the rape and murder of a local waitress from the killer's point of view. It is set against a familiar backdrop of the teen tragedy ballads that were popular in the rock n'roll era of the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas hardcore artists usually evinced disruption by launching an aesthetic attack of lyrical rage and ear-splitting guitar noise, Hüsker Dü maintained a disturbing edge through the use of irony, embracing pop structures while simultaneously commenting on them. From the song's opening two-step drum line, "Diane" carries a much more subtle sense of tension because of its quiet, restrained beginning, which allows the band to build from barely palpable discomfort to a harrowing climax. The last chorus conflates the word "die" and the first syllable of "Diane," which is repeatedly screamed over the unrelenting A-minor chord progression that meanders restlessly between the tonic, submediant and dominant seventh without variation throughout the song.

In addition to broadening Hüsker Dü's musical palette, "Diane" also helped them attract larger audiences. When they went on their first East Coast tour, Hüsker Dü played sold out shows in Washington, Boston and Philadelphia because the song was getting airplay on college radio stations; the band's "more tuneful take" was more engaging to college students than hardcore's unapologetic barrage of noise had been.⁶⁹ By the time Hüsker Dü finished recording their follow-up record *Zen Arcade*, an ambitious, conceptual double-album in 1984, they had a nation-wide audience of critics and fans eagerly anticipating its release. The consequences of the album's critical and commercial

⁶⁹ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 173.

success became a tipping point for Hüsker Dü, when the band found themselves in that precarious place between community loyalty and the chance to capitalize on their mounting success.

One of their primary issues concerned distribution. SST's decision to press only a few thousand copies of the album's initial release was borne of caution and limited resources. Mould aired his frustrations in an interview with the New Jersey fanzine *No Place to Hide* in late 1984:

They only did 6,000. Can you believe that? They do twenty or thirty thousand of Black Flag. We're the biggest seller on the label right now. It seems to me like we're the most in demand. They suggest that we do tours, but what good is it to do a tour if you come to a city and your records aren't available in the stores? They're supposed to be re-pressing it right now, but those will go out the door in a week and a half and everybody will be complaining. I think we can sell 15, 20, 30 thousand copies.⁷⁰

Hüsker Dü's relationship with SST was further complicated by their lack of contract. The band had initially deferred royalties on its albums so SST could remain financially solvent.⁷¹ This friendly agreement was unproblematic when the band was selling only a few thousand albums at a time, but when those numbers started climbing into the tens of thousands, royalty checks became important. Finally, when disagreements over the production and marketing of the band's next album came to a head, Hüsker Dü began to seriously consider the offers they were getting from major labels, especially after they got more commercial radio airplay. The final straw, according to Mould, was the demise of JEM, one of the biggest indie distributors in the country.

⁷⁰ *No Place to Hide* 4, interview with Hüsker Dü, Spring 1985, accessed April 2, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/npth4.html>.

⁷¹ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 184.

Thus, Hüsker Dü signed with Warner Brothers after the label agreed to give them complete creative control in the recording studio. Azerrad described the move as “momentous,” because “Hüsker Dü was the first key American indie band to defect to a major, [and] the event marked the end of an era within the American indie community.”⁷² For years after, members of the band were called upon to defend their decision. Hart explained the economic advantages:

[Indies] don't have as much push. It's not because they don't work hard, it's because if someone knows he won't get the new Prince album if he doesn't pay for the last Mötley Crüe or Van Halen record, he's gonna pay for that record. Major labels are good with their accounting. And it all boils down to the work you're doing and the rewards you're receiving for it. That's the basic and that's money. It's just whether or not you can comfortably deal with money, as far as the moral thing is concerned. Personally, I think I can do a lot more good for the world with money than without it.⁷³

Some of the most militantly independent hardcore bands had made a virtue of living in poverty, especially Black Flag, who flaunted their survivalist lifestyle as another form of social rebellion. Likewise, the members of Hüsker Dü spent years living on food stamps and residing in unheated basements before they started seeing any kind of profit from their music. The difference for Hüsker Dü was that they were in a position to make a living from their band when it became a viable option. Again, Mould explained it in terms of distribution when he said that “it would be nice to be played on those commercial stations. I'd just like the chance for people to hear the music.”⁷⁴

Although Hüsker Dü vehemently denied that they were seeking to become rock stars, their move to a major was inevitably viewed by some members of their indie

⁷² Ibid.,190.

⁷³ Tom Novak and Bruce Novak, “Rasslin’ Around with Hüsker Dü,” *Non*Stop Banter* 3, Fall 1985, accessed April 2, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/nsb.html>.

⁷⁴ Daniel Corrigan, “The Way You Do the Things You Dü,” *Hot Sounds*, September 21, 1987, accessed April 3, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/hotsounds87.html>.

community as a betrayal. “I suppose Hüsker belong to the masses now,” lamented a fanzine concert reviewer in 1986, “and some compromise (whether they admit it or not) may be in evidence.”⁷⁵ Even if an indie band manages to retain its creative control with a major, it becomes difficult to determine the degree to which they alter their sound based on a changed perception of their audience. But more important is the social implication, and the loss of intimacy between the band and its community. No longer are their communications maintained through self-generated underground channels; they are now mediated by a “faceless” mainstream network unconcerned with the bonds of local identity.

Hüsker Dü soon admitted that there was a disconnection between Warner and their musical style. SST, Hart pointed out, is made up of a small number of music fans who are “into your band anyway,” but getting major label executives excited about them presented a challenge.⁷⁶ There was also growing strife within the band, who argued over song credits and management, while also struggling with issues of drug abuse; Hart became addicted to heroin at the same time Mould went sober. They managed to release two albums on Warner, *Candy Apple Grey* and *Warehouse: Songs and Stories*, before breaking up in early 1988. Neither album received the acclaim of the previous ones, nor did they earn much more money than they would have on SST.⁷⁷ Both Hart and Mould went on to solo careers which they sustain to this day.

⁷⁵ Al Quint, concert review of Hüsker Dü, *Suburban Voice* 19, Spring 1986, accessed April 3, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/sv19.html>.

⁷⁶ *Uncle Fester* 11, Interview with Hüsker Dü, 1986, accessed April 3, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/uf.html>.

⁷⁷ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 193.

The demise of Hüsker Dü illustrates a paradox of indie success in the 1980s, a time when polemical ideas of survival versus solvency often left artists little choice between being considered authentic or a sellout. For Kruse, the issue concerns location:

Independent labels and indie music artists struggled to ground themselves in their localities and at the same time liberate themselves from identities that were exclusively local, and they sought to both target select audiences and reach as many potential consumers as possible. The tensions between authenticity and artifice, periphery and center, and independence and co-optation underlying the personal narrative histories of indie music scene participants were played out in the economic arena.⁷⁸

Arguing in support of Adorno's claims about the absorptive power of the culture industry, Colin Campbell is perhaps a bit heavy-handed in casting blame on the majors for destroying underground communities, but he nonetheless takes Kruse's observation one step further:

Starting in the late 1980s, major labels relentlessly bought out the most popular and productive independent bands, and then dumped all but a few when it was realized that most would not sell the millions of units necessary to make them worthwhile investments. In the meantime, a relatively diverse intersubjective 'community,' or potential community, that had been developing in the interstices of the culture industry was shattered, or else transformed imperceptibly into a market demographic.

The tension between indies and majors—in Kruse's "economic arena" and Campbell's "market demographic"—lies in methods of promotion, which can change the identity of community-oriented musicians. According to John Shepherd, the ideals by which musicians define themselves become, in the hands of industry executives, the very vehicles of celebrity:

The machinery of mass marketing takes the ideological deviance of some rock musicians and their music, and utilizes it to create for the musicians a star status. The musicians are different, so the implication goes, not because of their radical life-styles and musical utterances, but because of

⁷⁸ Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 69.

diligent hard work which has enabled them to escape the condition of the masses and succeed. Their essential difference, therefore, lies in the nature of their success.⁷⁹

The rigid, anti-corporate attitudes of punk and its various offshoots often failed to acknowledge the complexities of the popular music industry. For the bands who never had any designs on sustaining long-term careers, remaining part of an underground scene—however temporary—was less problematic. For those who wanted to develop beyond their localized success, the realities of forging careers within the larger industry meant shedding the mantra of self-enforced penury, and relinquishing the strictly DIY approach that earned them their symbolic character.

Yet the ephemeral nature of underground music scenes may also be part and parcel of their decline. In 1990, Mould spoke candidly to an interviewer about both the demise of Hüsker Dü, and the fragmenting of indie music at the end of the decade:

The Bob: I'd like to shift the discussion from your new album to the music scene in general. The early '80s, for me and for a lot of other people, were a really exciting time in rock 'n' roll, especially in the underground or indie scene. But in the late '80s it doesn't seem nearly as exciting. As a music listener, has the excitement diminished for you as it has for me?

Bob Mould: In some ways. But I think it's coming back around again. I've been hearing tapes from new bands, and there's some really good stuff going on again. But you're right, there was a bad spell there a couple of years ago, a really bad spell. I'm not sure what caused it. One theory that I'll lean on when questioned is the fact that the difference between indies and majors right now is non-existent. I don't know whether Hüsker Dü or the Replacements or a few other bands I can think of are to blame for that because we all went with Warner Brothers. The majors got really hip all of a sudden— everything got hip and now nothing is hip. I think it's a reflection of culture and of society more than it is the underground scene. People's thrills are few and far between now. It's like

⁷⁹ John Shepherd, "Sociomusicological Analysis of Popular Musics," *Popular Music 2, Theory and Method* (1982): 175.

a fleeting moment for every band that's got something to say. It's like "bang" and then it's over.⁸⁰

A year later, the Seattle indie band Nirvana would release *Nevermind* and sell over ten million copies, an event which most historians, fans and musicians agree constituted the end of the indie underground. But the conversation between Mould and his interviewer on the fleeting character of underground music scenes also highlights an important sociological component of youth culture. At the beginning of the decade, Mould and his colleagues were part of a movement that was primarily made up of college-aged individuals who were getting their first tastes of adulthood after high school. For many of them, the state of American society clashed with their ideals, and they had enough energy and ambition to vent their frustrations by constructing their own sociomusical spaces. But those same spaces became stifling after the realities of being a working adult forced them to confront the economic boundaries in which they were surrounded, both by choice and necessity.

Hüsker Dü's migration to a major label at a time when their success was outgrowing the limitations of their indie community underscores a fundamental difference between indies and majors. With more resources and commercial clout, major labels could offer artists financial stability. For a band like Hüsker Dü who enjoyed the freedom of deciding when to record and tour, the looser structure of indie labels suited them. And they took their autonomy very seriously, particularly Mould, who wanted to be his own producer, engineer and manager. But their ambitions to release more albums to larger audiences could only be realized through major distribution, and even with

⁸⁰ *The Bob* 38, Interview with Bob Mould of Hüsker Dü, Winter 1990, accessed April 4, 2011, <http://www.thirdav.com/zinestuff/thebob90.html>.

contractual permission to retain creative control, they could never quite adjust to the pressures of the mainstream industry. Their personal issues and differences exacerbated those difficulties.

Hüsker Dü's failure to make the transition from indie to major was not unique. Other bands, including Minneapolis indie colleagues the Replacements, fell apart when confronted with the demands of being major label artists. They, too, often dealt with issues of drug abuse and infighting. However, this was not the story with every indie band in the 1980s. One example is the Seattle group Sonic Youth, who maintained both their band and their indie credibility after signing with the MCA-owned Geffen label in 1990. In fact, they consulted Bob Mould on how to negotiate a contract that would allow them to retain creative control, which they received in addition to the ability to sign other bands. They continued to create innovative music, avoided drugs and kept their collective focus intact. As of 2011, Sonic Youth has released seventeen albums and still tour internationally. But if indie labels represent local communities, then any band's migration to a major label, whether it is considered successful or not, signifies a loss.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the losses began to pile up as majors went after the most promising indie artists, or merged with their labels. According to Waksman, "The resulting tension between 'independence' as a mode of musical production and 'indie' as a stylistic subcategory of rock made it more difficult for independent labels to distinguish themselves from the routine work of the music industry."⁸¹ Stephen Lee examined the same phenomenon in his 1992 study of Wax Trax Records, and found that, "by design or due to the inability to handle its new found success, Wax Trax's operations turned towards the very industrial structure and accompanying ideology that it had so stridently

⁸¹ Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, 215.

resisted with its posture as an indie.”⁸² However, Lee concluded that while independent labels must operate within the larger commercial structures of which they are inevitably a part, they still constitute “crucial sites of cultural articulation.”⁸³ In other words, he sees independent labels as social fields in themselves, in which ideologies of independence can survive through ongoing negotiation, even if they cannot achieve the industrial permanence of the majors.

An important phase that contributed to this phenomenon was the growth of college radio. With their emphasis on alternative and local-oriented programming, college stations were important outlets for independent labels. When bands such as R.E.M., Soul Asylum and U2 found mainstream success after debuting on college radio, the industry began to take notice. College radio became a pivotal platform between underground and mainstream media. As such, it embodied many of the ideological tensions within independent communities.

The Expansion of College Radio

Although it did not become a cultural entity until the late-1970s, college radio began to impact the music industry a decade earlier. Independent record promoter Paul Brown was among the first industry members to tap into college radio’s promotional potential. A September 1965 issue of *Billboard* reported that Brown had relied on the nation’s 500 college stations to help launch the careers of Nancy Wilson and Nina Simone. Both are classically-influenced jazz and blues artists whose careers coincided with the folk revival and the popularity of jazz on college campuses. Brown cited “the

⁸² Lee, “Re-examining the Concept of the ‘Independent’ Record Company,” 21.

⁸³ *Ibid.*,30.

dramatic rise in record purchases by collegians and the importance of campus for concert tours as the reasons for his devoting so much effort to the college market.”⁸⁴

In the 1970s, college radio stations were among the few outlets to broadcast punk music. Despite the corporate takeover of FM radio, most college DJs on noncommercial stations still had autonomy in deciding the content of their playlists. This led to a surge in the number of college stations that adopted the freeform format as the student demand for non-mainstream music increased. Jeff Krulik, a former DJ at Maryland’s WMUC from 1979-1983, remembers the changing climate of college radio:

It was a very screwed up world for commercial radio. It had served its purpose, served its time, but at this moment, especially at a college station where you figure there’s other stations doing commercial radio better, why should we try to do what they’re doing? Let’s have a distinctive voice ourselves. And let’s make something here that people want to seek out, that’s an alternative to what they’re getting. They already have several different variations of [commercial radio] to choose from.⁸⁵

For Krulik, the realization that he wanted to seek out non-mainstream music occurred when he received Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours* album for his birthday. He listened to one side of it before deciding that he did not like it simply because “it represented...this kind of mass conformity being shoved down your throat whether you liked it or not.”⁸⁶ He soon found joy in discovering local bands, frequenting the Yesterday & Today record shop in Rockville, attending live shows and listening to WHFS, a progressive FM station in Bethesda (which was eventually sold to the owners of WTOP in 1983).

When he arrived at Maryland as a freshman, Krulik became a DJ at WMUC. At the time, the station was primarily a training ground for students pursuing careers in

⁸⁴ Hank Fox, “Studios Promotion Men on College Radio Beam,” *Billboard*, September 18, 1965, 51.

⁸⁵ Krulik, interview, December 10, 2008.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

commercial radio. He and a handful of other DJs had freeform slots, but the rest followed a restrictive Top 40 format:

You had cards. You had to play what a program director picked for you. No freedom. You had like three things you could play from this one record. [Somebody else] was dictating what you should listen to and what you should play. They didn't even have taste. They were just looking at a trade magazine and regurgitating what they thought should be played.⁸⁷

In his four-year tenure at WMUC, Krulik became involved in the underground network of alternative media outlets. He co-founded a fanzine called *Thrill Seeker*, in which he and his friends transcribed their interviews with touring musicians who performed on campus. He went on to serve as Music Director, Program Director and finally General Manager of WMUC, recruiting enough freeform DJs to form “a unified, cohesive unit of people interested in reprogramming the station.”⁸⁸ After three years of battling with the students who wanted WMUC to retain its Top 40 model, Krulik and his supporters successfully turned it into an entirely freeform station. They held a card-burning ceremony on the main floor of the dining hall to commemorate their victory.

During these years, college radio's influence in the music and radio industries was growing. Krulik had been the Washington, D.C. correspondent for the *College Media Journal* (CMJ), a trade paper founded by Robert Haber, former music director at Brandeis University's radio station, in 1979. It began with a format of airplay charts, reviews and columns before expanding to include retail charts, editorial staff reviews and advertisements for new releases.⁸⁹ (Hüsker Dü's *Flip Your Wig* was the first independent release to top CMJ's charts.) In the early 1980s, *The Gavin Report*, a similar trade paper aimed at radio program directors, began to feature an alternative music chart which

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 85.

eventually appeared in *Rolling Stone*. By the mid-1980s, major labels were including alternative music departments, and sending Artist & Repertoire (A&R) representatives to college campuses.

College radio faced similar issues of authenticity versus conformity that characterized indie bands' struggles. Haber himself acknowledged ten years after its founding that *CMJ* had a negative impact by giving rise "to a college radio version of Top 40—playing different music, of course, but often in just as tight a rotation."⁹⁰ Major labels' involvement with college stations also increased. Promoters made more frequent contact with music directors in an attempt to get them to play new releases, and music directors often complied with their requests. Some college stations moved towards more commercial formats and away from their local identities, and a growing number of college radio staff members were recruited to work in major labels' promotional and A&R departments. Kruse cites a number of interviews with college station personnel to illustrate what she calls a narrative sign of indie music's decline.⁹¹ She attributes this in part to the advent of college charts and their subsequent overlap with *Billboard*, indicating the relationship with majors was a little too close for comfort. The term "alternative," coined as a commercial category in the 1990s, was often conflated with "college rock," as well as "indie rock," although opinions on what exactly this meant ranged from listener-friendly, guitar-centered music to nothing more than a marketing concept.

College radio's expanding cultural influence coincided with another important media development in the 1980s. In August of 1981, Music Television (MTV) made its

⁹⁰ Quoted in Kruse, 86.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

cable debut, broadcasting music videos as advertisements for albums and artists.

Although it was a joint venture of two major corporations—Warner Communications and American Express—MTV was promoted as an alternative to the limited playlists of commercial radio, and for the first half of the decade, it was. The first videos were imported from British New Wave bands, as major American labels did not yet trust the channel's promotional abilities enough to invest in video production costs. MTV cultivated an edgy, rebellious character with young, hip video jockeys (VJs) and the exploitation of visual elements in rock music, which enabled artists such as Michael Jackson and Madonna to make dancing part of their images. Independent music had the most exposure on MTV in its early years, before its massive popularity made it a major label domain. The show *120 Minutes* featured “alternative” music clips that included bands from indie labels like SST and Rough Trade. In the 1990s, *Alternative Nation* programmed videos by artists who appeared on the *CMJ* and *Gavin Report* charts.

In the 1990s, as MTV transformed into a more Top 40-style format, local alternative shows fell by the wayside. Soon, only major labels could afford to make videos, as production costs climbed into the millions by the end of the 1980s. The shift towards mainstream music on both college radio and MTV exemplifies the increasing commercialization of underground music. Indie communities faced a growing challenge in the struggle for distinction and autonomy, and many of them lost their vision in achieving it. However, one particular band not only managed to define its own terms of success, but created a template for survival that lasted into the next century.

Fugazi

Formula for an indie band according to Fugazi: Own your own record label. Avoid greed. Charge only \$8 for CDs and \$5 at the door. Book your own shows, and do not sell t-shirts. And do not make music videos. Result? Fugazi outsells and outdraws many major label bands, and they get respect. According to Fugazi, never mind what you're buying, it's what you're selling.

--Video jockey on Canada's "Much Music" TV, 1993

Concurrent with the hardcore scene developing on the West Coast, a similar community formed in the early 1980s in Washington, D.C. Like the L.A. hardcore bands, punk artists in D.C. were socially and musically subversive, but shows soon became breeding grounds for mindless violence that attracted angry and jaded white male youths. This frustrated D.C. native and former Minor Threat frontman Ian MacKaye, who was dedicated to supporting local bands through his label Dischord Records. "Fighting and other idiotic macho behavior was spoiling the entire scene," he averred, and assigned himself to the task of moving independent music into a completely new direction.⁹² He became a tireless community activist, and had enough success with Dischord to begin donating money to progressive organizations such as Planned Parenthood and the American Civil Liberties Union, as well as homeless shelters, soup kitchens and homes for battered women.⁹³ When he formed the band Fugazi with friends Joe Lally, Brendan Canty and Guy Picciotto, MacKaye lent his already distinguished voice to a new realm of musical expression. The band served as an extension of his philosophical beliefs: "To exist independent of the mainstream is a political feat, in my opinion," he told a German interviewer in 1990.⁹⁴

⁹² Quoted in Azerrad, *Our Band*, 378.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁹⁴ *Instrument*, recording session in Arlington, VA, January 1995.

Live Performance

Like Hüsker Dü, Fugazi was committed to creative autonomy. But unlike the former band, Fugazi wore its independence like a coat of arms. They redefined what it meant to be both punk and successful in terms of operating outside the channels of the mainstream music industry. Picciotto explained the commitment to creating their own image in 1995:

It's not important that everyone in the country fuckin' hears what we do. I mean, it's more important that we exist within a context that we control and that people are invited to participate in but not forced to participate in, and not forced to have people mouthing off every goddamn ten minutes about what trauma it is to be a star, or how incredibly great our new record is or what the lyrics mean.⁹⁵

For Fugazi, the most important context was the concert. The band could preach its positivist values directly to their audience at the same time they enacted them together. MacKaye confirmed that “with live shows the communication lines are very distinct—I mean you’ve got an audience there, a reciprocating energy that you can feed off of.”⁹⁶

In his recent study on the politics of participation in music, Thomas Turino conceptualizes two fields of musical performance: participatory and presentational. He defines participatory performance as a “special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role.”⁹⁷ This can be applied to Fugazi’s approach to live performance, although the lack of distinction between artist and audience must be viewed in relative

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26.

terms, as the band members were clearly the central focus of the event. But the basic features of their performances resonate with Turino's conclusions about three general characteristics of participatory traditions, that they: "1) functioned to inspire or support participation; 2) functioned to enhance social bonding; and/or 3) dialectically grew out of or were the result of participatory values and practices."⁹⁸

The documentary *Instrument* shows a 1988 Fugazi performance at Montgomery College in Silver Spring, Maryland, which was a benefit show for the Walter Whitman Clinic. The band is on a small stage in a brightly-lit auditorium. The audience surrounds the stage on all three sides (the fourth side being the wall behind them). Some members of the crowd are dancing onstage with the band. A shirtless man wearing a pink tutu stands out—he is among the most animated dancers, and he is physically interacting with bass player Canty. The fuzzy, distorted, overlapping guitars are made cohesive by the driving rhythm of Lally's drums, and each person seems as absorbed in his or her own movements as they are in the music that's uniting their gathering. The physical expressions are varied, but also uniform in the way people are flopping their bodies in the air in similar rhythm, and moving all four limbs. It is a community of individuals.

During a 1994 interview with a student from Eastern Middle School in Silver Spring, MD, MacKaye explained their "participatory values and practices":

We don't want to feel like we're just playing to a bunch of heads. It's not worthwhile to be playing to heads and bodies because heads and bodies represent consumers. I don't want to have nothing to do with that...I want to go play to people and those people are there with me and that way if we can get into a thing where we respect each other as human beings, chances are that we're going to be taking care of each other a little better since, and we can take it out on the streets from there.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ibid.,36.

⁹⁹ *Instrument*, Interview,1994.

Through their performances, Fugazi enacted the values of minimizing commercial consumption and advocating for social justice. They kept their ticket prices at \$5 throughout the 1990s despite inflation, and if a venue tried to charge more Fugazi would refuse to play.¹⁰⁰ And if the hardcore movement had been largely about intellectual control, Fugazi took it to another level when they applied it to personal accountability. MacKaye has been credited with founding straight-edge, a term coined from a Minor Threat song of the same name. It described a lifestyle of abstaining from smoking, drinking, drugs and casual sex. While some punk bands preached the straight-edge philosophy at their concerts, MacKaye insisted that he never meant to create a movement from it, he simply lived by example. Yet his belief in socially responsible behavior received a great deal of emphasis at Fugazi's performances, where they refused to tolerate violence and slam-dancing. For example, at a show in Knoxville in 1998, the band members stopped playing when an audience member became overly aggressive. MacKaye reached into the crowd, pulled out the offender and dragged him on stage. He made an example of him before the audience before turning him over to Event Staff.

Fugazi also took the opportunity to preach their social values, as evidenced in a 1988 performance at the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. This audience is fully engaged and participating in the music by clapping, jumping and dancing in a close circle around the band. Over a droning chord, MacKaye starts telling the crowd of a recent article he read describing an incident in which several young men beat up a homosexual in a public park. Someone from the crowd shouts, "Fuck that!" "I don't care what you are," MacKaye continues, the volume of his speech rising, "you DO NOT beat up people for being gay!" The audience greets this with cheers and claps. "You do NOT beat up

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Fidler, "Dischord," *Spin*, February 1991, 74.

people for being black!” he shouts, and the audience responds approvingly again. “You do NOT beat up women!” he finishes and the band launches into another song amid the cheers.

When asked what they thought about Fugazi outside a venue in New York, a number of fans referred to the ideologies mentioned above. One person said, “They’re not about show business and money. They’re about music and ideas.” Another said she appreciated the “controlled energy” of their concerts.¹⁰¹ In terms of their social field, Fugazi created contexts in which they exercised social agency by directly influencing the behavior of their audiences. Both Black Flag and Hüsker Dü had adopted similar performative stances when they encouraged their audiences to think for themselves, but Fugazi’s more inclusive, positivist frame encompassed a broader humanistic perspective that outlasted the youthful, violent impulses of the hardcore movement. And their emphasis on audience participation and constant touring meant that they shared the spontaneous and experimental process of musical creation with their fans. Azerrad observes:

Already masters of tension and release, they could mesmerize a crowd with a tightly coiled rhythm vamp, add in some fraught guitar interplay, and then blow it all away with gale-force explosions of thunderous volume. A song like ‘Shut the Door’ might get stretched out to nine minutes or more as the band leaned into extended but riveting improvisations, showing off an uncanny musical telepathy honed by endless roadwork. Fugazi never worked with a set list, which meant they would vibe off the crowd and each other in perfect synchronicity.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *Instrument*, portraits of ticket line and live show, NYC, 1997.

¹⁰² Azerrad, *Our Band*, 406.

Dischord Records

I have a lot of contempt for the record industry, and I don't particularly want to be a part of it anymore than I have to. The fact that we started our own label is proof of that. We don't want to be a part of something—you do it yourself. So we did.

--Ian MacKaye, interview on "Moving Targets," Germany, 1990

MacKaye founded Dischord Records with former bandmate Jeff Nelson in 1980.

Their motivation was to document the vibrant local scene in Washington, D.C. and empower those bands to remain independent of the mainstream. In a 1990 *Spin* article on Dischord, Kim Coletta, a member of the band Jawbox, described its philosophy:

After ten years, it's still just a bunch of friends doing a label. Ian usually knows the bands he is putting out and usually has some kind of relationship with them. We all have complete control over our music and no one signs contracts. There are no record obligations, and unlike some bigger independent and major labels, the money is done very carefully. We're all paid our royalty checks on time, and at any time you can find out what's going on with the band and where you stand.¹⁰³

While MacKaye acknowledged the majors' advantage in distribution, he stood by his claim that getting their records "all over the place" was never their ambition.¹⁰⁴ Yet their records sold in high numbers anyway—Fugazi's 1991 album *Repeater* sold over 100,000 copies with minimal promotion, mostly by word of mouth and constant touring. Their albums have also appeared on *Billboard* and commercial radio. MacKaye's longtime friend Henry Rollins explained their success:

Ian MacKaye at Dischord doesn't put out anything unless he thinks it's good—he doesn't care if it's gonna sell ten, or ten thousand. If it's good, it's going on the label. Luckily he sells a jillion Fugazi records, so he can finance his smaller bands.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Quoted in Fidler, 74.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ V. Vale, ed, *Real Conversations No. 1: Henry Rollins, Jello Biafra, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Billy Childish* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2001), 11.

Economic solvency is one of the key reasons why Dischord can support its autonomous operations. They are therefore able to continuously refute offers from major labels, including the distribution deals that have historically kept indies afloat.

Thus, MacKaye and Nelson have retained a unique position in the cultural field of popular music by successfully navigating independent ideologies. Their goal in founding Dischord was to *document* local bands, not make them stars, a mission that prioritizes communal values over commercial interest. They maintain regional identity by releasing only D.C.-based artists, but unlike many independent labels before them, they are not identified with a limited number of genres. On March 15, 2011, for example, they put out a 7” vinyl album by local drummer Andrew Black, described on their website as “an instrumental drum track with plenty of go-go flavor [which] combines the kit, congas, tambourine and cowbell in a blend that pays homage to the genre, which, like Black, was born in and around the District.”¹⁰⁶

Although Fugazi has been on indefinite hiatus since 2001, Dischord Records continues to operate as an extension of their participatory values and practices. Other labels would adopt similarly pragmatic business models, such as Matador and Merge Records, both of which have become indie powerhouses. Together, they helped carry independent ideologies into the 21st century by demonstrating that conscious practices of consumption and ongoing community involvement can be sustaining endeavors. “Ian MacKaye changed the way I lived my life,” Mike Azerrad told me in 2008, “I hope someday he is remembered as being a pivotal figure.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ “Store,” Dischord Records, accessed March 4, 2011, www.dischord.com.

¹⁰⁷ Azerrad, interview, October 30, 2009.

In the next chapter, I continue to trace the development of independence as a distinctive approach to creating and consuming popular music through the 1990s and into the 2000s. I describe how the state of the music industry at the end of the century led an increasingly jaded consumer base to harness internet technology in resistant ways. My focus is how independent social fields have inhabited virtual communities in the era of internet culture.

Summary

In this chapter, I examined the evolution of the term “independence” as a modern ideology predicated on the economic and social rejection of the mainstream industry. Drawing from the constructs of folk and rock ideologies of the 1960s, the punk movement in the 1970s forged an underground network that valued a DIY approach to the creation and consumption of music. The hardcore movement of the 1980s adopted the punk ideals of autonomy, giving rise to independent communities that defined their authenticity through the cultivation of local and regional identities. By studying the careers of Hüsker Dü and Fugazi, I showed how two independent bands negotiated their agency within their respective social fields. While one survived and the other did not, the sociomusical influences of both groups resonate strongly in the history of American popular music

Chapter Five: Internet Culture

After posting a long list of esoteric curios that caught my ear in 2010, a commenter on Expressnightout.com asked where I discover music. Same place as everybody else: the Internet.

--Christopher Porter, *Washington Post Express*, January 4, 2011

Not since radio has a mass medium impacted the world as powerfully and irrevocably as the internet. Its integration into the daily lives of millions of people beginning in the early 1990s resulted in broad social, cultural and industrial shifts of global proportions. For this reason, I believe “internet culture” warrants designation as the fourth moment of “radical situational change” in Middleton’s periodization of music history. As with the moments of bourgeois revolution, mass culture and pop culture, internet culture has brought significant and lasting changes in production, consumption and distribution of music, which has led to the transformation of nearly all facets of the industry.

In the previous chapter, I examined the construction of independent ideologies during the punk movement of the late 1970s, and traced their development into the postpunk era of the 1980s. I showed how underground networks of artists, mediators and audiences articulated with ideals of autonomy, regionalism, community and authenticity in order to resist the dominant structures of the mainstream popular music industry. But when many of the indie underground’s bands became popular among larger audiences, and their independent labels struggled to manage the volume of their success, major labels seized the opportunity to become involved. This led to a fragmentation of the underground networks that had supported the music for over ten years.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the state of the music industry in the final decade of the twentieth century, beginning with the next consolidation of entertainment media. I describe how the development of internet technology led to another wave of independent activities in which the social practices of millions of music consumers constituted mass resistance to the economic structures of the recording industry. I then focus on the ways in which independent social fields shifted to virtual spaces as internet culture evolved in the first decade of the twenty-first century. My theoretical framework draws from two sources: Veblen's theory of consumption, and Samuel Chambers' conception of how the public spheres of cyberspace can operate as counterpublics. Through an examination of blogs, social networks, file-sharing sites and online radio, I argue that the changes in social and geographical boundaries wrought by internet culture has recontextualized independent music in ways that are both more fluid and more formalized.

The Spread of Conscious Consumption

In 1899, economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen published *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, in which he conceptualized the consumption habits of an emerging middle and upper-class. The growing distinctions between elite and mass culture that Levine explored in *Highbrow/Lowbrow* preceded this trend, which signified a means of exhibiting social power. According to Veblen, the "conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure."¹ In terms of Bourdieu's concept of the social field, conspicuous consumption could be interpreted as the

¹ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class, The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1899),75.

accumulation of cultural, social and symbolic capital through the flagrant display of economic capital. Veblen's theory has been applied to a number of consumption trends over the last century, leading to the term "Veblen effect" which refers to purchasing something with the purpose of impressing others. Based on the idea that consumption can demonstrate social identity, I believe the term "conscious consumption" accurately describes consumer behavior patterns that have developed in the late 1990s. The term "conscious" suggests these behaviors engage with modern ideas about the morality of consumer decisions, namely the trend of "going green" in light of recent concerns about global warming and the social and environmental consequences of wasteful spending. For example, philosopher and economist John McMurtry's 1998 publication *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System* argues that all consumer choices carry moral weight.

Conscious consumption has been an important characteristic of independent communities over the past century, particularly in the postpunk era where thinking for oneself constituted a central tenet of the DIY movement. But in the 1990s, growing efforts to support community, autonomy, regionalism and authenticity spread beyond the consumption of independent music to other forms of leisure. The beer industry, for example, has mirrored the music industry in a number of ways, particularly with regard to centralization and distribution. Since the 1970s, three major companies—Miller, Coors and Anheuser-Busch—have controlled the majority of domestic beer production in the United States. A recent rise in craft brewing, also known as micro-brewing, has developed in response to the homogenization of American beer. And the concepts related to craft brewing, as outlined on the Brewers Association website, bear strong

resemblance to those of independent music: 1) “The hallmark of craft beer and craft brewers is innovation. Craft brewers interpret historic styles with unique twists and develop new styles that have no precedent”; 2) Craft brewers tend to be very involved in their communities through philanthropy, product donations, volunteerism, and sponsorship of events”; 3) “Craft brewers have distinctive, individualistic approaches to connecting with their customers,” and 4) “Craft brewers maintain integrity by what they brew, and their general independence, free from a substantial interest by a non-craft brewer.”²

As the internet has increased consumer access to both products and information about them, it has facilitated conscious consumption, whether it ties to music, beer, hybrid cars or laptop computers. (This is particularly true in the Washington, D.C. metro area, where Ian MacKaye’s influence is still very much a part of present-day discourse on independence.) By the end of the twentieth century, music consumers began operating outside the recording industry’s economic and distribution structures. For independent music communities, particularly the college-educated, middle class people who have the resources to make informed choices, conscious consumption became a defining practice in the ongoing struggle against mainstream popular music.

The Majors Close Out the Twentieth Century

The next wave of media consolidation to which I alluded in the previous chapter occurred in the early 1990s. It was a familiar pattern: popular music in the 1980s had splintered into an even greater variety of audiences and genres, while even higher levels

² “Craft Brewer Defined,” Brewer’s Association, accessed March 20, 2011, www.brewersassociation.org.

of commercial success for top-selling artists compounded the corporate strength of major labels. Yet the development of digital technology had also precipitated musical innovations and enabled non-mainstream musicians to record and distribute their own music. This fed a growing number of alternative music scenes which, besides punk and its various offshoots, also included hip hop, Latino music and heavy metal. As these eventually developed into recognizable trends, the majors descended on the action, signing away indie artists and swallowing up smaller labels.

Perhaps no other song heralded indie's mainstream crossover more than Nirvana's hit single "Smells Like Teen Spirit" from their multiplatinum-selling album *Nevermind*. Like so many hits before it, the song is a brilliant combination of new and old. It is in the dark key of F-minor, with a four-chord, heavy metal harmonic progression comprising the song's melodic structure. Unlike the more typical pop progression of I-IV-V-I, "Smells Like Teen Spirit" is built on a I-IV-III-VI pattern, with the tension in the III chord heightened by an E-flat suspension. The lead guitar opens with a quiet, four-bar statement of the progression, which is loudly repeated by the entire band for eight bars, followed by the bass's arpeggiation of the tonic pitches of each chord over a soft guitar chime between a V-I interval. It is a very striking sixteen-bar introduction. Lead singer and songwriter Kurt Cobain borrowed this method of dynamic and textural contrast from the Pixies, although the song also features the slower tempos and angst-ridden lyrics associated with what would become known as grunge music. The melodic hooks are as memorable as the jaded statement of the chorus: "With the lights out/It's less dangerous/Here we are now/Entertain us/I feel stupid/And contagious/Here we are now/Entertain us." The song's video, which is a grainy, slow-motion portrayal of a high

school pep rally that devolves into violent chaos, combines the destructive tendencies of punk while exuding a kind of stylized outsidership indicated by the anarchy symbols on the cheerleaders' uniforms.

Nevermind, its dismissive title evocative of the self-loathing and alienation ascribed to 1990s youth, spent five years on *Billboard's* charts. It eventually sold ten million copies. The indie underground's fragmentation in the wake of its success resulted largely from the massive commercial hype that followed. The media named Seattle the new epicenter of American popular music, and major labels rushed to sign bands that emulated Nirvana's sound and image. The common working-class dress style of torn jeans, long underwear and flannel shirts was soon nationally promoted as "grunge fashion," to the dismay of many local residents. ("We wear long underwear because it's fucking *cold* up here," one of them argued in the documentary *Hype*.) Advertisements for products such as Mountain Dew, AT&T and Subaru featured spokespeople in such attire in attempt to reach their valuable 18-25 youth demographic.³ In 1992, Warner Bros. released the film *Singles*, which featured an "alternative rock" soundtrack as a backdrop for the social struggles of a group of twenty-something friends living in Seattle. Like Bob Dylan in the 1960s, Kurt Cobain was labeled the spokesman for Generation X, a title with which he was neither comfortable nor happy. But Cobain was never able to reconcile his commercial success with his artistic identity and after a prolonged struggle with drug addiction, he committed suicide in 1994.

Some indie labels, like Dischord, managed to survive the blitz but the cohesiveness of the independent underground did not. Azerrad asserts that "the indie

³ James Lyons, *Selling Seattle: Representing Contemporary Urban America* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 120.

community of the Eighties had developed largely outside the withering media spotlight, where it could hatch and thrive unmolested. That situation simply didn't exist anymore. For a while there *was* no underground.”⁴ Azerrad's statement implies that independence is incompatible with mass popularity, and underscores a belief in the corrupting influence of the mainstream industry. As I discussed with the punk movement in the previous chapter, identifying a musical genre places it within a set of boundaries that diminishes the spontaneity of experimentation and limits the possibilities of expression. Agency within underground social fields is lost when stronger cultural forces, such as major labels, appropriate their symbolic capital and turn it into a vehicle for economic gain. A cultural form that develops as a mode of resistance to dominant media institutions can no longer be oppositional when it becomes a part of them, no matter how earnestly those institutions promote the image of alternativeness.

Responses by members of the indie community were divided among those who felt betrayed by the mass “sellout” and those who were glad to see their favorite bands get mainstream validation. For many, a sense of victory was soon replaced by dismay over what commercialization meant for the music they had helped to nurture. Their social field was suddenly flooded with larger audiences to whom the music meant something entirely different. The standardization of musical styles, and the incessant repetition of the biggest alternative hits on radio and TV turned the spontaneity of expression into a formula. This is why the social practices of underground communities do not often survive the migration to mass culture. Grant Hart's frustration in dealing with Warner executives who knew little about Hüsker Dü's music is an illustrative example. The band had been operating among a loyal fan base of which their label SST was also a part, and

⁴ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 498.

together they shaped a collective identity that centered on the music. The fanzine writer who bemoaned the fact that Hüsker Dü now “belong[ed] to the masses” after they signed with Warner recognized that they were no longer sharing the same lived experience. SST’s inability to manage Hüsker Dü’s success is another reason why independence often does not translate to popularity. As Lee observed with Wax Trax!, indie labels’ economic systems and ideologies are not equipped for large audiences. And, as so many in the community have said, this music is not for everybody.

At the beginning of the 1990s, six major companies collectively controlled over two-thirds of all recorded music sales: Sony, BMG, EMI, PolyGram, MCA and Time-Warner.⁵ (The fact that only Time-Warner is an American-based company illustrates the globalization of the music industry.) After the alternative boom had waned by the late 90s, major labels enjoyed several years of success with a teen pop revival. The slick and shiny production of boy bands such as N’Sync, the Backstreet Boys and 98 Degrees, as well as female idols Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and the Spice Girls, largely defined American popular music at the end of the twentieth century.⁶ It’s not that other forms of music weren’t being produced and distributed but, since Tin Pan Alley’s beginnings one hundred years prior, the dominant industry’s tendency to crowd out alternatives with top-selling hits saturated the public with limited styles of music. Personally, I strongly disliked it, and as so many critics of the music industry have complained, the music was nonetheless inescapable. Those artists’ songs and images were everywhere: bars, restaurants, groceries, hotel lobbies, department stores, office buildings, magazine racks, TV shows, radio and films. And the record market had

⁵ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 384.

⁶ Kind of a sad endnote to an entire century packed with so much musical innovation.

become just as stifling. The compact disc (CD) had replaced both vinyl and cassettes as the main recording medium, and it was so far the most expensive one to produce. With labels now supporting overhead costs for staffs of hundreds, not to mention the astronomical price of marketing and promotion, they could no longer afford to release singles. Music journalist Mark Knopper summed it up: “The record business had boiled down much of the business to a simple formula: 2 good songs + 10 or 12 mediocre songs = 1 \$15 CD.”⁷ Exploring new music and artists involved a significant economic investment that seemed indirectly proportionate to the quality of music.

The dawn of the twenty-first century was marked by further consolidation, the largest of which was the formation of Universal Music Group in 1998. Edgar Bronfman, Jr, heir to the Seagram Company, bought MCA, A&M, Island, Geffen, Interscope, Motown and PolyGram, among others, and also created a film division all under Universal’s heading.⁸ When Sony merged with BMG in 2004, only four transnational corporations—Sony/BMG, Universal, Warner and EMI—defined “the environment in which most music production and distribution took place.”⁹ Looking back over a century of popular music, it is now evident that this ownership shift foreshadows dramatic changes. Azerrad casually predicted it in the Epilogue to *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, “maybe the next Seattle will be both nowhere and everywhere—maybe it will be on the Internet.”¹⁰ That is precisely where it happened.

⁷ Steve Knopper, *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 106.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

⁹ Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 29.

¹⁰ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 500.

Internet Technology and the Rise of Digital Music

The stories of both the internet and the digitization of music resemble that of radio and sound recording technology: decades before anyone outside high-tech research divisions knew about them, audio engineers and scientists were working on ways to improve communications. And after the technology reached the public, consumers would adapt them in ways unimagined by their inventors. The production, distribution and consumption of music would never be the same.

What would eventually become known as the internet resulted from the collective efforts of U.S. government, science institutions and private companies to develop “a country-wide communications network.”¹¹ Beginning in the 1960s, these efforts eventually included contributions from a variety of scientific developments in the U.S. and Europe. In the mid-1990s, the internet was opened for commercial and public use. Meanwhile, in the late 1970s, a group of German PhD students began experimenting with ways to send music files over phone lines. In 1988, an international collection of scientists formed the Moving Picture Experts Group (a subgroup of the International Organization for Standardization) to discuss digital multimedia formats. By 1991, they were successful in creating a musical compression technology called ISO-MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3, or MP3.¹² It wasn’t long before MP3s were discovered online by curious music fans with technical skills.

One of the first major music websites was the Internet Underground Music Archive (IUMA), founded by three college students in California who first posted songs by their own band. As the IUMA became more popular, they added the capacity for other

¹¹ “Internet History,” accessed on March 15, 2011, www.livinginternet.com.

¹² Knopper, *Appetite for Self-Destruction*, 118.

artists to post their music, and enabled listeners to download songs and musician bios, as well as post critiques of the music.¹³ As the decade wore on, more users began creating MP3 websites, and included files of copyrighted songs. For many years, the music industry remained oblivious. When record company executives finally realized that their music was being distributed online for free, they sent cease and desist letters to the website hosts, but stopped short of agreeing to licensing deals. Most of them simply refused to consider that this was the future of music distribution. CDs were still selling in high numbers, and major labels saw no reason to change their business model. But when file-sharing became a predominant social practice among music consumers, major labels were forced to confront the immense tide of change.

The Napster Revolution

The brainchild of Northeastern University student Shawn Fanning, Napster was a peer-to-peer network in which a centralized server connected its users through their indexes of music files. While Fanning wrote the computer code for Napster, Sean Parker, a college-aged computer whiz, was instrumental in helping it become a business. With the aid of Fanning's uncle, Napster was incorporated in 1999. Napster's users, who were mostly college students, quickly blossomed from a few thousand to a few hundred thousand, and then spiked to tens of millions by 2001. Membership boosted the availability of music; the more users who joined Napster, the more songs could be shared among them.

¹³ Wendy Maurer, "The Dynamics of Music Distribution," *Chime Interactive* online, accessed March 18, 2011, www.chime.com.

I distinctly remember the day I came home from work at the Ann Arbor Art Center in late 2000 to find that my housemates had downloaded Napster on our shared computer. I had been receiving e-mails from them all afternoon informing me of their endless wonder at pulling song after song out of thin air. The first thing I noticed when I stepped into the kitchen that evening was that “Napster is the bad-assest!” had been gleefully scrawled on the refrigerator’s dry erase board. I found my friends upstairs huddled around the computer, writing lists of songs to search while keeping an eye on the screen to monitor the current downloading progress. In most cases, it took less than two minutes to download a song. By the end of the weekend, our music library would expand with over 300 new songs.

This was a collection of music I never dreamed of having: songs I remembered from my childhood and hadn’t heard since, artists whose names I respected but whose albums I had never owned, movie and TV show sound bites, one-hit wonders, obscure tracks, local bands, film soundtracks, international music, classical, jazz, folk, rap, blues, metal, funk, punk, bluegrass, pop. Aphex Twin, Woody Guthrie, The Gipsy Kings, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Jelly Roll Morton, Howlin’ Wolf, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Miles Davis, ABBA, KRS-One, Buddy Holly, The Thompson Twins, The Sex Pistols, Aimee Mann, Miriam Makeba, the Bluegrass Student Union, Parliament Funkadelic, Dick Dale, Dolly Parton, Frank Sinatra, Yngwie Malmsteen, J.S. Bach. The entire world of music was ours for the taking. No one doubted that we were in the midst of a technological revolution.

In the first of a series of fateful public relations moves, the Recording Industry Association of American (RIAA) filed a copyright-infringement lawsuit against Napster

in 1999. Major labels had already been under fire for their shady business dealings, which included recent payola scandals and the well-known exploitation of artists. For consumers, free file-sharing became the latest form of socioeconomic resistance:

Yes, Napster users were engaging in theft. But their stick-it-to-the-man righteousness drew much of the public to their side, and major labels were taking the biggest public relations hit they'd ever absorbed...Napster supporters reasoned: The record labels have screwed us for years! They charge \$18 for two good songs! Backstreet Boys suck! They latched onto Fanning as a symbol, a rebellious David-vs.-Goliath type who invented the coolest slingshot ever. To some, this spirit reeked of rock n' roll—or at least a more efficient way of selling records.¹⁴

More than simply generating excitement over the volume of music available that was free, Napster also represented a spontaneous, communal event charged with a liberating sense of consumer autonomy. Brief verbal exchange between users was common, and characterized by gratitude and a shared thrill of discovery, from “Thanks, you have a great collection!” to “I had no idea that Elvis Costello recorded a version of this song!” or “Unbelievable: BRAND-NEW Ludacris!!!” In researching consumer attitudes towards file-sharing in 2003, Mark Katz found a multitude of self-righteous, anti-industry rhetoric, such as the man from North Carolina who said, “I regard downloading music as a form of civil disobedience in protest of a monopolistic cartel that wants nothing less than to own and control the distribution of all music.”¹⁵ As the white youths who danced to the “forbidden” sounds of black culture in the 1950s, or the hardcore audiences who rallied against authority in the 1980s, millions of users—myself included—enjoyed an exuberant sense of rebellion by participating in the Napster Revolution. It had become the latest beacon of independence.

¹⁴ Knopper, *Appetite for Self-Destruction*, 133.

¹⁵ Quoted in Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 177.

The two years of court battles between Napster and the RIAA had instigated heated public discourse over the consequences of file-sharing, with recording artists weighing in on both sides. One of the most outspoken critics of Napster was Lars Ulrich, drummer for the internationally successful, heavy metal band Metallica. In 2000, the band filed its own suit against Napster, as well as the University of Southern California, Yale University and Indiana University for copyright infringement. In a public statement defending the move, Ulrich said:

We take our craft—whether it be the music, the lyrics, or the photos and artwork—very seriously, as do most artists. It is therefore sickening to know that our art is being traded like a commodity rather than the art that it is. From a business standpoint, this is about piracy—taking something that doesn't belong to you; and that is morally and legally wrong. The trading of such information—whether it's music, videos, photos, or whatever—in effect, trafficking in stolen goods.¹⁶

Ulrich cast file-sharing as a crisis of art versus commodity, which undoubtedly appealed to long-held beliefs about the artistic integrity of serious rock music. It also underscores the fear that Napster would not only lead to the economic devaluation of music, but its cultural devaluation as well. (It is a rather ironic statement, considering that as long as it's been for sale, Metallica's music has always been a commodity.) Conversely, Prince, an enduring funk and rock star, saw Napster as a reflection of consumers' sustaining belief in music's cultural value. He posted a statement on his own website in 2000: "From the point of view of the music lover, what's going on can only be viewed as an exciting new development in the history of music. And fortunately (for the music lover), there does not seem to be anything the old record companies can do about preventing this evolution from happening."¹⁷

¹⁶ Jaan Uhelszki, "Metallica Sue Napster for Copyright Infringement," *Rolling Stone*, April 13, 2000.

¹⁷ "Prince Really Digs His Napster," accessed on March 20, 2011, www.wired.com.

During the period of litigation, there were several opportunities for Napster and the RIAA to enter into a legal partnership, a move that might have helped the latter reconcile their relationship with their consumers and learn to embrace their changing habits. Yet all of them failed, due in part to the animosity between both parties. Even after the settlement, however, the music industry continued to pursue defensive business and legal tactics in what can only be characterized as a brazen denial of the encroachment of internet culture. They spent several years developing a technical strategy called digital rights management (DRM) that disabled the copy, edit and save functions of music players. They also started encoding CDs with copy protection.¹⁸ They attempted to stunt developing social practices by launching public campaigns that condemned file-sharing, likening it to theft. But it already appeared to be a losing battle. A few major label executives spoke frankly about their failure to respond more positively, as the CEO of BMG noted in 2001, “I can think of no other industry where there is a demand from consumers and demand from clients, and that industry fails to deliver. It’s a disgrace, and we as industry leaders have failed.”¹⁹

The polarized debate over the ethics of file-sharing signifies the most recent development in narratives of control and access of popular music. Over the last century, copyright law has been extended on several occasions in response to new technologies that change the ways in which music can be copied and shared. The Copyright Act of 1976 was the first revision to the Copyright Law of 1909, and referred to “original works of authorship fixed in any tangible medium of expression, now known or later developed, from which they can be perceived, reproduced, or otherwise communicated, either

¹⁸ Patrick Burkhardt, *Music and Cyberliberties* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 16.

¹⁹ Gordon Masson, “Publishers Debate Global Online Licensing,” *Billboard*, February 3, 2001, 94.

directly or with the aid of a machine or device.”²⁰ It also extended the term of copyright to the life of the author, plus 50 years. For works of “corporate authorship,” it was extended to 75 years. The Copyright Term Extension Act of 1998 added another 20 years to the existing terms. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act, implemented in that same year, expanded the definition of copyright to include internet services, and criminalized the production and dissemination of technology intended to enable copyright violations.

Given that the length of copyright stretches well beyond the life of the author, the balance between control and access seems to be tipped in favor of copyright holders, most of whom in the music industry are corporations. Therefore, Ulrich’s (and the RIAA’s) claim that illegal file-sharing is detrimental to artists is a bit disingenuous. Certainly, many artists and songwriters who own publishing rights to their songs do not reap any rewards when MP3s of their music are traded for free. But their music is still being *distributed*, not unlike on the radio, and reaches listeners who may not have heard of them or wouldn’t normally buy their albums. The current overriding issue is that it has become possible for the listener to control a copy of the music, and make it accessible to whomever he or she chooses. I have always argued that file-sharing amounts to free advertising, and may lead to consumers either buying an album after they hear an MP3 or, better yet, attending a live show by that artist. Musicians stand to earn more far money through ticket and merchandise sales than album sales.

After two years of court battles, Napster was deemed officially illegal in March of 2001. But Napster’s cultural impact far outweighed the RIAA’s legal victory. Not only were music fans now accustomed to consuming digital music online, they were also empowered by a growing sense of entitlement to a music market that was both larger in

²⁰ “Subject Matter and Scope of Copyright,” accessed March 20, 2011, www.copyright.gov.

scope and, if it couldn't be free, was at least affordable. While the major labels continued to grapple with how to keep selling CDs to consumers who were clearly enamored with the magic of MP3s, technology companies were experimenting with portable devices that would play digital music. The earliest attempts were clunky, difficult to use and limited in storage capacity. And the RIAA was still going after lawsuits rather than partnerships in their war against digital media. But when Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer, approached major labels with a prototype for both a digital media player and a means of distributing digital songs, they had little choice but to join the revolution.

Apple Takes Over the Music Industry

Do not judge a man until you have walked a mile with his playlist in your headphones.

-Anonymous note posted on the sound board in the WMUC studio, 2007

The iPod is about the size of a deck of cards. It is divided into two sections. The upper half features a small computer screen, and the lower half contains a scroll wheel with play, pause, stop and skip controls. It is shiny, lightweight and fits comfortably into a pocket, a backpack, a purse or the palm of one's hand. iTunes evolved from a digital jukebox called SoundJam, which Apple had purchased from software publisher Casady & Greene in 1999. Apple polished its function and appearance until it "had a sleek geometric screen with a brushed-aluminum look and made organizing music files on a computer seem like the hippest thing in the world."²¹

²¹ Knopper, *Appetite for Self-Destruction*, 167.

When the iPod made its market debut in October 2001, only Mac users could download iTunes software, and the amount of available music needed improving as well. Jobs presented iTunes to executives at all five major labels (Sony and BMG merged two years later), and by 2003 all of them agreed to license their music. On April 28 of that year the iTunes Music Store opened with a catalog of 200,000 songs available for 99 cents apiece. In October, the software was made compatible with Windows-based computers (commonly known as PCs) and it became a mass phenomenon, selling twenty-five million songs.²² By 2008, iTunes was the top music retailer in the United States.

The music industry had finally found a way to reach consumers with digital music, but labels were far from their profit goals. Most of the revenue from sales of iPods and iTunes went to Apple. Of the 99-cent fee, labels got 67 cents, which they had to share with artists and songwriters—significantly less than the \$12 they earned from the sale of an \$18 CD. But with iPods priced between \$200 and \$500, Apple saw billions of dollars in revenue. For music consumers, the return of the single in a digital format suited their new listening and consumption habits, and CD sales began to plummet. Meanwhile, other online music sources continued to develop. File-sharing sites such as KaZaa and Limewire had emerged in Napster's wake, and avoided legal prosecution by operating from decentralized servers, many if not most of them located in other countries, and thus beyond the reach of United States law. Amazon, a multimedia commerce company, began selling MP3s in 2007, and notably without the DRM that limits how many times they can be copied and where they can be played. (In order to reach an agreement with the labels, Apple had to sell iTunes MP3s with advanced audio coding, or AAC, which prevents tracks from being copied to other formats.) Amazon also offers a free daily

²² Ibid.,178.

MP3, and features \$3.99 specials for newly released albums, all of which can be instantly downloaded. And presently, almost all MP3s, regardless of their source, can be transferred to an iPod or other MP3 device.

The portability of music, from the transistor radio (with or without headphones) in the 1950s, to the Walkman in the 1980s and the Discman in the 1990s, made listening to music a more privatized experience. Cassette and compact disc technology also made it possible for fans to personalize and trade music. With the iPod came the ability to construct personal playlists of MP3s, facilitated by various iTunes commands to arrange by genre and artists, by “recently added” or “recently played,” or by customized sets of criteria. It is now possible to walk around with one’s entire music collection—upwards of 10,000 songs—in one hand-held device. On a home computer, a collection of that size can be played without interruption for a solid month. Music now has a more constant presence in daily life, and tending it is no longer a matter of changing a CD or even a set of CDs, but organizing it in personalized ways. Thus, the playlist has become increasingly understood as a projection of identity. “What are the top five songs in your playlist right now?” is a question commonly posed to celebrities and musicians, with the expectation that the answer will reveal some new insights about the creator and lead their fans to emulate their taste. As the iPod and playlist have further individualized the consumption of music, its social capital has become bound up in the ability to create a hit parade that functions as a personal narrative.

While the digitization of music has made distribution easier and more affordable, it has also led to some resistance, as a growing number of music fans have complained about the poorer sound quality of digital music. In order to create an MP3, a sound file

must be compressed to a manageable size, which is achieved by reducing the amount of data comprising each file. Dynamic range compression (DRC) is a production technique that equalizes the volume of sounds and instruments on a given audio track. This is usually done to capture and maintain listener attention by presenting a balanced blend of sounds at a consistent volume (read loud). These digitizing techniques are designed to suit iPods and other devices in which a large number of MP3s are typically stored. In pursuit of music with better sound quality, an increasing number of consumers is reviving the market for vinyl records. They had never disappeared entirely, but after cassettes and then compact discs made music more portable, vinyl records were relegated to small and independent record stores.

There is a strong connection between vinyl records and independence, not least of which is the communal nature of neighborhood record stores where fans go to socialize and share their music. But the recent romanticization of vinyl stems from the belief that it represents a more authentic format than a digital sound file. To sensitive ears, the sonic layers of analog production sound fuller and richer than the thin, tinny quality of an MP3. In 2010, *Rolling Stone* reported that vinyl sales had tripled in the last four years, which has led to a resurgence of new vinyl releases, both in album reissues such as the Beatles and Bob Dylan, as well as modern artists such as the Black Keys and Radiohead.²³ Merge Records was the first independent label to release the LP3, which is a vinyl album that comes with a corresponding digital code which enables consumers to download the music in MP3 format.

The iPod and iTunes appeared to signify a compromise between consumer demand for a variety of affordable music, and the industry's copyright concerns. But the

²³ Matthew Perpetua, "Vinyl Sales Increase Despite Industry Slump," *Rolling Stone*, January 6, 2011, 16.

RIAA remained unsatisfied. In many ways, their struggle resembles the development of radio and the subsequent disputes between the broadcasting and recording industries that began in the 1930s. As with the radio, the internet resocialized Americans by offering a new outlet for music, as well as the opportunity to construct new social practices and listening habits. The RIAA's defensive response emulated that of ASCAP when the latter organization tried to secure a greater share of publishing royalties from broadcasters in the 1940s in an effort to recoup profits from lost record sales. The concurrent period of market stagnation induced independent entities to find ways to capitalize on the new cultural and musical trends. And through corporate consolidation and a change in business models, the mainstream industry eventually recovered its dominant market position.

But the decentralization of the music industry wrought by Napster seems to have brought more dramatic changes than any previous era. Never had consumers and artists wielded so much agency in the distribution of music, nor had there ever been such widespread public hostility aimed at the recording industry. This was not simply the result of the RIAA suit shutting down Napster, but due to the fact that, after they won that case, the trade organization began suing consumers. The music business has lost an average of 8% in revenue each year since 2000, and many executives continue to place the blame on illegal file-sharing.²⁴ The RIAA's efforts to make public examples of "online pirates" have done nothing to improve their reputation among young consumers. In 2007, for example, the RIAA infamously won their case against a single mother from Minnesota who was accused of downloading twenty-four copyrighted songs. The most

²⁴ David Goldman, Music's Lost Decade: Sales Cut in Half," *CNN Money* online, February 3, 2010, accessed March 12, 2011, http://money.cnn.com/2010/02/02/news/companies/napster_music_industry.

outrageous aspect of the lawsuit was that they demanded \$9,250 for each song, amounting to a total of \$222,000.²⁵ (The current value of a single song is about \$1.) RIAA representatives have insisted that pursuing such cases is necessary to combat illegal file-sharing, although after ten years of such lawsuits this has yet to be proven effective.

Meanwhile, internet culture has continued to evolve, with the distribution of music among its most important functions. For communications professor Patrick Burkhart, the online behavior of music fans expresses their continuing resistance:

Because the file-sharing culture that grew up around MP3 and P2P technologies, and the technologies themselves, have come under legal attack by the RIAA, music and cyberliberties activities may be among the most political, and politicized, of any of the ‘active audiences’ examined by culture studies in many years. Music fans’ politics, culture, and identity were all bound up with the experience of losing Napster from the music lifeworld.²⁶

Indeed, independent social fields adapted quickly to internet culture, and immediately began engaging in efforts to promote independent ideologies. One of the first organizations to emerge in support of file-sharing was Creative Commons, which was founded in 2001. Their mission is to “develop, support, and steward legal and technical infrastructure that maximizes digital creativity, sharing, and innovation.”²⁷ Independent artists also began taking advantage of the internet’s free distribution and, since their music wasn’t under the RIAA’s copyright, they could offer free MP3 and audio streams to their audiences. Soon, online independent communities began taking shape,

²⁵ A technical error brought the case back to court in 2008, in which the fine was increased to \$1.92 million. A Minnesota judge reduced to \$54,000. The RIAA then offered to settle for \$25,000 donated to a musicians’ charity, but the woman refused and in January 2010, the case entered its third trial.

²⁶ Burkhart, *Music and Cyberliberties*, 86.

²⁷ “About,” Creative Commons, accessed March 29, 2011, www.creativecommons.org.

reinventing the social practices of past movements and distinguishing themselves in new ways. Revisiting Warner's concept of counterpublics in terms of modern technology will be helpful in understanding how these communities operate in cyberspace.

Virtual Counterpublics

In writing on the spatializing politics of the internet age, Samuel Chambers articulates with two parallel theories to show that as public spaces, virtual spaces can function in counterhegemonic ways. He draws from Diana Saco's conceptualization of the ways in which technology brings into being new constructions of space. For Saco, "heterotopias" are social orderings that "manifest themselves as strategies and modalities of spatialization."²⁸ Linking this with Warner's concept of counterpublics, Chambers concludes the following:

Heterotopic spaces can produce counterpublics, and counterpublics can occupy heterotopic spaces, precisely because each comes about only *in relation to the dominant*. Their counterhegemonic nature means that the 'other space' produced by a heterotopia may be the space of emergence for the 'alternative public' that is a counterpublic. This process proves to be infinitely reflexive, of course, so that a counterpublic can not only occupy or come about in a previously constituted heterotopic space, but also constitutes its own heterotopia. The alternate ordering of space produced by heterotopias and the challenge to the dominant provided by counterpublics both serve to keep the public plural.²⁹

It is worth noting that Warner had argued that web discourse lacked the temporal and reflexive frameworks inherent in public discourse. But, writing in 2001, he also admitted that a lack of empirical evidence prevented him from making any further claims about the

²⁸ Samuel A. Chambers, "Democracy and (the) Public(s): Spatializing Politics in the Internet Age," *Political Theory* 33 (February 2005): 128.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 131. Italics in original.

internet.³⁰ I agree with Chambers that the self-reflexive nature, citations and temporal frameworks of websites such as blogs resonate strongly with the Warner's definition of publics. Music blogs in particular encourage active discourse among users, carry links to other sources and are consistently updated as well as archived. I also believe the counterpublic nature of blogs can be extended to other online media sites that are presented as being distinctively separate from the mainstream.

But this raises an important question with regard to how internet culture has affected the idea of an underground community. In terms of social space, the “nowhere and everywhere” nature of the internet displaces the physical locality that has historically separated and distinguished music communities. On the one hand, there is still a literal, physical underground as evidenced by the predominant number of small basement venues and clubs where indie music performances still take place. And independent record shops and college radio stations continue to function as social gathering spaces. But much of the circulation of independent music discourse has shifted from fanzines and mixtapes to virtual, public sites of exchange. And these sites are widely accessible—even if they require user membership in order to interact with other users, their content is usually visible to anyone who visits them. Likewise, the internet has become an important resource for the dissemination and discussion of independent music. In this sense, there is no underground, as indie communities share a common platform with social fields oriented towards other types of music. Their struggles for agency continue, but they are no longer characterized by relatively long periods of innovation followed by market concentration. Rather, they have become absorbed into a system where continual negotiation over music's economic, social and cultural capital takes place within

³⁰ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 98.

overlapping heterotopic spaces. The plurality of these spaces can operate both socially and experientially, as it is possible to engage with more than one at a time. Through ongoing online discourse and music sharing, contexts for independent music have become both more formalized and more fluid as individuals and communities locate and relocate themselves within the social fields of internet culture.

Blogs and Social Networks

The online social world started from a host of DIY endeavors that came to fruition long before the recording industry began to engage in copyright suits. What began as e-mail lists and online community bulletin boards developed into more sophisticated websites devoted to facilitating ongoing discussions on a specific range of topics. Weblogs, or blogs, became more common in the early 2000s as interface software improved and more blog hosts were able to turn them into interactive websites. Music or MP3 blogs seemed to develop from an impetus similar to that of freeform DJs and the creators of fanzines, in which bloggers felt compelled to not only share the music that they loved, particularly if it was obscure, but their also opinions about the artists, recordings and their history. In 2004, *Reuters* journalist Adam Parsick called music blogs “part online mixtape, part diary and part music magazine.”³¹

In his 2007 book *Net, Blogs and Rock n’ Roll*, Jennings recalls Riesman when he claims “it takes only a small minority of active users... to create valuable resources and

³¹ Adam Parsick, “MP3 Blogs Serve Rare Songs, Dusty Grooves,” *Reuters* online, July 8, 2004, accessed March 11, 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/music/2004-07-08-mp3blogs_x.htm

sustain a thriving community.”³² Blogs were one of the first methods by which individuals learned to harness the communication potential of the internet to the advantage of independent communities. For Jennings, “blog culture” is characterized by a spirit of community and discovery in which ongoing, participatory communication, with a focus on the individual voice, occurs in a supportive, noncommercial space.³³ Because music blogs are centered on the act of discovery, they are widely used by members of indie communities, and keeping track of them has become as important as monitoring charts for all types of record labels. When I asked Ebbie Bonczek, music director of WMUC, what he thought was the best outlet for indie music, he replied:

I’d probably have to say blogs. With a blog, anyone can write anything they want. There could be some small album that would go unnoticed before—with the radio, we’re not just competing with other radio stations, we’re competing with iPods and all the other ways people can choose to listen to their music, so I feel like for the most exposure blogs are where people can really get a name out there. The hard core bloggers check up on other blogs, and stuff can spread like wildfire. If you get a top blog doing a review of an album you’re promoting, it just spreads across the internet.³⁴

And Brendt Rioux, general manager of WCBN in Ann Arbor, described his reliance on blogs for new music in terms that recall the magic of Napster:

I have definitely altered my habits of music consumption, just being able to find most anything on a blog somewhere, something I could never buy in a store, that I could never order at a store, but you can pull it out of thin air by downloading because some guy in Italy ripped it from his original record.³⁵

³² David Jennings, *Net, Blogs and Rock n’ Roll: How Digital Discovery Works and What It Means for Consumers, Creators and Culture* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2007), 55. Although many independent music blogs now sell advertising space, they still present themselves as alternatives to mainstream music.

³³ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁴ Bonczek, interview, September 24, 2008.

³⁵ Rioux, interview, April 7, 2009.

Pitchfork, which is presented as “the essential guide to independent music and beyond,” was one of the forerunners of indie blogs. It was established in 1995 by a Minneapolis high school graduate Ryan Schreiber who wanted to emulate the spirit of fanzines and college radio. The site eventually became PitchforkMedia, specializing in album reviews and “best-of” lists, and gained a reputation for breaking independent artists. Similarly, Stereogum, founded by Scott Lapatine in 2002, began as a personal blog that has since developed into “the leading online community for independent and alternative music news, downloads and videos.”³⁶ Stereogum offers free streaming for dozens of MP3s, organized by latest releases, “the ‘Gum Mix,” and the most popular. Users can also access links to videos, concert reviews, photos and artist interviews.

But the “spirit of community” is often trumped by the emphasis on hierarchies of both taste and experience. According to Washburne and Derno, “Anytime anyone makes a discursive judgment of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ this is first and foremost a positioning gesture, which serves to construct or reimagine specific modes of subjectivity or to restructure social relationships by asserting deliberate musical agency.”³⁷ As a result, a number of well-known indie blogs have been criticized for their exploiting this agency. Pitchfork’s rating system is particularly notorious for its ability to influence consumers. David Moore’s 2004 review of The Arcade Fire’s debut album *Funeral* made it the fastest selling album in the history of Merge Records.³⁸ But Pitchfork’s journalists have become equally known for their scathing reviews and tendencies to be overly dismissive. A 2006 *Washington Post* article cited some of the controversies:

³⁶ “About,” Stereogum, accessed March 20, 2011, www.stereogum.com.

³⁷ Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno, eds, *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

³⁸ David Moore, review of *Funeral*, September 12, 2004, accessed April 10, 2011, <http://www.pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/452-funeral>.

Among the sources of complaints: Pitchfork's mean-spirited rants, which have been accompanied by more than a few zero-point ratings; the site's cooler-than-thou indie-elitist tone; blowhard reviewers who don't really review the music; and pretentious writing that can be, as Rob Harvilla brilliantly put it in the *East Bay Express*, 'a dense, hugely overwritten, utterly incomprehensible brick of critical fruitcake.'³⁹

The challenges to Pitchfork's cultural power exemplify the way in which marginalized discourse overlaps with the accessibility of democratized media. As social narratives about indie music have been transposed from the underground circulation of fanzines onto the global visibility of the internet, they must continuously negotiate their authority within larger domains of music consumption.

The historical rejection of mass culture by independent communities, or the "cooler-than-thou" attitudes, has fueled the elitist perception among popular music audiences, and underscored the class issues that have often defined their struggles. On a website called "Stuff White People Like," writer Christian Lander parodied the consumption habits and interests of the left-leaning, white, middle-class, conscious consumers who comprise a large portion of indie communities. On the subject of indie music (#41 on the list), he strongly implies that it is more about social status than aesthetic preference:

But BE WARNED, talking about Indie Music with white people is perhaps the most dangerous subject you touch upon. One false move and you will lose their respect and admiration forever...Remember, popular artists can turn unpopular in a heartbeat (Ryan Adams, Bright Eyes, The Strokes), so you would be best to stick to the following statements: 'I love the Arcade Fire,' 'I still think the Montreal scene is the best in the world,' 'I would die without Stereogum or Fluxblog'* and 'Joanna Newsome is maybe the most original artist today.'

³⁹ Freedom du Lac, J. "Giving Indie Acts A Plug, Or Pulling It," *The Washington Post* online, April 30, 2006, accessed March 17, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

*-do not substitute Stereogum for Pitchfork, as this is one of those things that used to be cool, but is now not cool.⁴⁰

In the era of internet culture, the practice of discovering-it-yourself has become a form of symbolic capital, as it demonstrates a particular dedication to wading through the seemingly endless array of music that is now accessible. Lander also ridiculed the well-known desire among independent communities to stay ahead of popular trends, which is more challenging now that popularity can spread so quickly.

However, blogs are not the only paths to musical discovery, nor are public forums the only way to participate in independent communities online. File-sharing continues to be a widely used method of distribution. When millions of users began trading their music on Napster, they demonstrated keen interest in generations of popular songs and now-obscure artists whose music is no longer on the market. iTunes and other online retailers have hundreds of thousands of artists in their catalogues, but they by no means cover the breadth of music that has ever been recorded. And, for unsigned artists who want to distribute their music without paying sign-up and commission fees, free streaming is a better prospect. In the past decade, two file-sharing sites have emerged and developed as important outlets for independent music. And, due to their success, they have incited both the major label interest and copyright disputes that have historically challenged independent music communities.

⁴⁰ Christian Lander, "Indie Music," accessed March 30, 2011, www.stuffwhitepeoplelike.com.

MySpace

MySpace, founded in 2002, was one of the first social networking sites to generate widespread use. Users must sign up to become members, although it is free, and can then customize their own profile pages that feature background information, personal interests, photos, music, blogs and a place to exchange comments with other MySpace friends. Because MySpace has music streaming capabilities, musicians can use their profile pages to post samples of their music, tour schedules and blog updates on their recording or touring process. In its first two years, MySpace was a community-oriented website, its homepage layout geared towards connecting its everyday users to one another by highlighting its newest members in a “Cool New People” section. The “MySpace Music” corner featured emerging independent bands who were taking advantage of the free promotion. However, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation bought MySpace in 2005, and renamed the venture MySpace Music. Its function as a promoter of indie artists promptly expanded into broader areas of entertainment. Although Facebook has since become more popular for social networking, MySpace Music continues to operate as a “social entertainment” site that features photos, clips, news and interviews related to film, music and television. Major label artists, blockbuster films and celebrities now grace the website’s homepage.

The development of MySpace from a community-oriented social network to an arm of the entertainment industry suggests the return to a familiar pattern. Eliot Van Buskirk, a music writer for *Wired*, a monthly magazine that reports on how technology affects culture, politics and the economy, observed in 2007:

As the music business becomes more fragmented, a funny thing seems to be happening. Along with the decentralization trend, a strong need for new

types of centralization has appeared, such as MySpace and the original MP3.com. It has been possible for more than a decade to produce music pretty inexpensively without being part of a label or any other network, but there was no central repository for the results. In retrospect, MySpace's ascension looks inevitable; once it reached critical mass, no band could ignore it. It's as if the more decentralized things get in music, the greater the need is for certain kinds of centralization.⁴¹

Van Buskirk raises an interesting question regarding the centralizing tendencies in the cultural field of popular music: are they a result of consumer habits or industry efforts? Throughout the twentieth century, centralization in popular music usually occurred following periods of corporate consolidation, which were accompanied by efforts to respond to music consumers' changing habits and tastes. In that sense, Murdoch's takeover of MySpace is similar. Consumers' tendencies to flock to large outlets may either reflect the desire for music that's easy to find, or the expectation that there are going to be scads of possibilities in one place. The need for centralization, then, may be illustrative of an overall dependence on a formal and stable means of measuring popularity. As the tradition of ranking songs is deeply ingrained in American social practice, so too is the validation that comes from interacting with an established music authority. Whatever their particular approaches were, *Your Hit Parade*, Martin Block, Al Benson and Tom Donahue all catered to a listenership that wanted to be directed to the best music. In the music business, major labels exploit these formalized exchanges for economic gain, while independent communities rely on them in order to define their distinction.

In a way, the corporatization of MySpace did mark the end of an independent cycle and the start of a new period of market saturation. But this did not result in the

⁴¹ Eliot Van Buskirk, "Indie Music Takes on the Majors," *Wired Magazine* online, February 5, 2007, accessed April 12, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/entertainment/music/commentary/listeningpost/2007/02/72634>

majors' dominance of the entire internet, which might have more closely resembled the patterns of industry takeover in the past. Rather, it mobilized independent communities to regroup elsewhere online. Through their deal with MySpace, major labels were granted a 40% total equitable share of advertising revenues, while independent labels and artists were not. The backlash against this was immediate, swift and resonated throughout indie communities. One music blogger complained, "Rather than trying to encourage the direct-to-fan model that they once touted as they encouraged indie artists to post their music and develop their friends – MySpace hands it all over to the combine. THIS IS NOT THE FUTURE OF MUSIC."⁴² And a blog host from the UK concluded her denigration of the MySpace Music venture with, "It'll be interesting to see if it gets to a point where artists decide not to play along anymore and take their music elsewhere. There's already a new coalition in the works with some big names on board that is looking to organise artists and make their voices heard."⁴³

Almost as soon as control of MySpace was turned over to the majors, another online repository emerged that more closely resembled the democratizing characteristics of Napster. Identified as a "worldwide video-sharing community," YouTube emphasizes user access. And, despite major label presence, the site remains consumer-oriented, and has become an important domain for modern independent communities.

⁴² David Kusek, "MySpace Music Does a 180," September 26, 2008, accessed April 10, 2011, <http://www.futureofmusicbook.com>.

⁴³ Heliene Lindvall, "Why MySpace Music is Unfair on Indie Labels," October 2, 2008, accessed April 10, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/musicblog>.

YouTube

In December of 2005, YouTube made its public launch. When *Time* magazine named its 2006 Person of the Year “You,” it acknowledged YouTube’s swift and widespread social impact as users immediately began posting and viewing homemade videos. Content soon expanded to include clips from television, films, speeches, concerts, commercials and sound recordings, making YouTube a repository of cultural memory.⁴⁴ Its popularity developed through viral exchange, meaning it spread through word-of-mouth and user-to-user link-sharing. It has become a platform for amateurs and professionals alike, where the most recent videos from hitmaker Lady Gaga share the same “stage” as a ukulele ensemble from Siberia. It also functions as a public archive—though often a temporary one—where users can access video with footage dating as far back as the 1920s. In terms of modern content, the site has fostered unprecedented forms of global communication and organization. For example, in 2008, the YouTube Symphony Orchestra was launched as the first online collaborative orchestra, hosted by the London Philharmonic in conjunction with a several other partners. Auditions by video were invited from participants all over the world, who were encouraged to perform on their native instruments. A panel of judges selected the finalists, and the winners were voted on by the YouTube community. The fact that the winners were mostly amateur musicians speaks to the ways in which YouTube has evolved as an inclusive public domain, and its undeniable and far-reaching cultural impact has recently drawn the attention of scholars and academics. Ethnomusicology professor Kiri Miller is currently conducting research on YouTube’s growing influence as a virtual site of amateur-to-

⁴⁴ Lucas Hildebrand, “YouTube: Where Copyright and Cultural Memory Converge,” *Film Quarterly* 61 (2007): 50.

amateur pedagogy. Her focus is on how such online communities are transforming face-to-face, body-to-body transmission contexts.⁴⁵

As a streaming site, YouTube functions in ways similar to radio, but its nature as an on-demand resource means listeners can control what they hear. Though they cannot download videos, they can spread them by sharing their links. Content is easier to access than on MySpace, which requires software compatibility, and users do not have to log in to view videos. They also have the ability to create their own contexts for music, both in the construction of videos and in their descriptions, as well as through the discussions that often arise from those who post comments. Media journalists often refer to the “YouTube community” based on the fact that throughout the site’s short history, videos have been generating active and ongoing discourse in all forms of social outlets, including print and online media, as well as in-person exchanges.

In March of 2011, Knopper announced in *Rolling Stone* that YouTube had become the “number-one source for music in the world...[as] more than half of adults listen to music online for free, and 58 percent of those listeners get their songs via YouTube.”⁴⁶ Music videos come in a number of formats combining audio and visual elements. Some show nothing more than a still photograph or image while a song plays, while others may include a slide show that functions as a narrative, either in personal connection with the poster or in relation to the song’s recording artist or theme. Other videos are more elaborately designed with live action or animation accompanying the music. Fan videos have become a popular means for audience members to showcase their favorite components of a film or television series against a backdrop of music that

⁴⁵ Kiri Miller, “Virtual Music Lessons,” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the International Association for the Society of Popular Music, Cincinnati, Ohio, March 9-13, 2011).

⁴⁶ Steve Knopper, “Digital Music’s Unlikely King,” *Rolling Stone*, March 31, 2011, 17.

illustrates their particular interpretation of it. In many cases, music videos feature live performances, as with the YouTube Symphony Orchestra auditions, or the Black Flag show from 1982 that I described in Chapter Four. YouTube has shown that people around the world seem to have an overwhelming need to *share* music, and wish to do so outside the market structures imposed by the recording and broadcasting industries. Lars Ulrich's fears about Napster and the cultural devaluation of music have been entirely unfounded; trading it through file- or video-sharing seems to have increased its importance as a form of communication and celebration of cultural expression.

Yet YouTube has not been immune to the copyright issues that have plagued so many music-oriented websites. A number of large media companies have filed lawsuits against YouTube for copyright infringement, which have centered on accusations that the website does not do enough to protect copyrighted material. Universal Music Group was the first of the four majors to accuse the site of copyright violation in 2006, though all of them have since reached licensing deals with Google, which bought YouTube in November of that year. But this has not eradicated the presence of unauthorized songs that appear in YouTube videos. Label executives continuously search the site for titles and artists whose work is not covered under current licensing agreements. And in response, users often post and share videos with those names deliberately misspelled in order to escape detection.

But who actually benefits from copyright's enforcement has affected the ways in which artists approach YouTube, and this has once again shown a divide between independent and mainstream music. The advertising rates and licensing deals between YouTube and major labels have generated millions of dollars a month for the recording

industry. But for major label artists, this has amounted to far less; in fact, a lawyer for Lady Gaga, whose fame arose directly from the circulation of her videos on YouTube, recently reported that her royalty payments from them are “meaningless.”⁴⁷ What this means relative to her income from other ventures is unclear, but the fact remains that in terms of copyright, economic control of published songs is still the domain of the major labels. Independent artists, however, have more autonomy, and with equal access to YouTube—anyone with a computer can upload a video—they have been able to expand the means by which they reach success.

A prime example of this is the band OK Go, an all-male rock quartet that formed in Chicago in 1998. Musically, they are not particularly distinctive. With two guitars, bass, drums, vocals and the occasional keyboard, they play straightforward power pop, which is a style that features prominent guitar riffs, a 4/4 beat and fairly simple melodic and harmonic arrangements. But they’ve distinguished themselves through their inspired music videos, the first of which featured the band members executing a cleverly choreographed treadmill dance to their single “Here We Go Again.” It debuted on YouTube in 2006, and was eventually viewed over 50 million times. The video’s success helped the band sell more albums, but audiences and the music industry recognize them primarily for their videos. They won a Grammy in 2007 for Best Short Form Music Video in 2007, and their second-video, in which a massive and complex Rube Goldberg machine operates to the song “This Too Shall Pass,” received 6.4 million views on YouTube in its first week.

In addition to their creativity as video production artists, OK Go has established independence through a series of autonomous business decisions. In April 2010, David

⁴⁷ Quoted in Knopper, 18.

Browne explained how their success enabled the band to leave EMI and start their own label:

Manager Jamie Kitman says the band's YouTube popularity has led to 'greater ticket sales, bigger offers for concerts and festivals, and greater interest in licensing our songs. And more people means more merch[andise].' OK Go's label, EMI, hasn't found a way to cash in on the phenomenon. In March, the band announced it was leaving the label to go indie. 'EMI has failed to view the Internet as part of the music-selling business,' says Kitman, 'The future arrived earlier than we expected, where bands will be their own labels and will go to nonmusic corporations to fund their videos.'⁴⁸

OK Go will continue to release albums on their own label, Paracadute. But their market strength is far more reliant on their self-styled internet image than on album sales, a significant departure from the traditional structures of the music industry. And EMI's inability to capitalize on this approach indicates that major labels continue to struggle to keep up with internet-based practices of popular music production and distribution. OK Go showed that independence was something that could be earned, and that enough innovation can move an artist beyond the major label system, which was once considered the only means to success.

As recording artists have used YouTube to negotiate the formalities of the music business, everyday users have used it to maintain a fluid and informal collection of songs. On my radio show this week, I wanted to play The White Stripes' version of "St. James Infirmary Blues" from their 1999 debut album, which I do not have. I looked up the song on YouTube, and found dozens of versions of it by both amateur and professional musicians. This surprised me, so I searched the song's origins and learned that it is an American folksong of unknown provenance, and likely more than one hundred years old.

⁴⁸ David Browne, "Internet Made Them Video Stars: YouTube Kings OK Go Score Again," *Rolling Stone*, April 1, 2010, 22.

In order to showcase the song's diverse lineage, I first played the White Stripes' version, immediately followed by Louis Armstrong's 1959 recording. The effect was just what I had hoped. The Stripes' boozy, piano-driven stomp contrasted perfectly with Armstrong's lumbering and soulful requiem, while Jack White's reedy shriek and Armstrong's howling growl both sounded like timeless links in the long tradition of American blues. User comments for the Armstrong version included a discussion of where and when the session took place, who else has recorded it, what the song is about and where to obtain copies of it. In borrowing a song shared by one community in order to place it in the context of another, I felt that in my own small way I had contributed to both.

Hildebrand notes that, despite the continued efforts of large media companies to control access to certain content, the overwhelming consumer demand for YouTube will likely mean its survival:

YouTube cannot be completely shut down due to the indisputable volume of material that in no way infringes copyright and that can be argued to reflect the experiences and ideas of a generation and possibly even a whole cultural moment. The content industry's interests in the site may suffice to maintain its architecture—and, by extension to sustain a space for amateur and bootleg media flows. Even if YouTube itself implodes, the technology for video sharing remains available, and viewer desire seems sufficient to drive video sharing to alternative venues.⁴⁹

As long as its users can upload videos, YouTube more closely resembles the Napster model than anything before or since. As a heterotopic space, it functions as a broad social field in which a countless number of music communities may come into formation and just as quickly dissolve. It is at once centralized and decentralized, with the site itself acting as a single, massive repository in which the fluidity of its content represents the

⁴⁹ Hildebrand, "YouTube: Where Cultural Memory and Copyright Converge," 56.

millions of users and communities who use it to construct a variety of contexts. For independent communities, YouTube has been an important space for innovation and experimentation, particularly as the diversity of its user base prevents the standardization of form that has interrupted this process in the past. (iTunes does not have several dozen versions of “St. James Infirmary Blues;” they have the few that are most likely to sell.) It is also a site of ongoing resistance in which struggles for agency and autonomy continuously articulate with dominant institutions, which have so far been unable to launch a takeover. This does not mean that *anything* is possible on YouTube; it is still controlled by a single, large media company that acts in accordance with legal and business regulations, and its users must operate within the confines of its technical limitations. But in the cultural field of popular music, it is arguably the most heterogenous public space we have ever seen.

As internet culture has spawned modern innovations such as music blogs, MySpace and YouTube, it has also had a tremendous impact on existing forms of communication. In the final section of this chapter, I will explore some of the effects that internet technology has had on radio, and how traditional independent entities have refashioned their approaches to broadcasting.

Radio in the Twenty-First Century

As internet culture was in its early stages of development, radio underwent a watershed thanks to a provision of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, an amendment to the Communications Act of 1934. It was designed to promote competition in the telecommunications and broadcasting industries, and did so by deregulating access to

technologies and services. However, in yet another example of unintended consequences, this law resulted in further centralization of radio ownership, which has negatively impacted the presence of independent and regional radio stations throughout the country. The most powerful corporation to emerge was Clear Channel Communications, which was founded in 1972. Prior to the Telecommunications Act, media companies could not own more than four stations in a single market, or 40 nationwide. After these ownership limits were removed, over the next few years, Clear Channel bought up more than 70 media companies as well as individual stations. In 2002, Clear Channel owned “approximately 1225 radio stations in 300 cities and dominate[d] the audience share in 100 of 112 major markets.”⁵⁰ While the internet was enabling unprecedented access and control of music to artists and consumers, radio endured a period of consolidation that saw domination by just four large radio station group owners, though many stations (especially in smaller markets) remained outside their clutches. In addition to Clear Channel, these included CBS Radio, Citadel and Entercom.

Public criticism against this trend quickly spread. The leftist online magazine Salon.com published a 12-part series on Clear Channel in 2001, calling the legality of its business practices, from monopolization to payola, into question. In 2004, the office of New York Attorney General Eliot Spitzer launched an investigation of the relationship between Sony BMG’s labels and commercial broadcasters. They found that the company had been engaging in payola for years, another practice made possible by the reintroduction of independent promoters after 1996, and which closely resembled the payola scandal of the 1950s. This time, however, the promoters weren’t representing

⁵⁰ Perlstein, “Clear Channel: The Media Mammoth That Stole the Airwaves,” November 2002.

indies. They were helping major labels maintain big hits through tight playlists from tightly-restricted genres aimed at tightly-defined demographics.⁵¹

All four major labels and two radio station groups were eventually fined more than \$35 million. Embarrassed by Spitzer's findings, the FCC finally followed up in 2007 by issuing consent decrees against all four station groups. Group owners then met with the American Association of Independent Music to draft a set of "Rules of Engagement" in which the owners agreed to reserve a portion of all broadcast time for local, regional, unsigned artists and artists on independent labels.⁵² Two years later, the Future of Music Coalition (FMC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting diversity in American musical culture, published a lengthy report analyzing whether these agreements had been effective in expanding the breadth of music broadcast on the radio. After examining four years of airplay, national playlists and seven different formats, the FMC concluded that:

...radio's longstanding relationship with major labels, its status quo programming practices and a permissive regulatory structure all work together to create an environment in which songs from major label artists continue to dominate. The major labels' built-in advantage, in large part the cumulative benefit of years of payola-tainted engagement with commercial radio, combined with radio's risk-averse programming practices, means there are very few spaces left on any playlist for new entrants. Independent labels, which comprise some 30 percent of the domestic music market, are left to vie for mere slivers of airtime, despite negotiated attempts to address this programming imbalance.⁵³

By all appearances, radio's corporatized atmosphere, hugely strengthened with the 1996 law, has changed very little since. But in a culture of iPods, playlists, blogs and YouTube, radio listeners are well aware that there is much more music being made than that which

⁵¹ Charles C. Mann, "The Resurrection of Indie Radio," *Wired* online, August 13, 2008, accessed March 22, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.03/radio.html>.

⁵² The American Association of Independent Music was founded in 2005 as a trade organization representing independent record labels.

⁵³ Thomson, "Same Old Song: An Analysis of Radio Playlists in a Post-FCC Consent Decree World," (report published by the Future of Music Coalition, June 2009), 5-6.

is broadcast on traditional commercial radio. And, as FM technology did in the 1960s, both internet and satellite technology have enabled innovative broadcasters to attempt to articulate with modern consumption habits. At the same time, issues of centralization versus decentralization, national versus local, DJ autonomy and community continue to be important factors among those following the medium closely.

Pandora and Satellite Radio

In 2000, the Music Genome Project was founded for the purpose of reducing music's essence to a list of sonic attributes. The result was Pandora, a free internet radio site in which users customize their own radio stations by choosing the name of a band, song or musical style. A logarithmic code then determines the playlist by matching songs with shared musical attributes. Playlists are subject to listener feedback, which includes "thumbs-up" and "thumbs-down" options, as well as the ability to skip to a new track. Audio advertisements, which comprise Pandora's revenue source, usually run three or four times in the course of an hour, though for an annual subscription fee listeners can hear their music ad-free. Currently, the site has over 800,000 songs in its catalog, and employs a team of 25 "highly-trained" analysts to listen to new tracks and "unlock their musical 'genes'."⁵⁴ These include rhythmic, tonal, harmonic, melodic and instrumental descriptions, as well as orchestration, arrangement and lyrics. As of March 2011, Pandora executives are trying to integrate the technology into home audio systems, Blu-ray players, iPhones and cars.

⁵⁴ "How Long Does It Take To Analyze a Track?" accessed March 29, 2011, www.blog.pandora.com.

In a recent interview, Pandora's co-founder Tim Westergren discussed the company's expansion into iPhones, tablet computers and home audio systems, and reported that the service now has eighty million users.⁵⁵ Pandora's emphasis on musical discovery has enhanced its popularity, along with the perception among users that their personal musical tastes are accurately reflected in the playlists. With the absence of DJs, Pandora functions more like an automated iPod than a radio station, as its narrative content is limited only to brief descriptive on-screen captions and (if one does not subscribe) advertisements. The company prides itself on connecting consumers to a database of music that purports to serve no hierarchies, and thus represents "the first true music meritocracy."⁵⁶ In a recent statement, a member of Pandora's board of directors boldly proclaimed, "Pandora could redefine how much music is made and what kind of creative risks people are willing to take. Pandora could make music better."⁵⁷

Like Pandora, satellite radio developed in the early 2000s as an alternative for listeners dissatisfied with options on terrestrial radio. The FCC started outlining regulations for direct satellite broadcasts (DSB) for television in 1982, and a decade later turned to radio "with the intent to create a broadcast system that would provide a national service."⁵⁸ The idea was to serve a wide variety of niche markets with dozens of formats which, beaming from an orbiting satellite, could transcend the geographical boundaries of terrestrial transmitters. Two corporations, eventually named Sirius and XM, introduced satellite radio in 2001-2. In return for a monthly fee averaging around ten dollars, subscribers received a digital receiver and the ability to choose among 100 different

⁵⁵ Andrew Leonard, "Inside Pandora's Digital Kingdom," *Rolling Stone*, February 17, 2011, 17.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Leonard, 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Dennison, "Digital Satellite Radio," 467.

channels, roughly half music and half talk. Most satellite listening takes place in cars. After a complex legal process, the two companies merged in 2009 to become SiriusXM, and now offer over 180 channels of news, talk, music, entertainment and weather, all commercial-free. Subscription packages range between \$13 and \$17 a month.

Both Pandora and satellite radio aim to serve modern consumption habits. Pandora mimics the creation of an iPod playlist, where the conspicuous absence of an authoritative DJ is replaced by a sense of consumer agency. Satellite radio operates in conjunction with users' habits of finding all the music they want in a single repository, as with an iPod, MySpace or on YouTube. Both claim that they provide equal access to independent music; Pandora with its user-directed "music meritocracy," and Sirius XM with its one indie rock station. But each falls short in a number of ways. For Pandora, the claim that the essence of all music can be reduced to sonic descriptions ignores the humanizing elements that go beyond delineated categories. Furthermore, like iTunes, Pandora's database in no way encapsulates the sum of all recorded music, and even though their mission is to offer the thrill of discovery based on personal taste, it is an inherently limited process. For Ben Yee, the music director of the University of Michigan's campus station WCBN, Pandora's weakness is the lack of any meaningful context:

Pandora takes a database and assigns five key attributes to a song, you know, heavy bass line, female vocals, strong lead guitar or something like that, and then tries to link them up based on that. But there's so much more to music than five descriptive words and there's so much more to the history and to the understanding. You know, no one's going to tell you that Benny Goodman bought off all his hit songs from black big band leaders who never made it anywhere.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Ben Yee, interview, April 6, 2009.

For me, the licensing and copyright restrictions that prevent users from skipping more than a handful of songs per hour reveals the fact that Pandora is deceptively personalized. So, too, does the number of people who agree with me that Pandora's playlists become noticeably repetitive after a period of time. The breadth of a given station's content is still ultimately regulated by the recording industry.

In the music and broadcasting industries, SiriusXM is perceived as problematic for several reasons. The NAB opposed their merger out of concerns over monopoly, citing threats to innovation and competition. Local broadcasters have expressed concerns over the fact that satellite radio's mission to serve a national listenership will eventually eliminate the stations serving local public interests. And from a business standpoint, SiriusXM is working from a precarious model. They fund their operations with the money they receive from subscription fees, as opposed to relying on advertising revenues that support terrestrial commercial stations. This means SiriusXM is gambling on the fact that there will eventually be enough consumer demand to turn a profit. Jim McGuinn, the programming director of an NPR station in St. Paul, MN, was approached for hire by both Sirius and XM. He turned them down, due to the fact that he believes they're run as poorly as Clear Channel stations, and have no future in radio. He explained:

It's like a really steep profit thing. Until you get to the point when you're actually making money, you're losing money. Because of that cost structure, they operate programming really cheaply. When I talked to them they wanted me to run four channels and I had a staff of three people. Here, we have 12 people on the station, 10 of them DJs. At the last commercial station I was at we had 9 people. With such a small staff, you wouldn't have time to do decent programming... Everyone's overworked because they're trying to maximize corporate profits, and the path of least resistance is to play what the major labels send them because it's what they've always done.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Jim McGuinn, interview, July 31, 2009.

Of the two sources, Pandora seems to provide a service that's serving a growing demand, though it is unlikely they will ever be the one-stop service that they're aiming to become. No one I spoke with thought that Sirius XM would last more than a few years at most, whether because of their questionable business model or lackluster programming. More importantly, however, I have found that listeners, especially in independent communities, still value radio as a local medium. Even in an age when internet technology enables radio stations to stream online, thereby reaching well beyond the scope their local listenership, the sense of community engendered by local broadcasters communicates in important ways. To that end, National Public Radio and college radio continue to serve important functions, especially in an age when commercial radio is more corporatized than ever, and automated and satellite radio have displaced any sense of regional identity.

National Public Radio and the Triple-A Format

Though they have been broadcasting since 1971, National Public Radio and its local affiliates have only recently become associated with independent popular music. NPR's music programming has historically tended to feature classical music, jazz and blues, folk and ethnic music, aimed at a college-educated listenership with a median age of 50.⁶¹ Since 1999, however, NPR's audience has increased by two thirds, due in large part to the consolidation of commercial radio.⁶² NPR stations started reaching out to a younger demographic in the early 2000s, particularly the post-grunge generation of

⁶¹ "Audience," National Public Radio website, accessed March 30, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/about/aboutnpr/audience.html>.

⁶² Mann, "The Resurrection of Indie Radio," August 13, 2008.

conscious consumers who were turning away from commercial radio. To this end, a number of NPR affiliate stations adopted Adult Album Alternative (Triple-A), which has grown substantially in the last twenty years. The “eclectic” format that regularly features independent music grew 150 percent from 1994 to 2002.⁶³

In the 1990s, radio programmer Lee Abrams created a new format that shared many attributes with 1960s progressive FM radio and album-oriented rock (AOR). Triple-A was designed to reach audiences in the 30-49 age range who represented the “upper end [of] musical sophistication.”⁶⁴ The musical idea, said Abrams, “is popular eclectic. It’s a place where a 40-year-old AOR rooted person can go without hearing ‘Light My Fire’ again.”⁶⁵ In other words, Abrams wanted to build a format that differed from the predictability and repetitiveness of other modern formats such as Adult Contemporary, Contemporary Hit Radio (formerly known as Top 40) or Alternative Rock. Triple-A stations are more flexible with regard to DJs’ autonomy, as well as to the number of genres and eras from which they construct their playlists. In the FMC’s report, Non-Commercial Triple-A stations were singled out for including more independent music than any other format—50 percent of their total content.

The Current is a Triple-A station that broadcasts from St. Paul, Minnesota as a service of Minnesota Public Radio. They boast a worldwide membership, and programming that “brings listeners the best authentic new music alongside the music that inspired it, from local to legendary, indie to influential, new to nostalgic.”⁶⁶ In August 2009, I interviewed programming director Jim McGuinn, whose experience includes both

⁶³ Mike Janssen, “Triple-A Strikes Chord with Disenchanted Listeners,” *The Current.org*, January 27, 2003, accessed April 12, 2011, <http://www.current.org/music/music0302triplea.html>.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Keith, *Voices in the Purple Haze*, 181.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁶⁶ “About,” *The Current*, accessed March 19, 2011, www.thecurrent.org.

college and commercial radio. He, too, remembers the “amazing and horrifying” popularization of the grunge era in the 1990s when the sense that “we won” was quickly replaced by dismay that “the kid with the backwards baseball hat had co-opted our music.”⁶⁷ He later worked at several alternative commercial stations in St. Louis and Philadelphia, but was eventually put off by their robotic methods of programming. “The distressing thing is when you look at auditorium research the phrase lowest common denominator really is true,” he said, “I used to test 600 songs and it would be the same Green Day songs that were at the top every year.” When I asked him to expound on “auditorium research” he explained that it meant gathering 100 people in an auditorium and playing 10-second song snippets for them. They mark a Scantron sheet using a scale of 1 to 5 to measure how they felt about each song clip. “Commercial radio is programmed to maintain as large an audience as possible to enable selling exposure to that audience to a client,” he said, and then described the Current’s alternative approach:

Here, our business model is based on enticing you to give us money voluntarily. So we are driven to superserve our audience to the extent where—fingers crossed—you will reach into your own pocket because you love us so much. So it kind of becomes the opposite of ‘I don’t want to offend you, I don’t want to offend you’ because that doesn’t really get anyone’s passions aroused. Instead, we’re trying to build a community and have you put a value on it. It’s all built around a very offensive posture—what’s the music that can really inspire people, passionately? It encourages us to be much more daring. Face it, people still need filters. There’s so much out there thanks to the democracy of technology. Anybody can make a record, there’s zillions of records out there. Which ones are good? That’s where we come in. If you have a general aesthetic of liking what we normally do, then hopefully you develop this trust that you’re gonna like the new stuff we bring you, then it’s great. ‘We listen to this box of CDs so you don’t have to. Because you’re busy.’⁶⁸

⁶⁷ McGuinn, interview, July 31, 2009

⁶⁸Ibid.

This addresses a number of ways in which modern independence articulates with past traditions. The spirits of passion and discovery resonate with the freeform movement, which also recognized a community of listeners who relied on radio as a means of expanding their musical knowledge. The curatorial role of the DJ—“We listen to this box of CDs so you don’t have to”—recalls Martin Block’s friendly authority and cultural agency as someone with discriminating taste. The Current also cultivates a strong local identity that represents the distinction of the Twin Cities’ own musical culture. On Sunday nights, “The Local Show,” broadcasts two hours of nothing but local music and interviews with the artists, and much of the music featured on daily shows descended from postpunk genres for which the area was known in the 1980s. Finally, under the guise of listener-support, the station deflects the desire for profit, which bolsters the cultural integrity of its programming.

KCRW in Santa Monica, CA, is similar to The Current in a number of ways. They also claim to feature an eclectic mix of music that combines DJ taste, listener requests and local sensibility. When I visited the station in January of 2008, I toured their studios and library, and was introduced to a number of staff members. Their library contains hundreds of thousands of albums, with several boxes’ worth of new ones coming into the station every day. Rachel Reynolds, who is in charge of publicity at KCRW, told me that their CDs come from a wide variety of sources, from major label artists to someone who mixed a demo in their basement. And, like the DJs at The Current, the staff at KCRW listens to as many as possible in order to maximize the diversity of their programming. When I asked Jason Bentley, the current host of *Morning Becomes Eclectic*, whether he plans his shows in advance, he shook his head. I gathered that for him, broadcasting is a

spontaneous kind of expression, built on years of knowledge and experience with all types of music. According to Reynolds, the listeners who appreciate the aesthetic of this approach constitute an identifiable community. “You can tell—there’s just something about them,” she said. “When you see someone with a KCW bumper sticker you know that you have a lot in common.”⁶⁹

I asked McGuinn a similar question when he described some of the Current’s political programming. They host a monthly political discussion panel called “Policy and a Pint.” “What does that have to do with the Arcade Fire?” he posed, “Probably nothing. But if you’re into the Arcade Fire, you’re engaged in your community and you’re concerned about stuff.” I asked him if he saw any connection between music sound and a political sensibility, or how to account for the fact that people who are into the Arcade Fire also share similar political interests.

Well, if they like the Arcade Fire, they’re listening to the Current. And if they’re listening to the Current, they’re also probably the people, like I said, who are buying a Prius, or shopping at Whole Foods or drinking a microbrew if they can afford it. They’re engaged and interested in a certain type of culture, politics and more willing to participate in that. I can’t imagine a Top 40 station coming on the air and offering a political discussion.

This resonates with Lewis Hill’s belief in Kierkegaard’s willful construction of the self, and the power to create community through ongoing public dialogue. It also articulates with the goals of the freeform DJs who constructed playlists with political rhetoric that would appeal to their countercultural audiences. But in the era of internet culture where radio stations can and usually do stream online, once “local” radio now has more far-reaching effects.

⁶⁹ Conversation with Reynolds, January 7, 2009.

In writing on the technological mediation of radio narratives, Jody Berland claimed that spatial and social processes are indistinguishable, and that “the production of audiences is inseparable from the production of spatial relationships. Media forms are constituted (if they constitute us) spatially as much by genre, signification or technological form.”⁷⁰ Through analog and online broadcasting, the Current and KCRW produce both local and national audiences. The DJs’ spoken narratives, in which news, events and even their regional accents, serve as points of reference for their geographical space. They also feature regional musical content as well, showcasing local artists and styles that have been uniquely identified with their respective areas. In Minneapolis, for example, where bands like Hüsker Dü and the Replacements earned the city a reputation for its indie scenes, punk music is considered part of its heritage, and the Current’s playlists often reflect this. Presently, the station is promoting the artist Dessa, a spoken-word artist from Minneapolis, through links to a video and interview, boosting exposure for her recently acclaimed hip-hop album. And both stations encourage their area listeners to become involved through local fundraising events, concerts and record swaps. In this way, they mediate local communities of artists and listeners built around shared musical and social sensibilities.

Yet they simultaneously project to a greater audience. DJs routinely address their wider listenership, both through the solicitation of contributions and the musical selections that represent other styles and regions. They tend to play indie “hits,” such as artists featured on the current *CMJ* charts and those who are significant in indie music history, such as Black Flag and Fugazi. Most of them also carry syndicated national programming, such as the rock n’ roll talk show *Sound Opinions*, which is based in

⁷⁰ Berland, “Radio Space and Industrial Time,” 186.

Chicago, or *All Things Considered*. Triple-A stations emulate the formality of Top 40 radio by canonizing certain independent artists who have had a national and/or historical impact. The website NPR Music, which launched in 2007, has become an indie music authority through their endorsements of new albums, and streams of interviews and live concerts. However, each station strives to retain a semblance of the community, regionalism and autonomy that have characterized local, independent stations in the past. As the Current's programming director, McGuinn has to report to a board that has financial and ratings goals, but he is also entrusted to maintain a staff of experienced and knowledgeable DJs, whom he encourages to be creative. Their programming decisions are not based on centralized market research divisions, he claimed, but through active engagement with their listenership through e-mails and phone calls.

The internet has clearly been a positive bolstering force for Triple-A stations by enabling them to formalize an indie music demographic through a fusion of local and (inter)national sensibilities. They owe much of their success to college radio, through which many Triple-A audiences and staff members developed their eclectic tastes. College radio itself also has benefitted from the accessibility of music online and the ability to reach larger audiences. But for the freeform stations that have depended on the live, active engagement of its students, the internet has also introduced some new challenges.

College Radio in the Twenty-First Century

In September of 2010, *Paste*, a monthly news and entertainment magazine that focuses on independent music, film and literature, named WMUC among its "40 Best

Little Radio Stations in the U.S.” Article writer Josh Jackson said, “The University of Maryland’s student-run station is truly freeform: the student DJs each program their own playlists.”⁷¹ He emphasized the importance of stations like WMUC for remaining committed to their diversity and creativity in the face of “the FCC’s apparent decree that all radio must viciously suck.”⁷²

Freeform has been a cornerstone of student-run college stations since the 1960s. So, too, has community, which is emphasized both through programming and through their function as social outlets. Despite the seemingly limitless number of musical resources that are available on the internet, college radio retains a unique character based on the kinds of social fields that develop at campus stations. Scott Maxwell, general manager of WMUC at Maryland, shared a recent example of a student who attended one of the station’s semesterly open houses. He was a freshman who had been on campus for only two weeks, and felt miserable and out of place:

He thought campus was dominated by jocks and frat boys who listen to Top 40 radio and nothing but and that’s not his personality or style. He came up to WMUC and found that there were people who listened to the music that he was into, and found the social circle that he was looking for. He found himself a community.⁷³

Brendt Rioux at WCBN in Ann Arbor characterized college radio in similar terms as a specialized group of individuals who often do not fit in anywhere else:

[WCBN] is the place you can at least feel validated in a sense. Everyone here is really socially unable in one way or another....I swear, it’s the most dysfunctional group of people. They all have some sort of social disorder, every one of us. You have to in order to want to, ‘Oh, I’m gonna go play records in a poorly ventilated basement for four hours. Alone. In the dark. That’s my idea of a good time.’ I mean, there’s something wrong

⁷¹ Jackson, Josh. “The 40 Best Little Radio Stations in the U.S.,” *Paste Magazine* online, September 23, 2010, accessed March 27, 2011, <http://www.pastemagazine.com/blogs/lists/2010/09>.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Scott Maxwell, interview, November 13, 2008.

with you fundamentally, so...[LS: *You think so?*] I don't know...there must be. Maybe not 'wrong' per se, but there's something unusual going on. So as a result I think we get a lot of weirdos. I don't know, it makes for interesting programming.⁷⁴

Both Rioux and Maxwell emphasized the liveliness of the college radio community, which serves a social need that the internet does not meet. Many of the student DJs and staff use the station as a gathering space. This seems to be part and parcel of the freeform philosophy in which word-of-mouth exchanges and interactions among station personnel foster communities of sharing. Chris Berry, a former DJ and staff member at WMUC, now runs a record label called Fan Death Records with fellow alum Sean Grey. Berry has fond memories of the college radio environment:

Well here's what I think is really cool about college radio. You get to meet people and hang out with people and bounce ideas back and forth off each other. [T]here are a lot of people who are really involved with music where they have a blog or a tumblr or something where they might be clued into a very specific style or specific scene or something. But at a college radio station -- we had a hundred other people working at WMUC who listened to everything from metal to indie pop to Indian classical music. And then there were people who really weren't that into music [but] were into sports, too. And that's something I really liked about it.⁷⁵

Student-run college stations also encourage musical discovery on an individual level by encouraging active engagement with their music collections. A sign posted on the wall at WCBN advises DJs on how to contribute to the station when they're not on the air. The top three recommendations on "Off-Air Work" are "1) Adopt-a-Shelf. Alphabetize; 2) Put away LPs and CDs left lying out, and 3) Mend well-loved LPs." At WMUC, where one of the mottoes is "Get Listenin' Kids!", DJs are invited to write reviews of incoming albums in order to help fellow and future DJs become acquainted

⁷⁴ Rioux, interview, April 7, 2009.

⁷⁵ Valerie Paschall, "Three Stars: Fan Death Records," April 15, 2011, DCist blog, accessed April 16, 2011, http://mobile.dcist.com/2011/04/three_stars_fan_death_records.php.

with them. I remember sorting through the New Bin before my show several years ago, and coming across an album by High Places, which bore the following description:

Artist: High Places

Album: s/t (self-titled)

Label: Thrill Jockey

I can't remember the last time I've been so excited for a record to come out. After this Brooklyn duo released their first demo in late 2006 and a string of singles from early '07 to the present, their first full-length is finally here. And shit, it's *really* good. High Places have a unique approach to recording, seen only in the past from bands by the likes of Mum or The Books. They compile a collection of home-recorded sounds, from coffee cans filled with ball-bearings to noises from bassoons and toy harps, only to be sequenced later into abstract trip-hop beats that perfectly frame Mary's spacey female melodies. I've always been a fan of that "organic music in a digital world" aesthetic, and this record pulls it off flawlessly. The production is so crisp and clean that you'd never guess in a million years that it was recorded right at home in their Brooklyn apartment. If you appreciate modern music like Subtle, El Guincho, Panda Bear or Animal Collective's Strawberry Jam, give this album a listen. I promise you won't be disappointed. *Highly recommended.*

Reviewer: Ebbie, 9-19-08

Ebbie has eclectic and specific taste in music, as well as very high standards, so a good review from him goes a long way with me. I was mostly intrigued by the "spacey female melodies" and gave the CD a listen. It *was* really good. I decided to open my show with one of the tracks from that CD, and followed it with a smooth segue into a piece from my iPod by Arizona indie band Calexico, who collect old instruments. Their enigmatic desert noir, rattling marimbas sound picked up nicely on the metallic echo of High Places' homemade percussions.

When I spoke to Ben Yee of WCBN, I asked him to talk about what freeform meant to him. He explained his approach to broadcasting, which echoed Raechel Donahue's description of "the round":

I might find that John Gilmour who played sax for Sun-Ra for however many years led a small side project back in the early 60s and that side project was doing ragtime jazz, which transfers me then to then Eubie Blake, who did 'Stars and Stripes Forever.' All of a sudden I'm on a military slant in terms of the origination of the music and then I go to Albert Eiler who was a lieutenant or sergeant, I can't remember which, of the Marines. So it's a way of moving around. [Freeform] is very fluid and allows you a large degree of freedom in terms of what you choose in music.⁷⁶

For DJs like Yee and myself, the DJ's role is a performative one that is contingent on the process of making surprising, but aesthetically logical musical connections. The college radio environment is not only a vital space for enabling this kind of expression, but a unique resource for music that may not be found anywhere else, including the internet. Each station's music collection is a reflection of its individual history, having been amassed and organized by generations of students with their own particular sets of interests. They also represent thousands of tiny record labels who sent albums to college stations. For this reason, college radio stations may be considered some of the most intrinsically local broadcasting institutions in American culture.

However, the internet has not necessarily enhanced college radio in all ways. Although many student DJs have welcomed the increased availability music, some regret the resultant changes in DJs' habits. In writing about how technology has changed college radio in 2010, Jennifer Waits noted:

With the proliferation of digital music and MP3 players, it's not uncommon for some college radio DJs to arrive just in time for their shows only to plug an MP3 player or laptop into the board in order to play a pre-programmed playlist for the listening audience. This works to rip the "soul" out of the college radio experience and even makes for a more listless sounding DJ because the physical aspects of doing a show have

⁷⁶ Yee, interview, April 6, 2009.

been removed. With their music already lined up, they don't have to investigate or navigate the station's record library in order to do a show.⁷⁷

I have seen this, too. The DJs with shows before and after mine broadcast from their laptops. They may still be broadcasting spontaneously, but their playlists are limited to their own music collections. Meanwhile, the 45,000 vinyl records at WMUC's library, which is the largest public record collection east of the Mississippi, remain under lock and key. Students need to get permission to use them, a step that many of us do not take as it involves coordinating a time to meet with the music librarian. Even the vast and readily available CD collection seems to go largely underused.

In *Site and Sound*, Kruse found that indie music narratives tended to view the 1990s as a time of college radio's decline. This was due in large part to its increased presence in mainstream media, which many perceived led to compromises in programming. I have found similar sentiments in present-day discussions of college radio, particularly in the comments section of related online articles, in which the statement "college radio is dead" often punctuates arguments over the lost spirit of freeform. But the internet is not the first major technological change to impact college radio, nor will it be the last. Students will always adopt new listening and broadcasting habits accordingly, and it's inevitable that some will be less active in searching out the obscure music that college radio has been known for. At the same time, more students may feel equipped to experiment with broadcasting based on the portability of their own music collections.

⁷⁷ Jennifer Waits, "Technology and the Soul of College Radio," *PopMatters* online, April 10, 2010, accessed April 3, 2011, <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/124160-technology-and-the-soul-of-college-radio>.

From a broader perspective, the cultural value of college radio may be more dependent on the fact that they are stagnant and fluid in ways opposite to mainstream media. Because their licenses are owned by colleges and universities, college radio stations do not experience the frequent changes in ownership, nor the periods of media conglomeration that commercial stations frequently undergo. Conversely, the turnover in college radio staffs tends to be higher than that of commercial stations since the average career of a college student is usually four years. Therefore, the personnel changes often, but the age demographic does not. College radio maintains its identity as an institution of transition, an outlet for middle-class youths to seek out distinction at a time in life when social and musical experimentation become important defining elements in the process of self-discovery. For this reason, college radio stations remain ideal social spaces for independent music.

In Chapter Six, I examine present-day independent social spaces in live settings. In a series of five ethnographic case studies, I explore how musicians and audience members structure independence in live performance. Each case study showcases an artist or band at various stages of career development, and include a discussion of how each one negotiates his or her independence in the present-day music industry.

Summary

This chapter concerned the ways in which internet culture has impacted independent music communities, by creating new contexts for independent music that are both more fluid and more formalized. I began with a discussion of the state of the music industry in the final decade of the twentieth century, which fueled the dramatic changes

in consumer behavior following the development of digital music files. I showed how the music industry became decentralized as a result, and struggled to adapt to the practices of file-sharing and other forms of free distribution that changed the cultural value of music.

Using Chambers' concept of heterotopic spaces to interpret the overlapping nature of virtual social fields, I examined the ways in which music blogs, file-sharing sites, social networks and online radio streaming have enabled individuals and independent communities to locate and relocate themselves within the social fields of internet culture. Whereas blogs such as Stereogum and Pitchfork, as well as Triple-A noncommercial radio stations, have comprised formal, canonized contexts for independent music, YouTube functions as a more fluid repository in which independence is realized through individual innovation and experimentation. Likewise, college radio stations continue to function as unique local institutions with freeform formats that encourage discovery and distinction.

Chapter Six: Live Performance

"We play at ridiculous tempos, screaming and hollering, seemingly doing musically questionable, possibly atrocious things by pop culture standards, but if you're there and involved with it there's raw excitement. You can't package that."

-Jesse Fiske of The Hackensaw Boys

Throughout the previous chapters, I have tried to emphasize the importance of live performance in all popular music. Both the jazz and blues labels in the 1920s, and the indie labels in the 1940s approached the production of music by observing the communication between audiences and musicians at live shows. Radio announcers and disc jockeys also embraced performative methods in their broadcasts, whether they were portraying an actual live event as in *Your Hit Parade*, simulating one as in *Make-Believe Ballroom*, or cultivating new aesthetic standards for delivery and presentation, as Al Benson and Tom Donahue did in their respective eras. The punk and postpunk bands of the 1970s and 80s built their audiences through constant touring. And even in the virtual world of cyberspace, music consumers have consistently demonstrated their interest in viewing live performance, particularly on YouTube where videos of concert footage are among the most widely viewed and shared.

In this fifth and final chapter, I present a series of ethnographic case studies, and examine independent music performance from several perspectives. First, I discuss the significance of live performance in popular music, and outline some general characteristics of indie concerts. I define what independence means in the twenty-first century based on my own involvement in indie music communities, as well as the definitions I've received from audience members, mediators and artists. Next, I describe five performances I have attended in the past three years. They range in both venue size

and artist career stages, from a small punk show before a few dozen college students at WMUC, to a sold-out concert by the indie rock band Spoon at the 930 Club in D.C. I will contextualize each performance with discussions of the artists' backgrounds, reception and career paths in order to illustrate the ways in which each of them negotiates his or her independence in the present-day music industry.

One of the pervading assumptions in music scholarship is that the values and ideologies of popular music are more strongly tied to sound recording than on the stage. In his study of "liveness," Philip Auslander points out that "mediatized forms enjoy far more cultural presence and prestige—and profitability—than live forms."¹ This is true, but slightly misleading. Although media companies do profit from the production and distribution of mediatized forms of music, successful touring artists often make the bulk of their profit through performance. However, as popular music studies tend to focus on technology, industry, politics and subcultures, performance is often treated as a means to an end. In describing the record as "the predefining text" for a performance, Alan Durant claimed that performance became "largely advertisement for record, in an inversion of earlier conventions according to which performance was the primary or dominant audience relation, when songs were considered to be tested out for response after being devised in relative isolation and 'solitude.'"² While album promotion is indeed a part of it, live performance of popular music does not necessarily function primarily as a marketing tool. Seiler explained:

Though the recorded commodity has superseded live performance as the essential medium of artistic communication...the concert stage remains a site of authentication at which an artist's music is gauged by audiences as

¹ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 162.

² Alan Durant, *The Conditions of Music* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), 230.

legitimate, pleasurable and therefore worth buying in record form. Live performance also functions to affirm the audience's commitment to musical artists and what they and their music represent.³

In my experience with indie music, live performance constitutes the most important means of communication between artist and audience for two reasons. The first concerns the age-old tradition of valuing performance as the most authentic form of musical expression. Of the indie musicians I've personally spoken with, and the multitude of interviews I've read, nearly all of them expressed the desire to earn their livelihood from performing, and claimed to craft their repertoire in deference to the idea of playing before a live audience. Secondly, concerts enable a direct interaction between musicians and audiences, cultivating what Ian MacKaye referred to as "reciprocating energy." The tension that exists between audience expectations and the possibility of the unexpected and unpredictable "lends the live performance the energy and excitement lacking in 'mediatized' performance."⁴ Furthermore, the real-time evolution of a performance context, what Auslander calls "pure originating condition," signifies authenticity.

In Chapter Three, I described Fugazi's approach to performance using Thomas Turino's outline for three general characteristics of participatory traditions, which include the function to inspire or support participation and social bonding, and which dialectically grew out of participatory values and practices.⁵ From a broader perspective, musical performance may be understood as a social process enacted between performers and audiences. Victor Turner heralded this conception in his 1977 study of ritual, and

³ Seiler, "The Commodification of Rebellion," 205.

⁴ Ian Inglis, *Performance and Popular Music: History, Place and Time* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), xv.

⁵ Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 36.

subsequent anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Dwight Conquergood have applied it to their interpretations of culture. For Conquergood, the performance paradigm “privileges particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency and ideology.”⁶ Performances may therefore be interpreted as physical and spatial enactments of social fields, signified as moments in which audiences and musicians actively co-construct the cultural and social value of the music.

Independent music performances are diverse in setting, artists, style, structure, and audience. The smallest shows may take place in a tiny basement club before a crowd of six people, and the largest at a major outdoor venue that hosts a crowd of 20,000. Artists cover a gamut between internationally famous or known only among the most intimate local communities. Genres and styles also span a wide spectrum, though most articulate with identifiable popular music idioms in ways that defy mainstream standards. And audiences range from high school and college-age fans to fortysomething adults with families. Social interactions, behaviors and expectations are therefore drastically varied depending on these circumstances.

Popular music continues to be a generationally divided cultural form, which is why I believe the oldest indie music fans are the ones who came of age during the first modern era of independence in the late 1970s and 80s. My own taste in indie music mirrors that of my age and class demographic; the artists whose music I find most aesthetically appealing tend to articulate with the styles of popular music with which I grew up. This refers to eras both within and beyond my years—I was not alive in the

⁶ Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” *Communication Monographs* 59 (June 1991): 187.

1960s, but music from that period is very much a part of my experience due to its incarnation as “classic rock” in commercial radio as well as parental influence.

My tastes have also been shaped by my classical music training, as I favor bands and artists who play a variety of instruments beyond the typical bass/guitar/drums combination. Many of these artists are themselves classically trained, and use the flexibility of independence to write songs that stretch the limits of popular music idioms in particular ways. For example, they often use triple-meter time signatures, which are not considered “radio-friendly,” and include pianos, horns, strings and wind instruments in their ensembles. I also have more generalized appreciations for versatility, virtuosity and discipline and, no matter what genre, I am attracted to musicians whose creation and innovation is built on a lifelong mastery of skills. I expect their live performances to sound better than their recordings, and the experience is more rewarding for me when they do. Audience behavior is a factor as well, and I enjoy myself more if I sense that the crowd is appreciating the music from a perspective similar to mine. My friend Heather M. also noted that it is less about socializing than it is about an unspoken understanding:

I’m past the age I associate with the people surrounding me at shows (late teens, early twenties)...But I also feel that the audience in general is people who want to support the artistic expression, who feel a sense of joy or rage or other vicarious emotion upon hearing the music. And those are the people I’m connected to, and when I meet, I feel a sort of kinship. For someone who doesn’t often feel that kinship with people or setting, that is very important to me.⁷

But however authentic a concert experience feels, it is as much a part of the music industry as recordings are, and cannot be divorced from the realities of business.

⁷ Heather MacDonald, e-mail communication, July 10, 2009.

According to David Byrne, former lead singer of Talking Heads and denizen of the music industry for more than thirty years, “performing is a thing in itself, a distinct skill, different from making recordings. And for those who can do it, it’s a way to make a living.”⁸ But navigating the changing music business is part of the process, and Byrne has recently dedicated himself to helping artists forge sustaining careers. In a 2008 article, he outlined six viable models for doing business, an unprecedented variety that he claims is good for both musicians and audiences—musicians have more options for making a living, and audiences have a greater volume of more interesting music available to them. At one end of the business spectrum is the 360 deal, in which “every aspect of the artist’s career is handled by producers, promoters, marketing people and managers.”⁹ This does not guarantee long-term success so much as it guarantees exposure in nearly all mainstream outlets. At the other end of the spectrum is the self-distribution model “where music is self-produced, self-written, self-played and self-marketed.”¹⁰ Internet and digital technology have made this possible, since recording, manufacturing and distribution costs have declined to almost zero. The advantage is complete creative control, although it also means “jamming econo,” a phrase coined by the hardcore bands of the 1980s who toured by living out of their vans. In between are standard distribution, licensing, profit-sharing and manufacturing and distribution (M&D) deals, each with varying degrees of artist autonomy.

For independent labels, running a successful business is contingent on working within the constraints of a sensible budget. Merge Records, founded in 1989 by Laura

⁸ David Byrne, “David Byrne’s Survival Strategies for Emerging Artists and Megastars,” *Wired Magazine* online, August 13, 2008, accessed April 2, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/entertainment/music/magazine>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Ballance and Mac McCaughan of the band Superchunk, is currently one of the most successful indie labels in the U.S. They are known as a solid cultural institution that maintains integrity and solvency through their level-headed approach to producing and distributing music. McCaughan attributes the recent success of indie labels to the emergence of an independent distribution system in the 1990s, particularly the Alternative Distribution Alliance (ADA), which “provides placements for independent artists in film, television, commercials, video games, audio compilations, and custom products.”¹¹ Since its inception in 1993, the ADA has been instrumental in getting music by independent artists in major retail outlets, which until then were dominated by the majors.¹² McCaughan also cites indie labels’ financial flexibility as a key to sustainability:

We’ve always been super conservative about the way we spend money. Again, that goes back to being flexible. The last M. Ward record sold like 50,000 copies, 60,000 copies, so we’re going to look at—when we’re working on his next record we’re going to do the advertising budget differently than we will for the next Rosebuds record [the last of which] sold 7,000 copies...Usually we work with artists that are, first of all, artists first, and not looking to have a career necessarily, but then if it happens that’s great, but I think also artists living in the real world, and that’s how we’ve always had to live in order to survive.¹³

This model not only enables Merge to stay afloat, but it gives artists room to grow and develop their sound without being beholden to minimum sales requirements. Neither does Merge rely on large-selling hits to support their overhead (in twenty-one years their staff has grown from two to twelve), but scales their budgets according to the expectation that most albums will sell a few thousand copies.

¹¹ The website for Alternative Distribution Alliance, accessed April 8, 2011, www.ada-music.com.

¹² Warner owns the majority shares of ADA, a troubling factor for some indie purists.

¹³ Byrne interview with McCaughan, “David Byrne’s Survival Strategies,” August 13, 2008.

McCaughan's point about working with musicians who are "artists first" also alludes to long-held beliefs in indie communities that artistic integrity means eschewing financial gain. As business entities, labels like Merge have provided a model for achieving sustainable success that is not predicated upon the continual pursuit of expansion, a practice that in many ways flies in the face of traditional American capitalism by avoiding mass cultural appeal. This has also helped artists redefine what it means to be successful in American popular music. In the past, this has usually meant selling millions of albums and becoming a celebrity, and there was little choice between toiling in obscurity or signing with a major label. That began to change when independent labels in the 1980s made a virtue of the DIY ethic and cultivated symbolic capital by shunning economic gain. But even then, there was no independent distribution system solid enough to offer long-term support, and the "sell-out" option loomed large for indie bands. Now, however, as the number of approaches to independence has expanded, cultural agency is no longer strictly defined by artistic penury but the ability to make informed business decisions that favor sustainability and creative growth. This shift has also influenced present-day understandings about what indie music is.

What is Indie Music?

Since the 1990s, indie rock and indie pop have been genre categories in the music industry. The consumer resource All Music Guide, which was founded in 1991 first in print and then online, has separate definitions for both, although each is connected to the idea of resistance. Indie rock is described in terms of excess and its aesthetic incompatibilities with mainstream popular music:

the music may be too whimsical and innocent; too weird; too sensitive and melancholy; too soft and delicate; too dreamy and hypnotic; too personal and intimately revealing in its lyrics; too low-fidelity and low-budget in its production; too angular in its melodies and riffs; too raw, skronky and abrasive; wrapped in too many sheets of Sonic Youth/Dinosaur Jr./Pixies/Jesus & Mary Chain-style guitar noise; too oblique and fractured in its song structures; too influenced by experimental or otherwise unpopular musical styles. Regardless of the specifics, it's rock made by and for outsiders.¹⁴

To be an “outsider” in this context does not necessarily carry a cultural or social stigma, but refers to a self-selected category characterized by resistance to the mainstream. As Kruse points out, “difference is crucial in the formation of subcultural identity, in positioning oneself against dominant cultural forms and practices.”¹⁵ Similarly, the category of “indie pop” embraces the ironic juxtaposition of independence and popularity:

Indie rock's more melodic, less noisy, and relatively angst-free counterpart, Indie Pop reflects the underground's softer, sweeter side, with a greater emphasis on harmonies, arrangements, and songcraft. Encompassing everything from the lush orchestration of chamber pop to the primitive simplicity of twee pop, its focus is nevertheless more on the songs than on the sound, and although both indie pop and indie rock embrace the D.I.Y. spirit of punk, the former rejects punk's nihilistic attitude and abrasive sonic approach.¹⁶

For Simon Reynolds, indie pop's oppositionality in the 1980s was defined by its self-conscious construction of innocence and naivete that was about “stylized authenticity.”¹⁷

Nowadays, the term indie is frequently used as a descriptor for many different styles of popular music such as indie folk, indie country and indie hip hop. This carries two implications, the first being that the music is released on an independent label, and

¹⁴ “Indie Rock,” accessed April 5, 2011, www.allmusic.com.

¹⁵ Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 116.

¹⁶ “Indie Pop,” accessed April 5, 2011, www.allmusic.com.

¹⁷ Simon Reynolds, “Against Health and Efficiency: Independent Music in the 1980s,” in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses*, ed Angela McRobbie (Boston: Unwin Hymen, 1988), 252.

the second being that the artist had more freedom to challenge the boundaries of his or her particular style than a major label artist. However, the term indie may continue to apply to an artist that has migrated to a major label, which suggests that his or her stylistic approaches are still in some ways independent of the mainstream.

In each of my interviews, I solicited definitions for the term “indie music.” Most people first defined it in its traditional sense as an artist or album distributed by an independent label. After that, their definitions took a variety of forms. Jessica C., a 37-year old American indie fan living in Britain, based her definition on indie’s relative lack of popularity:

I have a very wide definition of indie music. It should not be played on top 40 radio every hour on the hour. It should be music that is actually played (and preferably written) by the artists themselves as opposed to digitally produced a la Britney Spears. I generally fall a bit out of love with great indie artists when they become too mainstream. I like the acts better when I know I can see them play in a small venue as opposed to a large soulless arena.¹⁸

Scott Maxwell noted that the term indie cannot describe a genre, as it originally referred to fringe rock and roll of the 1980s and 90s. He sees the word indie being used “more in the context of basically off-kilter pop music, which is designed to be odd or uncomfortable for people who go in with pre-defined expectations.”¹⁹ Likewise for Chris Berry, who said:

I don’t even think the definition of indie has anything to do with music or a style of music, I think it has to do with an aesthetic decision to avoid taking part in ‘battling the corporate music ogre.’ That’s the kind of attitude that indie has in general. That we don’t really understand, we don’t really like the way the regular music industry works, so we’re going to do something different.²⁰

¹⁸ Jessica Cobb, e-mail, April 16, 2009.

¹⁹ Maxwell, interview, November 13, 2008.

²⁰ Chris Berry, interview, November 23, 2008.

Mike Azerrad also denied the connection between indie and genre:

I just don't think it's a musical genre. It's an approach, it's a sensibility. That sensibility can manifest itself in many ways. That's the whole point of it.²¹

And Halley C., a 30-year-old indie fan, acknowledged her conflicting ideas:

A basic definition would be music that isn't signed to a mainstream label (or any label), and often is thematically or musically different (in any number of ways) from whatever is happening in the mainstream version of that genre. It frequently has smaller, more niche audiences, but I don't think that that's entirely unique to indie music. Or you could use the term on entirely aesthetic lines and it could discard everything I said above. Or it could be about the community created at a venue when a certain 'indie' band is playing. In short, I have no idea.²²

I disagree with Halley's self-deprecating final statement—she does have some idea about what indie music means, as did all my interview subjects. Whether they were about aesthetic incompatibility with mainstream popular music, lack of popularity, deviance from the expected, avoidance of corporate control, or a small collective of appreciative fans, all the above definitions may be incorporated into the following statement: Independence is an approach to the creation, distribution and consumption of music, characterized by a conscious act of distinction that articulates in some way with ideologies of community, authenticity and/or autonomy. As we shall see, this approach is subjectively understood and constructed by individual members of independent communities.

²¹ Azerrad, interview, October 30, 2009.

²² Halley Cohen, e-mail, April 24, 2009.

The Lampshades and Birth Control at WMUC

On Saturday, March 11, 2009, I attended a concert at WMUC. The Going Out Gurus, a collective of *Washington Post* staff writers who feature weekly recommendations for local entertainment, posted an announcement for it the preceding Thursday:

Who doesn't love coming up with a silly band name? Come on, like you haven't spent an hour or six on that Facebook game where you find a random Wikipedia entry, end of a quote and Flickr picture to create a fake band's album cover. Apparently coming up with a band name based on the name of everyone's favorite drummer is pretty popular, too, with Atlanta's Gringo Star and Austin's Ringo Deathstarr getting into the act, in a devious plot to confuse bloggers around the country. The latter makes a righteous racket, going with the can't-miss approach to live performance in which the band turns everything up as loud as it goes and blasts away for less than 30 minutes. Hey, if it worked for the Jesus and Mary Chain, why not? That seems to be the band's general M.O—listen to "In Love" on the band's MySpace page for proof. If your eardrums have been treating you bad lately and you want to punish them, head to our old stomping grounds of WMUC at the University of Maryland to catch the band, along with locals Flying Eyes and Pittsburgh's Lampshades.²³

I arrived at the station close to 9:30, and despite the published starting time of 8:30, the first band still hadn't started. I paid my \$5 entry fee and wandered around for a little while. I noticed Ebbie's office was open, so to kill time I went in there and helped myself to the "High Priority" CD review shelf, and emerged with five new albums: The Black Ghosts, Enemy, Lady Sovereign, Bell X1 and a 2-disc set of the winners of the Independent Music Awards. For this, I can already count the experience as a success.

The station has a small lobby with three faded couches, staff mailboxes and a few tables that are usually strewn with flyers and random CDs. At 9:30, it was only slowly filling up with a handful of student-aged attendees and band members who were still

²³ Going Out Gurus, March 5, 2009, accessed April 1, 2011, www.washingtonpost.com.

hauling in their equipment from the loading dock downstairs. The doors in the narrow hallway of the station's offices were open, which shows a significant degree of trust, and smaller groups gathered in them to visit and drink beer. There is a strict no-alcohol policy at WMUC, but it seems to be tolerated during live shows. The station's student staff is responsible for the behavior of their guests, and will have to answer to the university administration if problems arise.

There was a merchandise table set up in the front room with a variety of 7" vinyl records and CDs for sale. I examined a record by the band Birth Control, and caught the attention of a tall, plain-looking man leaning in the doorway sipping a beer. "What does it smell like?" he asked when he saw me sniffing it. I was thinking it would need to spend thirty years in someone's basement in order to acquire that scent of the discs I deal with at the broadcasting archive, but I didn't say so. I introduced myself instead. He said his name was Sean and we struck up a conversation.

Sean is 27 years old, and lives in Philadelphia where he attends community college, and plays in several bands. He's been doing the latter since he was 13. Sean is the drummer for Birth Control, who were scheduled to play that night, though they had not been included in the *Post* announcement. I asked him how he got started in music. "It's something I have to do," he shrugged, though he does not expect to make a living at it. But he and his band do sell recordings. They are on an indie label called Fashionable Idiots, based in Minneapolis. The members of Birth Control had heard good things about it and liked some of the other bands on it, so they sent the label some demos, and soon heard back with an offer. They cut the 7" single that I had examined on the merch table and distributed 3,400 copies throughout the U.S. In his 2009 book on the history of

Merge Records, John Cook explained the cultural and economic significance of the 7-inch:

From a practical and economic standpoint, the 7" vinyl single is still the only inexpensive way a person can document music in any sort of durable fashion. So it is the people's medium, the punk rock kid's and the garage band's and the home-taping hermit's medium...[B]ut finally it is not about the colored wax and the limited edition, because it is about the adrenalin rush, the conceptual greatness of the 7" single: What can you do in three-and-a-half minutes that will make us get up and put the needle in the groove time and again? The single must be a distillation of one's powers, the most exciting slice of noise a person can cram between the lip of the disc and the edge of the label...Thanks for listening.²⁴

Birth Control had thus established their first indie success—Sean proudly told me that almost all 3,400 copies of their single had sold.

Our conversation then turned to the internet, and we discussed the impact it has had on artists. One issue that has arisen with internet culture is album leaks, meaning an album not yet completed and mastered by the artist is distributed online as an unauthorized bootleg. Sean said he hopes this never happens to him. “Why not?” I asked, “It shows there's interest in you and besides, it's free marketing.” He disagreed, saying that for him it is important to control his own creative product, and having part of the process publicized puts artists in a vulnerable position. He said it ruins the mystique of being in a band, and this is something he feels strongly about, not just as a musician, but as a fan as well. Sean once saw one of his favorite bands rehearsing and it made him uncomfortable. The “mystique” idea speaks to presentational expectations in popular music, and the ways in which artists are often interpreted as conduits of inspiration. For some, glimpsing the process of creation takes something away from the euphoria of first hearing a band in a polished context. Whether that context is an album or a performance,

²⁴ John Cook, *Our Noise: The Story of Merge Records, the Indie Label that Got Big and Stayed Small* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2009), 25.

seeing the production process entails bearing witness to draft versions, arguments and mistakes that would spoil the illusion of spectacle.

We segued into the subject of popularity, which Sean noted can peak faster now than ever, thanks to the internet's viral publicity. He used the band Vampire Weekend as an example. In 2008, they released their first self-titled, full-length album, which combined cheerful, Afro-pop influenced indie pop with lyrical literary references. Sean pointed out that after the album came out, the band went on tour, performed on late night television shows, became wildly popular and then seemed to disappear in the short span of about four months. I surmised that it probably took longer for Vampire Weekend to build a steady following at Columbia University where they formed, though I understood his point. Since distribution is now instantaneous, fame spreads more widely and quickly than ever before. And it seems to fade just as fast.

Azerrad acknowledged some of the detrimental effects that this can have on aspiring musicians. Whereas bands would take months and even years to build up a following in decades past, the internet has allowed them to get immediate attention more rapidly and by more people:

They don't have the time to develop in a low-pressure environment to get their stage show together, and literally get their act together before they're seen on the next level, and some bands simply aren't ready to be seen and they get this flash-paper buzz. It takes a long time for a band get to be good...The only good way to have a good live show is to play together a lot.²⁵

This calls attention to a common belief in indie communities about the authenticity of performance. The "next level" alludes to upgrades in venues and audiences that can only be reached through the hard work necessary to create a presentation appropriate for those

²⁵ Azerrad, interview, October 30, 2009.

contexts. Although Vampire Weekend continues to cultivate a strong and promising career, the points that Sean and Azerrad made underscore a belief that performance is an ongoing process of growth and development. As liberating as the internet has been for consumers and musicians alike, it can also invade this process. And being able to play a “good a live show” resonates with the idea that performance may be more indicative of an artist’s skill than a sound recording, which can be manipulated in countless ways.

The station was becoming more crowded and Sean excused himself to get ready for their show. With the number of attendees growing to several dozen, the space began to resemble a small rock venue. This crowd might be described as “alternative” and it was not always possible to discern musicians from audience members. Mostly, people wore grungy, faded t-shirts and torn jeans, individualized with creative accessories such as combat boots, hemp jewelry, scarves and chains. I overheard one male student telling a group of fascinated young women how he pieced together his colorful outfit from garage sales and the Salvation Army. But mostly people are talking about music, what they’re listening to, who’s putting out a new album, which live shows they’ve seen.

The first band to perform that night was a trio called the Lampshades. I remembered seeing an album of theirs in the New Bin at the station some months ago. They performed in the live room, which is next to the on-air studio and is about the size of a small living room. There is no stage in the live room; the instruments, microphone and amplifiers were set up near the furthest wall, leaving the remaining floor space for the crowd. The room was dark and appeared full when about sixteen people started dancing in it. This entailed both slam dancing, where audience members ricochet off one another at random, and pogo dancing, which simply means jumping up and down in time

to the music. The lead singer was physically animated, too, as he lurched back and forth in broad movements while he sang. In between songs, the room became relatively still as the band members prepared for the next song. They engaged in casual and playful banter with their audience while they made the necessary equipment adjustments. The friendly exchange, as well as the lack of any physical boundaries between the band and the audience, created a very egalitarian atmosphere.

From my own perspective, the Lampshades looked and sounded pretty good. The vocalist wasn't all that strong, but they had a solid rhythmic sense. In the last song they played, they made good use of tension and release by shifting to different tempos at well-paced intervals, which went down very well with the audience whose energy seemed to peak in that moment, and they nodded and jumped in affirmation during the changes. While this tiny house show at WMUC was probably the smallest formal concert I'd ever seen, it nonetheless resembled other rock performances I've attended. I was first impressed by the way in which the Lampshades exhibited that level of professionalism to which Azerrad referred that can only come from experience. To my ears, their sound was relatively unpolished, but they presented themselves with enough energy and self-assurance to make every aspect of their performance seem deliberate. They also played with respect to their audience by encouraging a participatory atmosphere. It was rather remarkable, in fact, the way this small group of people who were once freely milling about the station seemed to suddenly organize themselves into a performance structure. Even though it involved scheduling and set-up, there was sense of spontaneity that came from their collective effort to create a live musical space for themselves. And their connection was evident in the matched level of enthusiasm for the music.

When Lampshades finished, the crowd momentarily scattered and Birth Control immediately began setting up. The station was so crowded by this point that the heat was becoming unbearable. I did not plan on staying much longer, but I wanted to hear at least one song. Sean had told me that he would be singing instead of playing drums tonight, and I was curious to find out what he sounded like. However, the fact that their soundcheck was itself ear-splittingly loud sent up a warning flag. Then, they started playing. Maybe playing isn't the word, much like singing is not what really Sean was doing. It could be more accurately characterized as banging and screaming. I was dismayed, but not surprised. Any band that identifies as punk is likely going to take certain elements to an extreme, especially volume. The little crowd in there liked it well enough, but I could not stay. It hurt my ears, the college crowd isn't really my social group and it was getting late.

Food Will Win the War at the Velvet Lounge

"I'd just like to be able to pay my rent by playing music."

-Rob Ward, Food Will Win the War

In August of 2009, I received an e-mail from Rob Ward, lead singer and co-founder of the band Food Will Win the War (FWWTW), inviting me to come to their concert at the Velvet Lounge in D.C. I later found out that he got my name and contact information from the WMUC website when he saw that I had played a track from their new album on my show. (I had been initially intrigued by the name of their band.) I agreed to come to the concert if he would sit down for an interview afterwards. He concurred, and on August 17, I showed up at the venue.

The Velvet Lounge is a small, three-story bar in D.C.'s U-street corridor that regularly features DJs and musicians of all types. Richard Harrington of the *Washington Post* described it as a cozy haven for up-and-comers:

Around the corner from the 9:30 club and DC9, this tiny oasis features a downstairs bar and upstairs performance space barely bigger than a walk-in closet. It's home to noisy, edgy, experimental bands, many local but a good number of them out-of-towners looking to get a foothold in Washington.²⁶

The Velvet Lounge is indeed a dungeon-like space, as the stage area's capacity is only 40. This was my first time visiting and I liked its dive bar personality right away. My taste in taverns mirrors my taste in music—I much prefer independently-owned underground dives than spacious, loud pick-up bars with a dozen flashing TV screens and large parties. I got a mixed drink in a red plastic cup and wandered upstairs to wait for the show to begin.

The few people mingling in the small, dark upstairs room seemed to know one another, and spoke of Rob and his bandmates with a familiarity that indicated they were friends, and possibly family. Ruth Finnegan observed that the relationship between amateur musicians and their audiences is often more intimate than more large-scale events:

Many local audiences were made up mainly or wholly of the performers' friends, relatives and supporters (a few bands even had their own fan groups who followed them from performance to performance), and the experience of the audience was naturally coloured by these personal relationships as well as by the more general conventions... Thus, there was simultaneously the idea that a performance—to be a proper

²⁶ Richard Harrington, Velvet Lounge Review, *Washington Post Going Out Guide* online, November 2, 2007, accessed March 13, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/profile/velvet-lounge,797042.html>.

‘performance’—had to be in some sense ‘public’ and the fact that much of the audience was actually recruited on a personal basis.²⁷

While I would not characterize FWWTW as amateurs, given the musical backgrounds of the band members and the fact that they did get paid for their performance, audience recruitment is something that many aspiring musicians do in order to fill venues. In independent communities, attending a friend’s or family member’s show is a way of showing support, and also fills a role that live performance is dependent upon. As with the space at WMUC, there was no stage at the Velvet Lounge, only a few microphones and amplifiers that set up in the front of the room nearest the windows that overlook U Street. The communal atmosphere was therefore similar, with the audience and band members connected on personal bases, as well as the shared desire to help create a “proper” public performance.

The band members gradually filled in the space with their instruments—two keyboards, drums, bass, guitar and fiddle—while audience members trickled in. The crowd reached a healthy but intimate size of about thirty when the band came upstairs and began to play. One of the keyboard players was a woman, which is something I’m always glad to see as there isn’t, nor has there ever been, nearly enough female representation in popular music. FWWTW’s folk rock style balanced the acoustic and electric instruments, and they demonstrated their versatility by trading instruments between songs. Rob had a smooth baritone voice that contrasted pleasantly with the occasional backup singing and harmonization of his female bandmate. I felt that the fiddle and keyboards were their best assets, being that those two instruments distinguished them from the basic bass-guitar-drums rock band formula. And while their

²⁷ Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 152.

songs used familiar pop music idioms, such as verse-chorus form and AABA structures, they also had a lot of unexpected and creative chordal and rhythmic changes. It made perfect aesthetic sense when they cued up the Pixies song “Where’s My Mind?” which suited FWWTW’s eclectic instrumentation, and made productive use of their full dynamic range. The Pixies were known for switching between loud, heavy choruses and stripped-down verses, and FWWTW emulated that very well. In *Our Band*, Azerrad noted that the Replacements were one of the first independent bands to play covers, “as a way of legitimizing themselves and aligning themselves with their roots.”²⁸ Rob would later tell me the Pixies were one of his biggest influences.

The band performed eight songs, a number of which I recognized from their album. But they all sounded better live. The musicians’ on-stage chemistry heightened my anticipation for the surprising twists and solos. The liveness of their sound brought a clarity and depth to the songs that the recording had been unable to capture. I heard more layers and nuances, which was aided by the fact that I could also see the instruments in their physical incarnation and could anticipate their sound. And the fact that they were well-received by an enthusiastic audience made it a more rewarding experience for me. They weren’t quite as animated as the WMUC crowd, likely due to the fact that they’re slightly older, but they showed their appreciation by swaying, stamping their feet, and occasionally clapping in time to the music when the tempo permitted.

Reciprocity between audience and performer, or “the gifting of performance,” was the subject of anthropologist Richard Flores study of Mexicano folk drama in San Antonio, Texas. Flores interprets performance as a product structured by human labor, in which the labor of performance is reciprocated by the labor of gratitude. According to

²⁸ Azerrad, *Our Band*, 214.

him, “the gifting of performance, therefore, is the process of performance and gratitude that engages performers and audience in a cyclical event founded on shared communication, social solidarity and mutual obligation.”²⁹ Rob Ward and FWWTW prepared and enacted musical entertainment for an audience that helped shape its meaning through their responsive reception. The dialectic between the labors of performance and gratitude was based on a mutual understanding of musical styles, patterns and practices, and the resulting performance was framed by the emergence of those social bonds. This concept is applicable to most of the performances I attend, but it was particularly evident in the social field in which I participated at the Velvet Lounge that night. No doubt this was due in part to the fact that I had been solicited to lend a supporting role to the performance.

When FWWTW finished their set, the band members had to quickly move all their instruments and equipment out of the way for the next band. It took nearly thirty minutes, however, because they were continuously accosted by audience members who congratulated them on a good show. When Rob and I finally sat down to talk, we perched ourselves on a concrete planter on the sidewalk in front of the club. It was much quieter out there than inside, but as concert-goers left the club they continued to interrupt us with praises and well wishes for Rob.

Rob Ward is a classically-trained musician, who started learning the viola at the age of six. As a child of a military family, he grew up playing in youth orchestras and chamber groups around the country, attended New College of Florida in Sarasota for two years, took a year off, and finished his bachelor’s degree in musical composition at

²⁹ Richard R. Flores, “‘Los Pastores’ and the Gifting of Performance,” *American Ethnologist* 21 (May 1994): 279.

Columbia in New York. FWWTW is based in Brooklyn, NY, and Ward has been a member since 1995. He has seen a rotating roster of members ever since; the band's first drummer is getting a PhD in economics in Chicago, the first bass player getting his PhD in Chinese literature at Harvard and the female keyboard player from tonight just finished her degree at USF and rejoined the band. However, being in a band is not yet a fulltime job, so Rob also currently works as a computer assistant for a composer named Amal Young who specializes in Western minimalist music and has his own label called Just Dreams.

(Some exiting fans came to bid goodbye: "It was great! By the way, I didn't know you played fiddle! Fuckin' awesome! Y'all gotta start a bluegrass joint now!")

After establishing Ward's musical background, I asked him to define indie music:

RW: To me, indie is just in the strictest sense unsigned, but then it gets complicated with indie labels, but originally my understanding is that's where it came from. And now...you get indie bands who were independent for a long time who are now on a major label, and I guess now it's kind of an attitude or sonority or something, in my mind. Because I still think of Wilco and Death Cab as indie bands even though they're so dreadfully popular.

LS: Why "dreadfully?"

RW: In one sense, I think overproduction is kind of a sad thing. On the other hand, our early recordings that we did with a friend who wasn't at all a producer are really bad and it doesn't do the music justice, so you want a certain degree of production. In my opinion, when Death Cab did *Plans* that was a huge leap as far as how much production you heard, even though their band member is a producer.³⁰

In present-day indie communities, mass appeal is still often perceived as a compromise of artistic autonomy and creative authenticity. However, a number of indie artists who subsequently become mainstream successes are "forgiven" for their crossover when they

³⁰ Rob Ward, interview, August 17, 2009.

demonstrate continued artistic control of their music, as Wilco and Death Cab For Cutie have both done. Furthermore, in the present-day industry where there's a much wider spectrum of success, an indie band's migration to a major does not necessarily translate to a betrayal of community, nor does it mean their hits will be incessantly repeated in all major public outlets (though this is still problematic when artists make dramatic rises to fame). There are more ways for bands to expand their audiences, and many fans are happy to see their favorite artists become more popular.

For Ward, integrity on a recording means maintaining the emotional honesty of a live performance:

I want the recordings to have the same emotion that a live show has. The songs that are written each have their own meaning and their own feel, and I want that feel to be in the recordings and in the live show. The Pixies recorded where they were all playing at once, and a lot of bands do that, especially now with some of the new Americana or folk style bands that are doing a lot of recording in large spaces. They use large spaces like churches, and have this feel of everyone playing together.³¹

Although the frequent rotation of FWWTW does not lend itself to that approach, Ward works to minimize the evidence of production on his recordings. He gave the example of a kick drum sample they used on their previous album, an addition that he and his producer tried to make sound as natural as possible. It's likely his classical training shapes his attitude towards the authenticity of performance and the fear that overproduction will misrepresent their sound. He said he is not averse to signing with a major label, as he believes it would give him the financial ability to devote all his time to working on his music.

Before we parted ways, I asked Ward why he wanted me to come to his performance:

³¹ Ibid.

Basically, we try to reach out to anyone who's involved with college radio or small local papers. It's helpful to come in—since we don't have any marketing budget whatsoever, or any way to spread the word—freeform radio DJs or college radio DJs, which are usually freeform, they take an interest in the music and tend to be very helpful and very supportive in a way that other people can't or aren't.³²

I thought as much, and I was happy to do my part as a member of the Washington, D.C. area's independent communities. It reminded me of Jim Coffman's quote from the mid-1980s, which I cited in Chapter Three: "Indie music...was do whatever you can, call whoever you know. Everybody was just figuring it out for themselves."³³ A lot has changed in indie music since then, but the reliance on self-generated systems of support is still very much intact.

Pop Levi and Gram Rabbit at the Troubadour

In January of 2009, I traveled to Los Angeles to conduct research at the Pacifica Radio Archives and KCRW. On my final night in Santa Monica I attended a concert at the Troubadour, a famous club founded in 1957 as a folk music center. Modeled on a London coffeehouse of the same name, it soon became known as an important launching venue for the careers of many famous artists and musicians. Buffalo Springfield, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell and James Taylor made their L.A. and solo debuts at the Troubadour in the 1960s. Tim Buckley and Miles Davis also recorded live albums there, and in the ensuing decades both musical and comedic artists have given legendary performances that have earned it a reputation as one of the premiere rock n' roll venues in the country. In 2009 NBC recognized The Troubadour as "The Best Venue in L.A."

³² Ibid

³³ Quoted in Azerrad, *Our Band*, 107.

The club is located on Santa Monica Boulevard in West Hollywood, on a tree-lined block near the border of Beverly Hills. Its small size belies its storied history. The main hall has a capacity of only 500, with a narrow showroom balcony and bar making the space feel even more enclosed and intimate. There is a front bar separated from the main hall by a pair of swinging doors, where artists can sell their merchandise, and where people can gather when they're not watching a show.

I knew nothing of the musicians who were playing that night. I learned about the show from listening to KCRW in my rental car. Nic Harcourt, one of my favorite DJs, had announced that Pop Levi and Gram Rabbit would be playing at the Troubadour on Friday, January 9. My partner and I arrived there around 8pm and bought our tickets at the door, which saved us the \$14 in Ticketmaster fees that we would have paid reserving them over the phone. For a club as legendary as the Troubadour, I was pleasantly surprised to find it a very unassuming place. There was no atmosphere of pretense about its history or all the famous people who have played there; there are no velvet ropes marking V.I.P sections or awards showcases. Rather, it has the intimate and inclusive feel of a folk venue. And the crowd that gathered for the show that night looked decidedly indie—men and women my age and younger, wearing all manner of casual clothing from jeans and layered t-shirts to more expressive accessories such as scarves, costume jewelry and colorfully-dyed hair.

The music hall was kept fairly dark during the pre-show interim, with a few colored spotlights illuminating the space with a warm, slightly psychedelic aura. The stage, which is only about 16x24 feet, is a rectangular platform that juts out slightly in the center. A small blue neon sign that says “Troubadour” graces the center of the stage's

frame where the curtains would hang if it were a theatre. When the house lights go down, the sign appears to hang in eerie suspension above the performers.

The main floor was populated with several dozen people at the start of Pop Levi's set. I was instantly drawn into his performance. Levi, whose real name is John, is the frontman for this guitar/bass/drum trio, which he named after himself. He had excellent stage presence; strong, confident, and fully projected towards the audience. This last quality is not to be taken for granted. I once saw a band called Minor White play a very weak show at the Black Cat in D.C. Each of the four band members was too self-absorbed to be presentational, especially the lead singer who kept his body angled slightly away from the audience. Rather than fueling the energy of the venue, they sucked the vitality right out of it. Pop Levi, however, was quite the opposite. Levi, a somewhat diminutive young man, wore a blue velvet suit, and with shoulder length brown hair, dark eyeliner and a relatively high voice he projected an androgynous persona. He played his guitar with the passion and fluid dexterity of Jimi Hendrix, and exuded the eccentric flamboyance of Perry Farrell, the charismatic former frontman of Jane's Addiction. Pop Levi's music had a similar groove, a combination of glam rock and freak folk, with virtuosic flourishes and suspensions punctuated by groove-heavy rhythms. It was hot, foot-stomping music with a great deal of energy, and I was one of many audience members who danced throughout the show.

Following what I thought was too short a set, I observed Levi after the band left the stage, and watched him as he buzzed around unplugging and packing up equipment. I wanted to see if he was Doing It Himself, and so far he seemed to be. I approached him, thanked him for the show and asked if we could speak. He seemed happy to talk to me,

and invited me to follow him upstairs. He led me to a little sideroom off the showroom balcony in the main hall, which was crowded with instrument cases and two large tubs of water and beer. Levi offered me a beer, which I accepted, and we began our conversation. He told me he'd been performing on stage since he was about 11, and that before founding his trio, he had played bass in Ladytron, a British glam rock quartet. He is currently on Ninja Tune, a London indie label, but has aspirations of starting his own label called World Empire, Inc. I asked about his commitment to indie labels, and he replied that he would never go to a major because of their instability. "You could lose your contract just because someone decided to change jobs," he said. Many artists have admitted that majors offer the advantage of financial stability, but staffing inconsistencies have gotten steadily worse in the last decade, and as Levi noted, this can be detrimental to aspiring musicians.

We were soon joined by two other men, whom Levi introduced to me as his bass player and his producer, Travis Huff. Huff was accompanied by his own manager, named Mike Kato. We continued to chat, and Levi explained that he'd gotten an artist visa to work in the U.S. He spent four years in L.A., which he felt was plenty long enough, and wanted to head to New York next. Before that, however, he planned to make an album with Huff at his own private studio, a much more "stripped-down" version than his previous album, much like what he played tonight. Huff had stopped by the sideroom to offer his praises. "The ladies were dancing, man!" he said, acknowledging the level of audience participation as a sign of success. Levi eventually excused himself to tend to the merch tables in the front bar, but said I was welcome to follow him. As I waited for Gram

Rabbit to take the stage, I decided to find Travis Huff and Mike Kato and see if I could learn something about what it means to produce and manage musicians in Los Angeles.

I found the two men sipping beers in the front bar. I asked them if they wouldn't mind talking more about their work, which they were both delighted to do. Huff is a freelance producer in Mt. Washington, a neighborhood in L.A. Kato, his manager, works for BK Entertainment group, which specializes in managing the careers of record producers, song mixers, songwriters, recording engineers and artists. Huff has worked with a variety of artists with the goal of helping them realize their full musical potential. He described hearing a "nugget" when first listening to them, and then working to develop it in the studio. He said the process can be harder going with some artists than others. (He gave the example of having to play every instrument himself on an album by a local band.) According to Huff, indies are fast disappearing, and labels in general no longer hold all the power because people can do it themselves. The amount of money a label puts into an artist now is a fraction of what it used to be because they're not covering as much overhead. As a result, most labels don't employ producers anymore. Artists are expected to request producers themselves. Kato chimed in that producers need to have credibility among artists; album sales are not enough, they need to be known for the quality of their work. He also said that most producers last three to five years in the business because hot ones keep coming along. Finding work means becoming well-known enough to be requested by an artist.

Hennion's belief that for producers, success is "the last extension of an equation into which the public has been incorporated in many forms from the very beginning"

resonates with Huff's and Kato's statements about their role as mediators.³⁴ Writing in 1989, however, Hennion had little or no concept of the ways in which technology would enable anyone to be a producer ten years later. When Kato said that his job of bridging the connection between art and entertainment is what makes a successful band, he acknowledged that the producer's role has changed little since the 1960s. But in talking to the two men, I gathered that the producer's position within the industry has begun to more closely resemble that of musicians. Without the steady support of a major label, producers must ply their trade by consistently demonstrating their distinction among legions of their peers. Their challenge is more than reconciling public tastes with artists' visions, it also involves rapid and continual innovation. Phil Spector secured his signature "wall of sound" style in the 1960s because few others had the resources to imitate him. But staying "hot" in the modern industry now must be an ongoing process of self-reinvention.

As much as I enjoyed speaking with Mike Kato and Travis Huff, I could no longer ignore the elaborate spectacle that was going on behind them in the main hall. I excused myself and returned to the concert. Gram Rabbit, a disco glam rock outfit from Joshua Tree, California, had been performing for some time, and their visual presentation was every bit as striking as their music. They seemed to represent the outrageous glamour of Los Angeles with a theatrical concept that combined a rabbit fetish with tongue-in-cheek pop kitsch and a rebellious, metal edge. The lead singer, who goes by the name Jesika von Rabbit, sported a retro-1950s look in short ruffled dress that was adorned with huge bows. Her platinum blond hair was coiffed into rolled bangs and a long ponytail that hung down her back. Their sound was heavier than Pop Levi's but no less compelling for

³⁴ Hennion, "An Intermediary Between Production and Consumption," 400.

the way they overlapped psychedelic disco with fuzzed out guitars. But Gram Rabbit had a fancier show, which included a video screen backdrop with images of film and TV stars, flashing lights and elaborate costumes. They did a phenomenal cover of Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit," during which one of the band members came on stage dressed as a grotesque-looking heavy metal rabbit whose exaggerated features made it appear much more menacing than playful. When they closed out their set with a song built on the famous guitar riff from Black Sabbath's "War Pigs," I felt that I had witnessed the perfect marriage of art and entertainment.

My experience at the Troubadour illuminated how a mid-level independent community articulates more explicitly with the larger industry. The concert was a more formalized event than the WMUC or Velvet Lounge shows, as evidenced by the higher level of stage production and the presence of industry personnel. However, both the musicians and the representatives of the music business with whom I spoke were approachable and friendly. At more elaborate rock concerts, fame often defines the social divide between musicians and audiences. The former remain sequestered before and after the show, and typically do not casually intermingle with their fans. But, as I have shown, indie performance spaces tend to be more inclusive and community-oriented. Levi's attendance at the merch table exemplified one method by which indie musicians demonstrate their accessibility. I've made the acquaintance of several artists this way, and while I'm aware that they're trying to sell merchandise, I also know that meeting fans and casual concert-goers is an important way for them to connect with their audiences in a less structured social context. Musicians can extend their gratitude and acknowledge the audience's agency in the construction of the performance. At the Black Cat in D.C., for

example, local band These United States ended their set by thanking the crowd and urging us to come talk to them after the show.

As a venue, the Troubadour represents both a folk-oriented communal space and a valuable cultural institution. It was designed for small, intimate events, as invoked by the layout of the main hall where the stage is in close proximity to the dance floor. The location of the front bar in a separate space also encourages socialization outside the concert setting. The availability of tickets on the night of the show suggested that it may not sell out. At an arena or stadium, this might be considered a financial disaster given the expense of putting on a show in such a large space. At a small neighborhood club, however, it is part of their mission to help showcase up-and-coming musicians.

Furthermore, for those of us who bought tickets immediately preceding the show, our audience collectivity was a spontaneous social gathering. And while Pop Levi and Gram Rabbit are still in the early stages of establishing sustainable music careers, being able to perform in a venue with such a legendary history validated their own cultural legitimacy.

Lastly, both bands expressed interest in maintaining a degree of autonomy as they continue to forge their career paths. Levi seemed to have designs on reaching larger audiences, and will likely one day relinquish the tasks of loading his equipment in and out. But he also told me that he intended to work only with independents or his own label in order to avoid the current instabilities of major labels. Two months later, I found out the same was true of Gram Rabbit when I visited their website. I had gone online to look for some of their MP3s, and saw that they were soliciting donations to help produce their next album. Due to “the confused state of the industry,” they decided to record it without the help of a label, and invited fans to contribute, and thereby participate in, their DIY

endeavor. I did not send them any money, but I did purchase *Miracles and Metaphors* when it came out in 2010. I also frequently play their music on my radio show. Their syncopated acoustic dirge “Devil’s Playground” made an excellent addition to my annual Halloween show last year. It contrasted perfectly with Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’ bodacious 1956 R&B version of “I Put a Spell On You,” which ends with his eruption into vocal hysterics. The low humming that opens “Devil’s Playground” dissipated some of that tension without losing the sinister intensity of my playlist. And I was sure to tell my listeners that Alan Freed once paid Screamin’ Jay \$300 to dress as a vampire and climb out of a coffin before performing the song onstage.

The Hackensaw Boys at the 930 Club

Two months after I returned from Los Angeles, my enjoyment of the show at the Troubadour was still a bright memory. I decided to venture out into my own community in search of another spontaneous and rewarding indie experience. I looked at the online schedule for the 930 Club in D.C. and decided to attend a concert featuring an indie folk rock quartet from San Francisco called Tea Leaf Green. The Hackensaw Boys, a bluegrass sextet from Charlottesville, Virginia, were scheduled to open. I first visited their respective MySpace profiles to sample their music. The Hackensaw Boys sounded okay, but since their samples were taken from live shows the sound quality was fairly poor. Tea Leaf Green showed more promise with a well-mixed, but relaxed jam band sound reminiscent of the Grateful Dead’s studio work.

My partner and I bought our tickets at the window that evening to save again on petty charges, although we did have to pay a \$1 “convenience fee.” It was then that I

noticed for the first time that the 930 Club is not labeled; that is, there's no sign anywhere on the outside of the building to indicate it is anything other than a nondescript, brick warehouse on V Street. Only the small window to the ticket office betrays the fact that it is a venue. Although it is nearly thirty years younger than the Troubadour, the 930 Club has an impressive history of its own. It was originally located at 930 F Street when Dody DiSanto and Jon Bowers founded it in the early 1980s. It was a venue for punk and alternative bands, but when they began admitting people as young as sixteen, the 930 Club became D.C.'s center for hardcore.³⁵ Big name postpunk bands performed there, including Nirvana, and it was also the place where Henry Rollins first heard Black Flag before joining the band in New York days later. The club moved to its current location in 1996, which enlarged its capacity from 200 to 1200, and now features all types of music to all ages. Its unassuming, minimalist façade reflects its punk origins. However, when tour buses and crowds begin hemming the sidewalk in front of the entrance, its identity as a rock venue becomes more apparent.

Returning to the club a few hours later, we found the line stretching out onto the sidewalk on either side of the doors. But we had our tickets, so we were promptly admitted. Once inside, we checked in our coats, got a couple drinks and scoped a place to stand on the floor. The club has a three-tiered interior. The main hall is flanked by two bars on opposite sides of the floor. A second-level balcony edges the perimeter of the main hall on three sides, the exception being the wall behind the stage. There is an upstairs bar, as well as a basement bar which is an alternative space to pass the time before a concert begins. The stage itself is the centerpiece of the club, and stands about four feet above the main floor. Finding a good place to stand is important, for when the

³⁵ Hannon, *Punks*, 31.

club fills up it can be difficult to see from the back. The spaces along the balcony and directly in front of the stage usually fill up first.

We had assumed that the showpiece of the concert would be Tea Leaf Green, given that they were headlining and their MySpace tracks had sounded better. Therefore, we barely noticed when the Hackensaw Boys began setting up their equipment and cued up their first songs. We had been conversing and replacing our drinks with casual indifference towards the stage. But we became increasingly engaged in their effusive performance, and were soon standing in rapt attention. As a bluegrass sextet, the Hackensaw Boys play all acoustic instruments: fiddle, guitar, banjo, upright bass, mandolin, harmonica and accordion. They stood in a semicircle around the microphone in the center of the stage, and performed original folk and country-style songs with layered vocal harmonics and lively, fast-paced rhythms. One of the most provocative things about them was how much fun they appeared to be having, particularly as each song gained momentum and they took turns improvising solos. One of the fiddle players, the tallest among them, was the most visually striking with a full beard, fedora and long brown hair that nearly reached his waist. He was exceptionally animated, waving his bow in the air and bouncing vigorously as he sang and fiddled. When he hit a high, sustained note he would squeeze his eyes closed and raise his face towards the heavens. It wasn't long before the Hackensaw Boys had the room bouncing along with them.

The Boys were interviewed in a 2007 article on the website Jambase.com, whose motto is "Go See Live Music!" The band members discussed their approach to music as being predicated on instinct and spontaneity. While they're skilled, professional

musicians, they prefer the excitement of the unexpected over trying to play a flawless show. Band member Jesse Fiske explained:

When we walk onstage or into the crowd – and this is at the very core of what we do – it’s our job to get people’s attention in an entertaining fashion. As entertainers we’re trying to get your attention, hold it and justify it. A good movie can be serious but it should be entertaining as well. You have to have a good story to get your deep, life-affirming message across. That’s what we’re trying to do, tell some entertaining stories that maybe on the side slide in a little of that pathos, ideology and whatnot.³⁶

In most cases, the majority of audience members attending a show at the 930 are there to see the headliner. Opening artists usually play to half-full houses where people are still buying drinks and conversing while only a small, loyal crowd actively observes the opener. But by the end of their set, the Hackensaw Boys had the attention of the entire club. It is worth repeating Fiske’s words, which I cited at the beginning of this chapter, because they raise two vital points about both live performance and independent music: “We play at ridiculous tempos, screaming and hollering, seemingly doing musically questionable, possibly atrocious things by pop culture standards, but if you’re there and involved with it there’s raw excitement. You can’t package that.”³⁷ The lack of certain restrictions in a live setting is what separates performance from sound recordings. Moments of spontaneity can and do occur in recording studios, but they are no longer spontaneous upon repeated listening. Only at a live event can the “raw excitement” of the unexpected be truly experienced. Likewise, independent approaches to popular music have historically granted musicians more freedom of expression. For these reasons, I count the Hackensaw Boys’ performance as one of the best I’ve ever seen.

³⁶ Quoted in Dennis Cook, “Look Out for the Hackensaw Boys!” December 13, 2007, accessed February 26, 2011, <http://www.jambase.com/Articles/12327/Look-Out-For-The-Hackensaw-Boys!>

³⁷ Ibid.

When the house lights came on during the set change I took the opportunity to observe the gathering crowd. I recognized our demographic of thirty-something, middle-class, white men and women, although I did notice that the women seemed particularly groomed in appearance. Then, Tea Leaf Green finally took the stage. I was first impressed by their production, especially their balanced instrumental sound and impeccably-timed silent suspensions. This was followed by a stronger realization that I was suddenly out of place. It happened about halfway through their first song. The lead singer sat on keyboard, in a sheath of white lights that washed out the features of his pale skin and light blond hair. His voice wasn't bad, but the music was so straightforward and bland that it sounded completely devoid of character.

I once heard a friend refer to her exquisite taste in music as a blessing and a curse. She explained that being hyper-receptive to music made for some highly pleasurable experiences, but that others could be equally powerful in their misery. I agree that as a "serious music fan" there is nothing worse than being held captive by a recording or a performance that sounds bad for any number of reasons. And the enthusiasm with which the crowd responded to Tea Leaf Green was as irritating as it was alienating. All around me, perfectly-coiffed ladies and their dates cheered and swayed and sang along to the music.

In a 2004 essay, Simon Frith attempted to answer the question "What is bad music?" He addressed various perceptions of badness, ranging from questionable production techniques, inauthentic performances, unprofessional musicians and thwarted expectations. In the end, he concluded:

Our feelings about a piece of music are, of course, drawn forth by the music: we listen, we respond. But we listen on the basis of who we are and

what we musically know and expect, and we respond according to how and where and why we're listening....What I want to conclude is that the aesthetics of music, therefore, involve a particular mix of individualism and sociability.³⁸

Many of us who participate in independent communities pride ourselves on having exceptional taste and, as internet culture has privileged the expression of individual opinion, there seems to be a predominance of self-righteousness concerning those opinions. I certainly did not begrudge Tea Leaf Green their right to create whatever kind of music they wanted, nor the fans their right to enjoy it. But I could no longer remain a part of the experience, based on the fact that we were perceiving the music in diametrically opposing ways. My partner and I promptly left and went to a jazz club up the street called Utopia. A small trio was just finishing their set, and they played a beautiful rendition of "Round Midnight" at my request.

Spoon at the 930 Club

The first time I heard Spoon was in 2005 during my first semester as a DJ at WMUC. I came across the soundtrack for the indie film *Stranger Than Fiction*, to which Spoon contributed two songs, "The Way We Get By" and "Mathematical Mind." (There were six Spoon songs altogether in the actual film.) Knowing nothing of the band, I listened to "The Way We Get By" and liked it for its upbeat, declamatory, piano-driven rhythm. I kept my ears out for Spoon after that, and a couple years later I had the opportunity to download two of their albums, *Gimme Fiction* and *Kill the Moonlight* from a friend's MP3 database. I first listened to these albums in rotation with a variety of

³⁸ Simon Frith, "What Is Bad Music?" *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 33.

others on my home computer. Anytime a Spoon song came on, my ears perked up. Spoon have a knack for creating catchy songs that don't sound exactly popular. For example, their piano-driven melodies and rhythms are both a signature trait and an indicator that they're not going to appear on Top 40 radio. Lead singer Britt Daniel's phlegmatic yowl, while certainly rock-oriented and influenced, is also not typical of male-lead mainstream bands. The more I listened, the more I liked. I found their lyrics enigmatically charming, and their ability to craft songs that avoid hooks and build effective climaxes through chromatic dissonance particularly soul-satisfying. Once I learned about the band's fierce commitment to independence, I became a full-fledged fan.

Spoon was founded in Austin in 1993 when Daniel was a student at the University of Texas.³⁹ He had joined the college station KRVX and began writing songs and scouting for potential bandmates in the college community. He made the fortuitous acquaintance of a jazz drummer named Jim Eno, and the two of them embarked on a prolific and well-matched musical partnership. With two other musicians, they called themselves Spoon after a 1970s top ten hit in Germany by an experimental band named Can.⁴⁰ Their first recording was a 7-inch vinyl called *The Nefarious EP*, which got airplay on KVRX and helped Spoon build a local following. They subsequently released a full-length album on indie label Matador called *Telephono*. It was critically acclaimed but poorly promoted, and Spoon spent years performing to audiences that were often fewer than two dozen people. When an A&R rep from major label Elektra expressed interest in Spoon, the band considered the offer. But Daniel had serious reservations about signing with a major:

³⁹ Cook, *Our Noise*, 167.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

I knew there was something not to be trusted about the major label system, but I wasn't really sure what. They just seemed to either make a band really huge in a really cheesy way, or else not be able to succeed... And I wanted to be able to make records the way I wanted to, and not have someone come in a say, 'This is great, we just need to have it mixed by' whoever the hot producer is at the time.⁴¹

Spoon decided to take a chance, signed a three-album deal with Elektra, and released *A Series of Sneaks*. However, Daniel's fears were confirmed when Elektra eschewed promoting and supporting Spoon in favor of their more successful artists, and eventually dropped them from the label due to low album sales. For Daniel, who moved to New York and got a job at Citibank, it was a painful and alienating rejection. But rather than abandoning music, he experimented with new sounds, began listening to different styles such as Motown, soul and new wave, and liberated himself from the weight of his own expectations:

The pressure was off. I was just writing [songs] for myself. I doubted we'd ever record them. Maybe we'd play them live or something. So I stopped trying to be indie-rock cool, or play by the rules of what I thought good bands did, or post-punk bands were supposed to do. I felt vulnerable, and that was starting to come out. And I was doing things that I hadn't had the guts to do before. I just felt like, well, if I want to have a piano on a song I can have a piano on a song. Fuck it. Nobody's going to hear it anyway.⁴²

Daniel and Eno remained committed to their band even though the future was uncertain, and continued to make recordings. Their music began to sound more distinctive, and they released a 7-inch vinyl single on indie label Saddle Creek Records. Daniel's angry lyrics on "The Agony of Laffitte" and "Laffitte Don't Fail Me Now" were aimed squarely at Elektra A&R rep Ron Laffitte, who had abandoned them shortly after promising to help them succeed. Spoon began to get attention from a sympathetic indie press that held them

⁴¹ Quoted in *Our Noise*, 169.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 173.

up as an example of the failures of the major-label system. James Hannaham of the *Village Voice* cited the songs as “a necessary step in re-establishing Spoon’s indieness... This bitter move, too kamikaze to be canny, would prove that [Daniel] and his ilk belonged back in the world of upstarts. It reminded us why independent labels exist.”⁴³

Eno built a recording studio at his home in Austin where they recorded their next album, *Girls Can Tell*. Cook describes it as a creative milestone:

Girls Can Tell is a record by a band that has figured something important out. Daniel’s new unselfconscious approach to songwriting was matched by a drastically different sound, swathed in reverb, pianos, Mellotrons and vibraphones. Gone were the onstage sunglasses, the antsy rock guitars, and the affected vocals. They were replaced by patient grooves, Motown hooks, and Daniel’s studied crooning and laid-back falsetto...it’s a record made by people dressed for work.⁴⁴

When Merge Records offered to release the album in 2001, things began to change. College radio played their songs, NPR did a feature on the band’s indie rebirth and Spoon started selling out live shows at major venues. Their next five albums have consecutively sold more copies, and the band’s fan base has grown larger with each release and subsequent tour. Merge’s model for success suits artists like Daniel who have ambitions to make music on their own terms and approach the music business with a professional sensibility that rejects rock star excess. Spoon’s most recent album *Transference* debuted at number four on Billboard’s Top 200. Their two previous albums had debuted at numbers 44 and 10, respectively, signaling a crossover into mainstream success. What this means in the twenty-first century, however, is markedly different than in past eras of popular music.

⁴³ Jim Hannaham, “Impeding the Stampede,” *The Village Voice* online, May 3, 2005, accessed February 28, 2011, <http://www.villagevoice.com>.

⁴⁴ Cook, *Our Noise*, 174.

One of recent methods by which independent artists have supported themselves is through licensing their music for placement in advertisements, television and films. This has been viewed by many fans and even some musicians as problematic in the past, particularly ad placement. When Beatles and Rolling Stones songs appeared in advertising campaigns for Nike and Apple computers, accusations of sellout arose from outraged fans who perceived the move as unnecessarily greedy, or a compromise of artistic integrity. But for independent artists who are not burdened by international fame, writing or licensing music to other media has given them one more way to empower themselves outside the jurisdiction of a major label. Spoon made lucrative business decisions when they licensed their song “I Turn My Camera On” to Jaguar, and “The Way We Get By” to TV show *The OC*, and the film *Stranger Than Fiction*. The exposure not only helped them sell more albums and concert tickets, but also funded their continuing efforts to remain independent of the major label system. Meric Long, frontman of indie rock band the Dodos, has made similar moves. He pointed out that ad placement has “a small impact on your career, and a great impact on your ability to sustain yourself and keep making records.”⁴⁵

Long claims that fan response has been mostly positive, though the practice has garnered some criticism for being so blatantly commercial. Musicians have a variety of perspectives on it, most of which demonstrate that they are under no illusions about what it can mean. “In a perfect world, you’re licensing a song to a product that is as great as your song,” said Christian Rudder, guitarist for indie rock duo Bishop Allen, “but that is never the case. You have to decide whether or not to take the offer, regardless of what

⁴⁵ Quoted in Ze Pequeno, “Selling Out To Survive,” *PopMatters* online, December 4, 2009, accessed February 28, 2011, <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/116256-selling-out-to-survive>.

you may think the ad agency is thinking.”⁴⁶ For Natalia Yanchak of the Dears, the decision must align with her values as a conscious consumer. When a car company offered the band six figures for a song, they turned it down when they learned it was not about alternative energy or hybrids, but “the exact opposite.”⁴⁷ The concept of selling out, which has historically implied that a musician has abandoned his or her artistic integrity in a bid for fame and fortune, has become less relevant in an age when the social fields of popular music are more fragmented than ever. Ad placement does not mean the same thing to all music consumers, and with albums sales and major label resources continuously dwindling, most realize it’s a sensible business strategy. Furthermore, divorcing independent music from other commercial markets ignores the fact that whether music is distributed through DIY mail order or through an ad for a Sony camera, it is a fundamentally commercial act.

The spectrum of mainstream rock has also widened and fragmented since indie labels like Merge and Dischord have created sustainable business models designed to support artists’ development. Major label album sales continue to decline due in part to their inability to adjust the inflated overhead and operating costs that necessitate cash cow hits. For the Merge staff, however, signing artists because they like their music and not because they need to create stars has enabled them to make recordings more integral to the process of musical growth. This philosophy has made them powerful cultural agents in the social fields of independent music; they’re serious music fans with good business sense who have responded to unmet consumer demand for higher quality albums than the industry has been promoting for the last twenty years. At the Future of Music

⁴⁶ Quoted in Pequeno.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Coalition policy summit in 2007, Mac McCaughan sat on a panel that discussed the industry's ongoing crises. When asked how Merge was fairing, McCaughan replied, "Business is great for us. The last few years have been the best ever. People may be buying fewer bad records, but I don't see them buying fewer good records."⁴⁸ There may always be communities of fans and musicians who regard licensing music as an abandonment of anti-commercial and DIY values. But the ways in which this has recently empowered indie musicians to gain mainstream presence while avoiding traditional channels of mainstream hype has undeniably expanded the boundaries of popular music, both aesthetically and industrially.

Spoon in Concert

Shortly after moving to the Washington, D.C. area in 2004, I joined the 930 Club's e-mail list. I received notice in mid-January that Spoon were scheduled to perform there on March 23, 2010 as part of the tour supporting *Transference*. When tickets went on soft sale—meaning the show is yet to be advertised to the greater public—the following Thursday at 10am, I spent an hour at my computer trying to reserve a pair through the 930 Club's ticket vendor TicketFly.com. The base price per ticket was \$25, and after charges and fees, came to \$32.50. My issues with exploitive, centralized ticket vendors aside, I was confident that this would be money well-spent. The show sold out within two days, despite the fact that Spoon did no advertising for their tour. They announced it to the press in January and let their fans spread the word on their behalf.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Cook, *Our Noise*, 268.

The main floor of the 930 Club began to fill up after 8:00pm. Spoon were the headliners in a three-band lineup, and wouldn't go on until 10:15, but as the show was sold out concert-goers began to stake their places two hours early. I wanted to be as close to the front of the stage on the main floor as possible. As always, I noticed I was among my age and class demographic, as I was surrounded by casually-dressed, mostly white, educated, thirtysomething men and women. They arrived in pairs and small groups and held mid-level conversations amongst themselves while they sipped beer and mixed drinks. Aside from the fact that we were all Spoon fans, I had little sense of community at this point. Whether or not there would be would depend on the performances. I've been to shows here, such as the Hold Steady and the Kings of Leon, where the band had the entire audience either completely riveted or singing along every word, passing joints to one another and dancing freely. I've also seen artists fail to capture the crowd's attention, or lose it early in the show, causing people to move towards the exit before the end of the set. But the pre-show crowd always seems somewhat fragmented, with people keeping a wary eye on those around them as if to make sure they're not going to be challenged for their spot on the floor.

When Spoon finally took the stage at precisely 10:15, they did so in a casual fashion typical of artists who play at the 930 Club. The lights dimmed and the band members simply walked out on stage and picked up their instruments. When the stage lights came on Britt Daniel was standing front and center, wearing a black leather jacket, white t-shirt and blue jeans. He stepped up to the microphone. "Hello," he said in a low drawl, "What do you want to hear?" Members of the audience shouted back, a little tentatively at first, but soon began hurtling song titles enthusiastically towards the stage.

“O.K.,” Daniel said, and they cued up their first song, “Everything Hits at Once.” It sounded like a warm-up, as the quartet weren’t quite locked into one another’s vibe. But they hit their stride with the next song, “I Saw the Light,” from *Transference*. Its meaning isn’t entirely clear, but I have often suspected that the lyrics “And I go out in the world/I make my case to the world” recall the band’s early self-conscious posture with regards to the music industry. Halfway through the song there’s a shift from a rocking 6/8 tempo to a fast 2/4. The band’s flawless execution of the change seemed to heighten the connection between both them and the audience. For me, it was evidence of their seventeen years of performance and rehearsal labor, and I joined the cheers of my fellow audience members who expressed their gratitude for the effort.

Music journalist James Gallippi described Daniel’s vocal delivery as “paradoxical calm agitation,” which aptly describes much of Spoon’s music.⁴⁹ One of my favorite techniques of indie artists is the manipulation of tension and release. In writing on American musicals in the 1920s and 30s, Crawford mentioned out that “the general kinship between European Romanticism and the idiom of American popular song is reflected in the way songwriters use chromaticism to intensify harmonic progressions that lead the listener, in a regular pattern of tension and release, from one phrase to the next.”⁵⁰ In mainstream popular music, these patterns tend to be fairly standard, with relatively short periods of tension building up over several lines or phrases, immediately followed by a predictable release, which often comes in the statement of the chorus or a return to the tonic in repetition of a verse. In indie music, artists will often displace these patterns in a number of ways. Sometimes it means creating much longer periods of

⁴⁹ James Gallippi, Review of *Transference*, *Wunderkammer Magazine* online, February 10, 2010, accessed February 28, 2011, <http://wunderkammermag.com/music-reviews/>

⁵⁰ Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 673.

tension in order to delay the release. Many artists deviate from the I-IV-V-I pattern that typifies most popular music, and build longer sections of development that expand the AABA song structure, layering instrumental textures before building to a climax. Jarring rhythmic shifts can also take a song in a completely different direction before returning to the tonic. Occasionally, there is no release and a song ends in a state of unresolved agitation. Conversely, tension and release patterns may come in such quick succession that it's difficult to discern when one stops and the other begins, resulting in an overlapping sense of anticipation and arrival.

In my opinion, Spoon do this very well. Their songs create urgency through shifting rhythms, which range from easy blues to maniacal riffs, as well as closed, dissonant chords that slowly build to climactic resolution. Such was the case when they played "The Ghost of You Lingers," and took the atmosphere of its recorded sound to a dramatic extreme. They used the same vocal effects on stage as they did in the studio, with an echo pedal conveying isolation and emptiness that was occasionally interrupted by the sudden rip of a distorted fade-in. Lacking were the overlapping vocals in two separate channels, but including that would have required the use of a recording onstage. But with a single dark blue light casting the stage in an otherworldly spectrum, and the sound reverberating throughout the concert space, the stark moodiness of the lyrics reached new heights: "If you were here/Would you calm me down and settle the score/The feelings I fight burn so bright/I'm a stranger in town." The calm remains elusive, as indicated by the insistent sixteenth-note pulse of alternating consonant and dissonant triads that propel the song (and which Daniel turned into an onomatopoeia for the title of the album whence it came, *Ga Ga Ga Ga Ga*). The song doesn't end so much

as it just goes away when the incessant *ga ga ga ga* pounding ceases on an unresolved chord and the last echo dissolves into silence. In person, the total effect was electrifying.

The show was full of unexpected moments, not least of which was the band's spontaneous approach to their set list. Additionally, each rendition of the songs they played, all of which were well-known to the crowd, was unpredictable. It wasn't always their best version. I was excited when they launched into one of my favorite songs "Two Sides/Monsieur Valentine," an enigmatic rock ballad with no hook and no chorus about a mysterious and reclusive actor. But they weren't entirely together throughout the song, as some of the members missed their cues by a few beats. On the other hand, their performance of "Written In Reverse," a track I usually skip on the album, was much more enlightening in its live incarnation. The stomping offbeat chords that I had originally found off-putting sounded exciting in person, as did Daniel's vocals which ranged from a mid-level drawl to a grating yell, and finally peaking in his trademark falsetto howl. It was not an elaborate stage spectacle by any means, although the lighting choreography was well done. They had no video screens, no costumes and no effusive stage antics. But for me, it was no less entertaining for the simple reason that when Spoon perform they project a sonic charisma that is larger than the sum of their parts.

I saw Spoon perform again in August of 2010 when they opened a concert for fellow Merge artists the Arcade Fire at the Merriweather Post Pavillion, an outdoor venue in Columbia, Maryland, with a capacity of over 19,000. Arcade Fire's ambitious, multi-instrumental brand of indie stadium rock suited the atmosphere perfectly, but Spoon appeared somewhat diminutive playing to so large a space. The intimacy of their sound was apparent from the way the audience behaved: those who were far from the stage

wandered around and held conversations; those closest to it collected in front and listened appreciatively to the entire set. After their final song, Daniel thanked the audience for not treating them like an opening band, a reference to their attentive fans. I was gratified to realize that Spoon appear to remain comfortable with their size and the niche they've carved for themselves. I have been rooting for their continued success for years, but part of me wants doesn't want them to get any bigger. I want them to keep being enigmatic and innovative enough not to appeal to millions of people. I don't want their sound to become formulaic and predictable, although I know that change is an inevitable part of getting older, and that wisdom replaces exuberance as artists mellow with age. But I hope Britt Daniel keeps indulging his own tastes and curiosities. If I ever met him the first thing I would ask is what he has on his playlist.

I had asked Jim McGuinn at the Current if he thought the accusations of elitism directed at indie communities were justified. He crisply acknowledged that the self-professed authority of some indie fans demonstrates an exclusion that is unfortunately socially limiting. He then expressed his own desire to maintain the community that has distinguished it from other types of popular music:

I want to get it as large as it can be but I want to still be able to have that thing where people feel the specialness of that bond, and so if maybe all of a sudden we start reaching out, and it becomes trendy to like indie, then pretty soon you might get people that are co-opting the aesthetic without understanding the context, and the community starts to fragment a little bit. You've got to keep inviting but also hoping that people who climb on board appreciate it for more than just 'I like that Bat For Lashes, she's got a cool headband.'⁵¹

I found myself hoping for the same thing after The Arcade Fire won a Grammy for Album of the Year in 2011. *The Suburbs*, an enigmatic, often haunting and frequently

⁵¹ McGuinn, interview, July 31, 2009.

embittered ode to the banalities of suburban life, had been earning accolades for months before its nomination. It was surprising to some, being that the Arcade Fire is an indie band, but when I saw that the album went to number one on both the *CMJ* and *Billboard* charts I knew their mainstream success was a foregone conclusion. They had previously been nominated in alternative categories, but never for category that has historically been the reserve of mainstream artists. It is too soon to know whether fame and recognition will lead to a fragmentation of their fan base, or if they will take their music in a new direction to accommodate new fans. However, I am confident that just over the horizon there are new artists developing something else. It won't be for everyone, but it will be a kind of music that articulates with their unique styles and experiences, and that's going to resonate among a certain community of like-minded fans.

Summary

In this chapter I presented a series of ethnographic case studies in order to understand how audiences and musicians structure independence in live settings. I began with an overview of indie concerts, outlining some generalized traits in setting and structure. I explored present-day definitions of independence based on both my own involvement in indie music communities, as well as ideas solicited from audience members, mediators and artists. I then presented five live performance contexts in which I enacted the role of a participant-observer.

Beginning with a small punk show at WMUC, I described the grass-roots, DIY structure of a college environment. At a Food Will Win the War concert at the Velvet Lounge, I engaged with an audience of family and friends who gathered to support

frontman Rob Ward's efforts to make music his livelihood. I then detailed my experience at a Troubadour concert in Los Angeles, where artists Pop Levi and Gram Rabbit gave polished and elaborate performances, and later expressed the desire to maintain creative autonomy while expanding their fan bases. Two months later at the 930 Club in D.C., I observed how bluegrass sextet the Hackensaw Boys located their authenticity through the spontaneity and excitement of live performance. Finally, I described a concert by Spoon, whose accomplishments as an independent band illustrate an increasingly widening spectrum of both popular music and the varying levels of success that can be achieved within it.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

In January of 2010, *Paste* contributor Rachel Maddux published a provocative article entitled, “Is Indie Dead?” Comparing the current impossibility of defining indie music to a spiritual crisis, Maddux writes:

Indie is, at once, a genre (of music first, and then of film, books, video games and anything else with a perceived art sensibility, regardless of its relationship to a corporation), an ethos, a business model, a demographic and a marketing tool. It can signify everything, and it can signify nothing. It stands among the most important, potentially sustainable and meaningful movements in American popular culture—not just for music, but for the whole cultural landscape. But because it was originally sculpted more in terms of what it opposed than what it stood for, the only universally held truth about ‘indie’ is that nobody agrees on what it means.¹

She proceeds to address indie music’s various incarnations over the last thirty years, from its development as an underground DIY movement in the late 1970s, to its current, more fashionable contexts in “quirky” films and hipster circles. Her conclusion is that indie has indeed died—“it killed itself”—because the term independent no longer has any meaning.

Maddux’s article incited a plethora of impassioned responses, most of which vehemently disagreed with her conclusion and argumentative approach. “If someone wants to get riled up about whether Grizzly Bear are indie or not, as some sort of semantical debate that implies authenticity (it doesn’t), or maybe whether ‘indie’ is an idea that sells records (it does!)—that’s their time to waste,” wrote music journalist Jessica Hopper. “There will always be kids toiling, always deep weird DIY layers under there, fanzines, kids and grown-ups and totally inaccessible bands doing it for the

¹ Rachel Maddux, “Is Indie Dead?” *Paste Magazine* online, January 26, 2010, accessed April 11, 2011, <http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2010/01/is-indie-dead.html>

scene—just like there always has been.”² Marvin Lin, editor-in-chief of *Tiny Mix Tapes*, replied, “To call indie music ‘dead’ is to implicitly legitimize outdated historical narratives.”³ Accusing Maddux of being “fucking insane to even ask” whether indie is dead, Andy Phillips, editor-in-chief of *MOG* said, “I think when you start declaring that things are dead, it’s more a lament for the loss of your own desire for new discovery.”⁴

From my perspective, the most important aspect of this article and its responses is the fact that independence, however it may be defined, is a concept that people care deeply about. Most of its defenders pointed to the fact that independence, in whatever form, has displaced the dominant industry’s cultural agency by privileging the efforts of the creative, the visionaries, the innovators and the curious. “The sounds we’re hearing now are undefinable hybrids of awesome that push every envelope and spiral out further than we could’ve possibly imagined when ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ was kicking everyone’s asses not so very long ago,” confirmed Johnny Firecloud, editor for *Antiquiet* and *CraveOnline*.⁵

In this dissertation, I have presented independence as an ongoing tradition in American popular music, defined by alternative approaches to the creation, distribution and consumption of music that actively resist mainstream patterns. I placed its earliest stages not in the underground punk movement, but in the first efforts by independent labels in the 1920s, such as Gennett Records, Okeh and Paramount, to fill a demand for music that was being shunned by the three major labels. In producing and distributing

² Jessica Hopper, “Is Indie Dead?” response, January 29, 2010, accessed April 11, 2011, <http://flavorwire.com/gallery/01-29-10/index.html>.

³ Marvin Lin, *ibid.*

⁴ Andy Phillips, *ibid.*

⁵ Johnny Firecloud, *ibid.*

African-American jazz and other marginalized forms, they helped alter the social fields of popular music by ignoring the restrictions imposed by cultural hierarchies. Twenty years later, a new spate of indie labels served the same function and, in the words of Nelson George, “eventually changed what America thought popular music should sound like.”⁶ From the late 1940s to the late 1960s, indie labels dominated the popular music charts by releasing R&B music that flourished in crossover markets of both black and white adolescents. The commercial development of rock n’ roll signaled broad shifts in social and cultural meaning of popular music. The recognition of a teenage market reflected the separation of audiences by generation, as well as the increasing importance of popular music as a socializing force for youths.

Concurrently, radio also became an important outlet for independent agents to negotiate the meaning and breadth of popular music. Just as the liberation of technology enabled small record labels to compete with the majors, it also helped independent broadcasters create counterpublics through new formats and modes of address. When television became the new national medium in the 1940s, and radio stations became more locally oriented, the inclusion of African-Americans in broadcasting desegregated the airwaves, once again expanding the social fields of popular music. Al Benson’s radical approach to building a narrative style that matched his equally daring effort to present R&B records brought black expressions into the social realm of white youths. Twenty years later, Tom Donahue and a host of other music fans frustrated with the limitations of Top 40 made use of FM freeform formats to construct more artful and culturally meaningful music broadcasts. Their tradition lives on in student-run college radio stations

⁶ George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 30.

where experimentation and eclecticism continue to define their character. Again, the resultant mainstream co-optation of both black radio and progressive FM by commercial media eventually robbed them of their cultural agency, but not without also bringing irrevocable shifts to the ways in which popular music was broadcast.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the cultural field of popular music became increasingly fragmented, and independence became a more distinct social and political posture. In the 1960s, a revival of folk ideologies, coupled with the development of rock music, became the primary domain of middle class college youths. They articulated with countercultural ideals that rebelled against the conservative values of their parents' generation, and cultivated music that embraced community, authenticity and artistic integrity. Following the excessive commercialization of 1960s rock, punk movements in the 1970s rearticulated with those values by aggressively rejecting the corporate structures and aesthetics of mainstream popular music. They created counter-institutions by establishing their own labels and circulating homemade fanzines. The subsequent mainstream co-optation of punk led postpunk communities to reassert their independence by taking a more earnest and deliberate approach to the DIY model. Building on the infrastructure of fanzines and indie labels, musicians and consumers adopted independence as a moral imperative, and defined their symbolic agency through the rejection of economic gain.

The commercial explosion of underground music in the 1990s, which most attribute to the multi-platinum success of Nirvana, fragmented the communities that had nurtured independent music. Another period of corporate conglomeration put popular music back under the dominance of major labels until digital and internet technology

forever changed the way music was distributed and consumed. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the development of virtual social fields in which music was exchanged and discussed brought independence into a greater variety of contexts. Blogs and Triple-A radio stations have since become independent music authorities, and cultivated formalized approaches to addressing independent communities that are simultaneously local and national. Conversely, YouTube functions as a more versatile public space in which video file-sharing has enabled a range of both communal and individual approaches to independent music. And, while most of them also stream online, college radio stations continue to function as unique local institutions with freeform formats that encourage discovery and distinction.

Arguably the most important aspect of indie music communities, live performances are the primary social spaces in which audiences and musicians directly interact and co-construct music's social and cultural value. From a small gathering of a punk show at a college radio station, to a sold out performance by an indie rock band at an urban club, I explored a spectrum of independence from the perspective of audiences and artists at various stages of their career. In doing so, I argued that while independence remains situated in ideas about community, authenticity and autonomy, it is subjectively understood and constructed by individual members of independent communities.

Of course, there is more work to be done. It is not yet clear to me whether there is an indie music canon, or even whether the idea of one could be accommodated by independent ideologies. Someone with a passion for music theory could attempt to identify independent idioms, and find out if they can be linked to a growing stratification of musical codes. I also think the issue of cultural minorities within modern indie music

deserves further study. The social makeup of my field consisted mostly of white, college-educated men and women between the ages of 18 and 40. But there is a multitude of other genres that have relied on alternative approaches to circulate their music. Experts on go go or hip hop, for example, could illuminate how those communities have navigated their own independence over the decades. Finally, there are ample opportunities for scholars in gender studies to examine the differences between gender constructions in independent and mainstream popular music.

Maddux's argument that indie is dead fails to acknowledge independence as an ongoing and intrinsic part of American popular music. Cycles of independent activity have changed and will continue to change with each new era, as subsequent generations seek to articulate their distinction, and sound media technologies continue to develop. My intent has been to argue that, despite cultural critics' fears, the mass commercialization of popular music did not have stultifying effects on American music culture. Rather, from the earliest inception of the music industry at the beginning of the twentieth century, it has inspired communities of active minorities to find creative ways in which to challenge cultural hegemonies.

Appendix

IRB CONSENT FORM

Project Title: "Get Listenin' Kids!': Independence as Social Practice In American Popular Music"

Why is this research being done?

This is a research project being conducted by J. Lawrence Witzleben and Laura Schnitker at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are involved in an independent music community, and/or the freeform radio community at WMUC, WCBN, The Current or KCRW. The purpose of this research project is to examine how listeners, musicians and disc jockeys (hereafter "DJs") in freeform radio and independent communities construct a public community through the music they listen to, perform and broadcast.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be interviewed, in a session lasting not more than one and a half hours, by J. Lawrence Witzleben and Laura Schnitker. The interview will not be audio-recorded, unless you consent for it to be audio-recorded as indicated by your signature and date here: _____

_____.
Though this interview will be free-form, questions will focus on your experience freeform radio and indie rock music. Questions may include the following:

Describe for me your motivation for becoming a DJ/musician/freeform listener.

What are some of your favorite indie songs to broadcast/perform/hear?

Could you describe for me what "indie rock" means to you?

If you have participated in freeform radio in more than one capacity--as broadcaster, performer, listener--please compare the two roles for me and describe the functions they perform in the freeform community.

Why is involvement in freeform radio and/or indie rock important to you?

You may refuse to answer any questions and you may withdraw from the interview without penalty. Even if you have given your consent for audio-recording, you may indicate times at which audio-recording is inappropriate.

Your on-air program will be observed by J. Lawrence Witzleben and Laura Schnitker provided you consent for such observation as indicated by your signature and date here: _____

_____.

What about confidentiality?

None of the information collected in this study is confidential unless you request that I keep your information confidential. In any presentation of this information you will be identified by a pseudonym, unless you would prefer to be identified by name in such publications, as expressed by your signature and date here: _____ . Any information which would be incriminating to you or expose you to liability will not be reported in any publication. Interview data will be stored in a locked cabinet of the researcher's office during the research, to which only the researcher will have access. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if we are required to do so by law. At the conclusion of the research, the audio recordings will not be destroyed, but as is normal for ethnomusicological fieldwork, all data will be donated to an archive such as the Library of

Congress, or carefully maintained in the researcher's own collection, unless you indicate your preference for this data to be destroyed by your signature and date here: _____
_____.

Project Title: "Get Listenin' Kids!': Independence as Social Practice In American Popular Music"

The research is not designed to help you personally, but to aid in learning about how listeners, musicians and disc jockeys (hereafter "DJs") in freeform radio and independent communities construct a public community through the music they listen to, perform and broadcast.

What are the risks of this research?

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.

Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify

What if I have questions?

This research is being conducted by J. Lawrence Witzleben and Laura Schnitker in the Department of Music at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact J. Lawrence Witzleben at: University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA. 301-405-5502 / jlwitz@umd.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742;

(e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

Statement of Age of Subject and Consent

Your signature indicates that:

- you are at least 18 years of age,;
- the research has been explained to you;
- your questions have been fully answered; and
- you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

NAME OF SUBJECT SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT DATE

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