A Virtual and Actual Subculture: The Independent Music Scene in the Digital Age
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Abstract

The independent music scene is comprised of a collection of artists, label owners, promoters, and fans that maintain a strict appreciation for music that operates outside of the corporate music framework. With this study, I seek to explore this group of individuals and gain a better understanding of their cultural practices, ultimately painting a fuller portrait of how the independent music scene defines itself and functions in the digital age. In order to do this, I will first review past subcultural studies to gain a better understanding of the landscape of musical ethnography. I will then set out to explore various sounds and associated identities within the independent movement, followed by reflections on my own experiences in the scene. With my final chapter, I will include the voices and opinions regarding the indie scene of other members within the movement. In coupling my own experiences with these different interpretations, I hope to address notions such as community, authenticity, production, distribution, and distinction from the mainstream, and ultimately express how the indie scene is built upon these subjective views.
Chapter 1
Subcultural Movements and Discussions

Introduction

Fringe movements and youth cultures have long been the focus of sociological studies within the music industry. From Sarah Thornton’s foray into the rave culture to Richard Peterson’s seminal work on the fabrication of authenticity in country music, the canon of musical ethnography has ranged widely with regard to subcultural studies. In more recent years, however, musical ethnographies exploring fringe movements have become less and less available, being pushed to the sidelines of sociological research alongside the obscure independent factions they once investigated. But does this decline in research merely represent a shift in sociological interest? Or does it, in fact, reflect a change within the independent music culture itself? The independent music scene has managed to invent and re-invent itself for nearly a century, as both Thornton’s and Peterson’s works reveal in the nuances of their respective subjects. Comprised of a network of self-reliant artists, producers, label owners, and critics operating outside of the corporate music framework, the independent music scene has operated under its own structure, language, and organization since the early post-war years in the United States. Since the mid-1990s, however, with the widespread introduction of the Internet, MP3s, and digital production equipment, the independent community has been facing unprecedented innovation that seems to have centered technology at the forefront of countless enterprises within our society. The question must then be asked: With the world’s changing technological landscape in mind, what does the modern independent music scene look like?

Before I begin to unpack the many aspects to this question, however, one issue should be noted. I myself am an avid member of the modern independent music scene. I have been
following the movement as a fan since the early years of the Internet, scavenging blogs and websites, such as Pitchfork and Altered Zones, attending concerts and performances, and frequenting record stores. More recently I have taken a more active role in the community and have contributed my thoughts to several online music magazines and blogs, namely Impose Magazine. In my several years within the indie scene, I have consequently developed my own preferences, biases, and opinions regarding not just certain labels or musicians but also the independent scene as a whole, including its structure, sound, identity, and authenticity. I have also come to discover, however, that the independent music scene operates quite like myself – subjectively. No omnipotent rubric or list exists to determine what represents the most authentic sound or style within the indie movement; the scene is instead determined solely by preference. With this in mind, a large part of this paper will in fact be constructed around my own personal experiences and opinions. In doing so, my own subjectivity will help to color my research, observations, and interviews within this exploration, and will work to paint a more authentic picture of the modern independent movement.

**Scenes**

In order to begin looking at the independent movement, several key phrases, concepts, and trends within subcultural studies must first be recounted. Perhaps the most important element of these sociological understandings is the structure of fringe movements and scenes, as well as what that structure includes. To establish a framework to build around, let us first visit Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson. As Bennett and Peterson note in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, the idea of a “scene” was first developed by “journalists in the 1940s to characterize the marginal and bohemian ways of life of those associated with the demiworld of jazz.” (2004:2) Included in this notion of “scene” Bennett and Peterson suggest are the cultural
elements that go beyond just the music, such as dress, language and the “deportment appropriate
to a scene.” (Bennett & Peterson 2004:2) Tammy Anderson extends this definition in her work
Rave Culture: The Alteration and Decline of a Philadelphia Music Scene, writing, “scenes and
perhaps other cultural collectives are defined by their host generation, which share ideologies,
values, tastes, identities, and styles.” (Anderson 2009:172) In other words, for Anderson, the idea
of a scene extends past one particular trait or characteristic and is embodied through multiple
forms of expression. Through such an encompassing definition, Anderson suggests fans of
particular genres, as well as the general public, are provided a cultural resource in the
determination of “alternative” or “underground” identity and its distinction from the
“mainstream.” (Anderson 2009:172) Members of a particular subculture are consequently able to
appropriately reflect the subcultural personality of their particular scene, while at the same time
separating themselves from the prevailing popular identity. (Anderson 2009:172)

Academic discourse builds on the journalistic discourse of “underground” and
“mainstream,” using the notion of “scene” not just as a cultural identifier but also as a “model for
academic research on the production, performance, and reception of popular music.” (Bennett
and Peterson 2004:3) According to Bennett and Peterson, academia seeks to understand not just
the subcultural movement itself but also its relationship to popular music and the commercial
industry. In determining a scene’s cultural space in relation to the mass media industry then,
academics are positioned to better understand both the structure and composition of the scene’s
identity, as well as the state of popular media. Scenes have therefore have seemed to be used for
two purposes within subcultural studies. One, in order to determine the cultural space one
belongs to and, two, in order to properly understand the functioning of the mass media industry
in relation to the particular subculture.
Formation and Organization

But what has been said about how scenes form? What components drive these individuals together? In the case of the club culture, Sarah Thornton suggests that club cultures, quite like other scenes, are taste cultures. (1996:3) “Club crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves.” (Thornton 1996:3) Thornton implies that, just as in any social situation, fringe movements and their individual relationships form from individuals seeking reinforcement from similar individuals. The assumption can thus be made that cultural, political, social and aesthetic preferences inherently group together individuals with similar values and ideals, consequently allowing groups and factions to emerge. (Thornton 1996:3) In the case of the New York punk rock scene of the late 1970s, as Ryan Moore points out, individuals were united under an appreciation for loud, raw, fast-paced, guitar rock, common dress, and the unity derived from the grittiness of New York’s Bowery at the time. (2009:1) The Johnny Ramone’s and Richard Hell’s, like the subcultural individuals that emerged both before and after, found similarities in each other that allowed for the creation and formation of punk.

Subcultural movements and scenes are not merely amorphous, unorganized blobs of like-minded individuals wearing the same clothes, however. Crucial to a scene’s subcultural identity and societal placement is its organization. As David Grazian points out, popular culture is a reflection of collective activity, meaning that scenes are composed not just of individuals with a particular language, sound, or style but of a collaborative web of “interconnected individuals working together toward a common goal.” (2010:10) This collaborative effort sharply contrasts with the organization of the multinational music industry, which is controlled by a select group
of individuals that depend on one another to create music. (Grazian 2010:10) In other words, Grazian suggests that where the commercial music industry employs a hierarchical configuration to determine the sound of popular music, fringe movements adopt a more planar structure that allows individuals to work together to create music for their own enjoyment. A communal space exists in the structure of fringe movements that does not appear in the corporate world.

This is not to say order does not exist in fringe movements, however. Club cultures, for instance, are riddled with cultural hierarchies according to Thornton. (1996:3) These hierarchies, unlike those of the multinational industry, arise not out of an attempt to control the creative process but in order to establish the subculture’s position in society, its distinctiveness from the mainstream, and its authenticity in separating itself from it. For Thornton, these hierarchies include: “the authentic versus the phoney, the ‘hip’ versus the ‘mainstream’, and the ‘underground’ versus ‘the media’.” (1996:3-4) These distinctions open up different meanings and values for subcultures, which can determine an individual’s role within the subculture, the individual’s relationship to mass media, and the collective’s positioning on the cultural spectrum of “underground” and “mainstream.” While the hierarchies of fringe movements’ deviate from those of the corporate world, they do still exist in order to legitimize the subculture as an entity.

But how is one to differentiate the individual members of a particular scene, especially in the absence of any true hierarchical organization? As Anderson notes, “our first tendency might be to think of insiders – especially loyalists and stakeholders – of any music scene as those who are highly committed to the scene’s central activity and outsiders as those who are less committed or are indifferent to it.”(Anderson 2009:171) These types of participant typologies, “insider” and “outsider” or peripheral member, certainly help to parse out members of the collective, but they fail to address the common element that binds them together in the first place.
alienation. (Anderson 2009: 171) “At another level, however, the insiders of any nonconventional social grouping might be those who have shared experiences or marginality and “otherness” to mainstream culture. This more fundamental experience with alienation may explain continued identification and commitment to the ‘alternative’ as much as artistic tastes and preferences.” (Anderson 2009: 171) To Anderson, cultural identification and membership is determined by more than just musical involvement; it is developed from the shared “otherness” that results from the mainstream. (2009: 171)

Sarah Thornton presents a different idea, however. Extending on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, Thornton proposes the idea of subcultural capital. Subcultural capital is composed of the cultural knowledge and commodities acquired by members of a subculture. (1996: 11) This capital can either raise or lower one’s status, which helps to differentiate themselves from members of both their own subculture and other subcultures. (Thornton 1996: 11) This type of capital could include attributes extending from the amount of time spent in the subculture to the number of records a person owns. The knowledge and commodities that compose an individual’s capital therefore “provides status to an individual in their own social world.” (Thornton 1996: 11) The more capital one has, the higher the status. The differences between subcultural capitals consequently allows for the distinction between members, creating a subculture rather than simply an unorganized group of individuals.

Identity

As Anderson goes on to point out, “these categories of individuals provide useful ways for understanding the connections between a group’s collective identity and individual attachment to it.” (2009: 172) While the collective identity of a scene might at times be discernable through dress, sound, values, or any number of related traits, a nuanced
understanding of the collective body must result from an understanding of the individual’s association to the group. In other words, in closing the gap between collective and individual it becomes easier to understand the true subcultural identity of the group. Anderson suggests that once we can understand the reasoning for an individual’s membership to a particular scene, we can begin to understand the scene as a whole. In the case of the UK rave scene, Anderson’s theory proves true. As Sarah Thornton addresses, membership was derived not only from an attraction to the sounds and styles of the club culture but also from the prevailing social and political norms, namely the feeling of alienation resulting from the Thatcher era. (1996:33) In this case, members were bound together through a rejection of the prevailing ideology as well as a common appreciation for electronic dance music. The collective identity therefore becomes encompassed through social and political beliefs and traits such as sound, dance, and dress. At the same time, however, many identities within subcultural communities are derived from views among members, meaning that members of the subculture look to one another for particular styles, sounds, and dance moves. As these trends become popular within the community, the collective identity is further reinforced.

Identity, however, is not solely determined from an insider’s perspective. The outside world plays an equally important role in developing a scene’s relationship to the mainstream, as well as the scene’s distinctiveness from it. As Richard Peterson notes scenes are oftentimes adapted by the commercial industry and repackaged as a product on the market. (1997:5) Perhaps the best example of this, as noted by Dick Hebdige, is the mod culture. The mod style, according to Hebdige, was very much conflated with the commodity culture. For the mods, “style was manufactured from above instead of being spontaneously created from within.” (Hebdige 1975:174) In other words, the dress and style of the mods was determined by the
consumer culture, which marketed and directed specific apparel towards the mods themselves. As movements such as these occur for indie factions, the mainstream public is put in a position to select certain traits they like about the scene and also reject certain traits that are not seen as authentic or original. Peterson refers to this process as “fabricating authenticity.” (1997:5) An “authentic” image is created by the mainstream for a particular scene, and that image determines the overall identity of the collective as well as its positioning relative to mainstream culture. Essentially, a scene goes through a process of aesthetic consolidation as it makes its way out from under the radar and into the scene it is viewed as by the public. (Peterson 1997:6) To use a phrase from both Peterson and jazz critic George Melly, what begins as a revolt against social and aesthetic conventions becomes mere style. (1997:6)

**Authenticity**

The bleeding of fringe movements into the commercial industry does not just lead to a consolidation of style, however; it also represents a commodification of authenticity. According to Peterson, “entertainment industry impresarios sensed that the essential appeal of the [country] music was rooted in the feeling of authenticity conveyed by its performers.” (1997:5) This recognition forces industry officials to seek out acts from a particular scene that reflect the authenticity sought after by the public, pushing seemingly “inauthentic” acts out of the scene which they helped to form. (Peterson 1997:6) Entrepreneurs “try to understand why certain offerings have been accepted and others rejected in order to create more that are as much like the successful ones as possible.” (Peterson 1997:6) Country music entrepreneurs, for instance, found the creative synthesis that the audience found most authentic was the young singer of plaintive hillbilly songs dressed in a cowboy outfit. (Peterson 1997:5) Other country artists that did not fit this profile slowly receded from the country music scene, leaving the young cowboy as the
identifying image of the collective body. This image came to reflect what the public believed to be most authentic, thereby consolidating the once-diverse culture into a marketable commodity.

This notion of consolidation leads to a contradiction between authenticity and originality. (Peterson 1997:6) How can something be truly authentic when it is merely the recreation of a particular image? As Tammy Anderson puts forward, prior to a scene’s commercial consolidation, “authenticity cannot be derived from music alone; it must have the accompanying lifestyle and traits that make the culture authentic in the first place.” (Anderson 2009:168) In the case of the Philadelphia rave scene then, authenticity was not only derived from high-BPM electronic music, but also from a rejection of social conservatism, a celebration of deviance and hedonism, and of course trendy clubwear. (Anderson 2009:171) Once this image transitioned from a culture into an industry, however, the original club image became something of the past. It was lost by its founding members and regained in an alternate form by the mass media. What was once a scene that celebrated the DiY nature of its formation became an industry where profit was the driving factor for its identity. Commercialization therefore “compromises music scenes’ culture, identity, and lifestyle. It compromises them or abandons them for a sort of commercial and conventional adaptation. All aspects and components of scenes and their cultures are therefore jeopardized, not simply their art or cultural products.” (Anderson 2009:172) Any authenticity or originality is consequently lost after a culture’s transition into an industry and it is this “relationship between society’s mainstream and its periphery and powerless and powerful people [that] reveals important social and cultural space between authenticity and mainstream commercialism.” (Anderson 2009:168)
Technology and Mass Media

With the onset of the dot-com boom in the late 90s, the music industry, along with its peripheral fringe movements, underwent processes of concentration, conglomeration, and hypercommercialism. (Moore 2009:199) Labels, artists, and promoters were forced to repackage themselves in a market that was (and still is) not only far-reaching and diverse but also active in the processes of creation and promotion. As Bennett and Peterson note in Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual, the rapid development of the Internet has facilitated the democratization of music making, its distribution, and increased fan communication. (Bennett and Peterson 2004:5) In other words, the Internet has nearly eliminated the gap between fan and musician, allowing niche markets to flourish among like-minded fans with file-sharing capabilities, while multinational corporations have been forced to concentrate themselves in order to address these niche marketplaces. Artists are now able to self-produce and release recordings without having to sign with a major record company. As a result, the Web has allowed for a lively scenelike exchange among fans, taking music back from the commercial world into the homes and bedrooms of independently operating recording artists. (Bennett and Peterson 2004:5)

Prior to the introduction of mp3s and peer-to-peer clients, however, indie scenes first had to adapt to a different innovation – digital technology. This post-analogue technology is capable of recreating the sounds of musical instruments, sampling sounds, and recording from instruments, thereby accelerating the "possibilities that were already visible in pre-digital forms of musical production (sound mixing, multi-tracking, splicing, and so forth)." (Beer and Sandywell 2005:109) With digital technology, and its affordability, studio-quality productions are no longer limited to the confines of an expensive studio. Artists are now capable of
producing their own music as long as they have a USB port. This has affected the commercial industry by taking the power derived from their studio-quality equipment and placing it directly into the hands of the creators. With this shift in power, record labels have been forced to merge in order to continue operating, as artists are now in charge of the entire production process. The digital revolution has consequently helped to facilitate the rapid development of the DIY music industry. (Bennett and Peterson 2004:5) With new levels of access to the recording process, the “creative potential of ‘amateur’ musicians and producers has also been substantially enhanced by relatively cheap state-of-the-art technology.” (Bennett and Peterson 2004:5) Studio-quality recording can now be composed in any location without the help of any technical staff, meaning corporations no longer have the power to define public identities because they cannot control who has access to the studio. (Bennett and Peterson 2004:5)

With the introduction of Napster in the late ‘90s, followed by other peer-to-peer clients such as Kazaa and BitTorrent, record labels took a further hit, as music fans no longer had to purchase their music at a store but could instead trade it for free online. From 1999 to 2003, record sales saw a drop from $38 billion to $32 billion. (Zetner 2005) And according to a CBS News poll, 70 percent of 18 to 29 year olds found file-sharing acceptable. (CBS 2003) The movement towards virtual file-sharing, coupled with online sales, essentially killed big-box mega-stores, such as Virgin and Tower, and forced record labels and major label artists to take one of two paths, either fight back against illegal piracy or conform to the culture of new media. As we saw with James Hetfield and the metal band Metallica, many artists and labels chose to wage war against piracy, taking thousands of online music sharers to court and shutting down numerous peer-to-peer clients and websites. On the other side of the dot-com boom, however, were artists such as Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails, who embraced the virtual marketplace, and
made their albums available online at a pay-what-you-want price. What was quickly discovered from these virtual experiments was that online downloading was not going to stop, as nearly 2 million copies of Radiohead’s *In Rainbows* were swapped online in only one month.

This kind of virtual peer-to-peer interaction seems to have enabled participants from around the world to come together in a “single scene-making conversation via the Internet.” (Bennett and Peterson 2004:11) Where fans of country music or the UK rave culture came together at a tavern or dance club, participants online are granted “Net-mediated person-to-person communication,” which allows scenes to be much more in the control of fans according to Bennett and Peterson. (Bennett and Peterson 2004:11) As many interpretations have it, online participants are capable of seeking out blogs, websites, networking sites, and forums that cater to specific scenes and subcultures. From the underground rap and hip-hop community to aspiring house music artists, the Internet has possibly allowed niche cultures to not only survive unlike before but thrive under the far-reaching and diverse nature of the Web. Unlike the scenes before, the Internet seems capable of uniting these like-minded individuals without either geographic constraints or commercial constraints. In other words, the power to produce, as well as the power to consume, appears to have been removed from the multinational music corporations and placed directly into the hands of the artists and the fans on the Internet, which implies a severe change in the culture’s value system. Bennett and Peterson suggest that these kinds of online communities, which have come to be known as “virtual scenes,” have nearly eliminated big music corporations and added another (virtual) dimension to the larger music community. (Bennett and Peterson 2004:11)
Scenes in the Digital Age

As noted by Beatrice Jetto, “virtual scenes are formed in virtual spaces on the Internet such as chatrooms, online forums, Web sites.” (2010:1) Quite like the punk zines that circulated among fans and artists in the late 70s and 80s, blogs and other virtual meeting places operate to keep members of the virtual scene up-to-date with the most recent information and provide a forum for discussion. However, unlike the members of local or trans-local scenes, online members rarely, if ever, meet. Instead they communicate solely online, and often congregate on specific sites that network with one another in a sort of virtual collectivism. (Jetto 2010:3) On these various blogs and forums fans are able to “spread their practices among a number of sites and social media all networked one with another.” (Jetto 2010:3) Coincidentally, however, with so many niche networks dedicated to various music collectives, many of these scenes begin to overlap. As Irwin states, and Jetto points out, “one’s social identity can be associated with a number of scenes rather than only one.” (2010:3) No longer are scenes segregated with such strictness; with digital technology and blog culture, scenes have begun to merge in terms of sound, style, and structure.

Where public image and cultural hangouts were once crucial to a scene’s particular identity, these things no longer matter in the virtual space of scenes in the post-digital age. Today, blogs play the role of one of the most important infrastructures within the virtual scene, oftentimes helping to determine individuals’ virtual identity and position within the culture, as well as creating a position for itself in relation to the mainstream. (Jetto 2010:4) As mentioned before, on a basic level, blogs and other virtual meetings spaces exist to provide relevant media for a particular scene. They also, however, become communal spaces for fans and artists to list upcoming concerts, music, events, and reviews, creating a participatory venue for like-minded
individuals, quite like the clubs of the Philadelphia rave scene. The difference between the clubs and blogs, however, is that blogs are also part of the music blogosphere. (Jetto 2010:4) They create links and network not just in a particular section of the world but globally. Blogs extend past the barriers of time and space, and connect users from around the world.

Members of the blogosphere create their own virtual scene through not only a vast network of links and threads but also a shared ideology. Though the blogosphere, like the subcultures before it, contains its own social hierarchies, members are united under shared interests. Though blogs may be dedicated to a trans-local scene by featuring international artists, or may solely focus on a local independent scene, they both have in common the shared principles of independence from the mainstream culture and a respect for indie music. (Jetto 2010:4) No matter the context of the particular scene, blogs stand as a separate online subculture through a refusal of traditional music press and mainstream media. (Jetto 2010:4) As Bennett and Peterson point out, “in a far greater extent than in other kinds of scenes, virtual scenes are devoted to the needs and interests of fans, and Net-based media that try to influence them tend to be quickly found out and censured.” (2004:11) Members therefore share a common devotion to the image of the virtual scene, making sure any mainstream content is filtered from their sites. This standard is also held with music from within the subculture. Indie songs that aren’t of a certain quality or skill (as determined by the virtual tastemakers) will be discarded and censored by virtual members as quickly as they were discovered. A common respect for the music exists among members in the indie community, and they are dedicated to preserving its quality. Yet, although members share the same ideology regarding music within the community, they do compete over cultural knowledge. (Jetto 2010:4)
Blog members’ identities cannot be differentiated by individual style or a particular dance move. Rather, as online entities, they are identified on an individual level by traits such as post history, length of blog membership, or other contributions to the online community. This marks a large shift in both value and authenticity from the pre-digital era. Thornton’s notion of subcultural capital still applies, however. (Jetto 2010:4) Online members cannot simply enter into a blogworld and expect any kind of credit or reputation; they must have done something for the broader good of the community. Members who have spent years on a particular blog, for instance, will have more subcultural capital than a member who just recently joined. The same can be said for members who have contributed more reviews or hyperlinks to the community than those who have contributed few. The more a member offers to the virtual scene, the more capital they will gain. And as members communicate with one another, these more active members also become influencers within the scene; they help to determine the value system of the movement, and consequently mold its organization. Preferring certain artists or genres, frequenting specific websites, and posting to forums become more than just assertions of taste. They act as advertisements for less experienced members, and value determinants in the subcultural marketplace. Social hierarchies, in this case, are not exempt from the virtual community. Just as the Philadelphia rave scene had a status culture, so does the blogosphere.

This shift in subcultural value is not limited to an individual basis, however. Subcultural capital can also be applied to the blogs, forums, and websites themselves, leaving certain online communities with more perceived value than others. Websites that contribute more useful information to the larger independent movement, for instance, will naturally be viewed in a higher regard than those with little influence; likewise for online communities that have existed for longer periods of time. As this shift capital illuminates, the notion of authenticity is as equally
as important in the virtual subcultures as in the local and translocal factions that came before. The perceived authenticity attached to specific online communities, as well as that attached to their individual members, therefore highlights the broader organization among virtual subcultures, and also helps to differentiate these communities from the mainstream.

As Jetto points out, a useful way for understanding both the individual and collective levels of organization in the blogosphere is through Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of *Field of Cultural Production*. (2010:4) Bourdieu’s theory provides two forms of logic to follow, one of which rejects the pursuit of profits, and one that is derived from economic power. (Jetto 2010:4) The dichotomy presented in Bourdieu’s theory recognizes those that are commercially successful as distinct from those who see themselves as independent from the pressure of economic power. (Jetto 2010:4) “Members of the scene can therefore gain status following one of the two types of logics.” (Jetto 2010:4) In the case of the independent blog culture then, the most authentic groups will not be groups pursuing economic power.

Within the indie scene, authenticity is viewed, according to Jetto, as “something personal, perceived as real, and created because of artistic expression instead of commercial motives.” (2010:5) A commercially successful independent act will therefore most likely be seen as “selling out,” consequently lessening its authenticity in the context of the blogosphere. (Jetto 2010:5) Artists in turn try to maintain their commercially authentic image by appealing to specific websites, blogs, forums, and fans. This attitude seeps into production as well, as many artists will continue releasing tapes and vinyl despite losing money. In this way, value and authenticity are very much tied to image, and for most indie artists this means maintaining certain ethics and a certain sound. For the audience then, virtual credit and authenticity is derived from liking the seemingly most credible and authentic bands and artists, revealing to the
blog community both a sign of personal taste and an ability to differentiate between artists. The same idea can be applied to blogs themselves. The more authentic music a blog promotes, the more authentic it appears to be. In this way, authenticity is directly tied to Thornton’s notion of subcultural capital. (Jetto 2010:5) “Music blogs are often considered taste-makers because of their ability of discerning good music in the face of an overwhelming music choice, demonstrating a unique taste as well as broad breadth of knowledge. Through their musical taste and recommendations, they define and construct what is considered as sub-cultural capital in a particular music scene.” (Jetto 2010:5)

What’s to Come?

Music scenes in the digital age have extended well beyond like-minded, similarly dressed individuals committed to similar social ideologies and musical trends. As David Grazian suggests in A Digital Revolution? A Reassessment of New Media and Cultural Production in the Digital Age, “these technological changes encourage the greater creativity, innovativeness, autonomy, and power of individual cultural producers,” from the most entry-level of fans to the taste-makers and subcultural capital producers of the blogosphere. (Grazian 2005:210) For many of these thinkers, scenes are no longer limited by boundaries, dress, or sound. Rather, they have merged under the shared commitment against the mainstream music industry and mass media ideology, and have created a subcultural scene where the sound is decided solely by the fans. Ryan Moore asserts that now more than ever, subcultures and their members have the power to not only interact with media but also participate in the production and distribution of its cultural goods, pushing the independent music scene into a united entity directly combating the monopolistic tendencies of the corporate media moguls. (Moore 2009:200)
With the following chapter, I will set out to explore the various identities encompassed in the independent music scene, and work to setup a broader landscape that positions indie in relation to mainstream music. In order to do this, I will first trace the history of indie music, and then move on to discuss its modern sounds and the identifications they assign. In addition to these issues, I will also evaluate notions of community, authenticity, production, and distribution within the movement. These sub-sections will serve as themes throughout the paper as I seek to flesh out a fuller understanding of the scene’s current state in the digital era. To reiterate before moving on, however, the interpretations that follow are based largely on my own subjective experiences in the scene. This approach is not meant to serve as means around the traditional ethnographic discourse, but rather as a more authentic way to portray the scene and the subjective interpretations that help to create it.
Chapter 2

Recognizing the Independent Music Scene: Identity and Distinction From the Mainstream Through the Music

With the Internet adding a level of anonymity to the independent music scene, how does one begin to identify members of the movement? Who are they? What do they look like? And how are they distinct from the mainstream? As the shared traits that once defined membership to a subculture seem to play far less of a role in the digital age, these questions become difficult to answer. Members of the virtual indie scene, however, still manage to merge under the shared schemata of its participants. Though Thatcher is no longer in power to push UK ravers together, and though the Bowery no longer represents the grimy meeting place for NY punks, the independent music scene has seemingly managed to adapt to these changes in technology, politics, and style. In order to begin exploring the modern virtual scene, however, a few questions must be posed. What is indie? What are the components that contribute to the formation of indie participants’ shared schemata? And how do they allow the independent scene to form? How has technology specifically affected the indie scene? And, more importantly, how is the indie scene distinct from the mainstream?

“Independent” Before the Internet

Where mainstream music is largely determined by the music’s aesthetic popular appeal, independent music has been characterized by its strict and unwavering DiY ideology. In other words, music that is independent can be understood as operating outside of the corporate world, instead championing self-production, self-release, and self-publicity. In light of this, independent music’s history must be traced by following the changing local and translocal sounds and identities that adhered to this strict ethical stance; from the post-war period in the United States
with Memphis soul and gospel labels such as King Records and Stax to UK punk and goth labels such as Rough Trade and Cherry Red to more modern grunge and folk labels like the now famous Sub Pop Records. Though the aesthetics ranged greatly among these indie movements, they all shared the same approach to music – they positioned themselves in opposition to the mainstream.

The earliest independent record labels that emerged were those that formed in post-war United States. Gospel and soul labels like Sun Records and King began releasing the rhythm and blues sounds of Tennessee, as well as early rock acts such as Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and Roy Orbison (Rogan 1992: Introduction). In the United Kingdom, by the 1950s and into the 60s, several producers and artists launched their own independent labels in order to create outlets for their work and rebel against the major record companies that controlled distribution power. (Rogan 1992: Introduction). The problem with these independent labels, however, was their inability to compete with the power of the unmatched major labels. Early independent labels lacked the organization and structure of later movements, providing them no support in either the marketplace or the media. Though the DIY ethic that has come to define the indie scene was present in the early days of US and UK music, these labels and artists lacked the cohesion and organization necessary to form a united scene. They were defeated in regards to both publicity and distribution.

With the formation of the National Association of Independent Record Distributors (NAIRD), now the Association of Independent Music, in the 1970s, independent labels were no longer operating on an individual level; members of the scene were now advocating for fairness, equity, and transparency. They were provided an infrastructure and foundation from which they could organize and promote trade and balance within the industry. Using NAIRD as support, the
punk rock era of the late 70s managed to extend itself beyond the reach of early independent movements, gaining a large increase in the number of indie labels and, at the same time, establishing a collective identity distinct from the mainstream. Recognized for its fast paced, raw sound and DIY ethic, the punk scene of the late 1970s was one of the earliest independent musical movements to form a cohesive and organized identity. Dick Hebdige suggests that this was largely a result of style. (Hebdige 1979:134) For Hebdige (as well as Eco), “style” is composed of objects that “may be viewed...as a sign.” (1979:134) In other words, the choices one makes in terms of what to wear are not just significant but also a reflection of the “socially prescribed roles and options.” (Hebdige 1979:134) The punks, however, with their ripped t-shirts, distinctly rebellious style and anti-authoritarian ideology, showed how these codes “are there to be used and abused,” according to Hebdige. (Hebdige 1979:134) In their “sartorial discourse” they effectively subverted the prescribed codes of the Thatcher era. (Hebdige 1979:134) In fundamentally challenging the corporate music world in this way, as an organized scene, the punk culture opened up a space for the independent shifts that followed and further cemented the independent scene’s position outside of the corporate framework.

By the late 1980s, the focus that had once been placed on bands like the Ramones and the Sex Pistols shifted to America’s Northwest, and Seattle became the epicenter for independent music as the grunge scene began to form. Sub Pop Records, the home to acts such as Nirvana, Dinosaur Jr., and Soundgarden, combined primal Americana rock with the disenchanted youth culture of the Reagan years. What resulted was a worldwide fascination with the grunge sound and culture – distorted guitars, contrasting dynamics, apathy, and flannel. Almost overnight, the grunge scene moved to the forefront of the music industry, and gained the attention of the mainstream media. This fascination with Seattle’s sound momentarily transitioned independent
alternative culture into the mainstream. As major label deals appeared for numerous independent artists, grunge made the movement away from small independent labels and introduced itself on the cover of magazines like Rolling Stone and People. Sub Pop was ultimately forced to sell 49 percent stake of the label to the Warner Music Group by 1995, and the true independent nature of the label was lost with its corporate association. (Sub Pop 2008) The alternative had in fact merged with the corporate world, leaving an opening for a new independent sound to emerge.

The starting point for independent music ideology in the pre-Internet era is its harsh rejection of mainstream music culture. Members of the independent scene, no matter the sound or movement, remain firmly embedded outside the artistic constraints of the corporate music framework. This acts as a basis for entry into the independent scene. Not only are sounds that are absent from radio and television often employed by indie artists, but the composition of the sound itself also represents a separation from popular music. Fans pride themselves on the hunt for this obscure music, and they take satisfaction in knowing the music represents a sharp contrast from what can be heard in more mainstream outlets. Dave Laing suggests in his essay “Listening to Punk,” that the rejection of mainstream music often centers on what is foregrounded in the musical composition. “Typically in popular music recordings what is foregrounded is the voice.” (Laing 1985:406) The voice takes center-stage in mainstream music, enabling listeners to easily comprehend the arrangement and understand the message of the lyrics. This is not the case with independent music, however. Shoegaze, for instance, often uses the voice as a subtle accent in the arrangement, focusing instead on the dance beats and associated experience that accompanies the music. Punk employs a similar approach, using the voice as an instrument, but rather than providing just an ambient layer to the sound, vocals are used to add an additional level of distortion. Indie artists consequently alienate listeners who are
not prepared for the distorted vocals, as singing is no longer available to use as an identifier. Form, in this case, seems to exceed the message. The collective experience is in this way placed ahead of any social or political communication. Following Laing’s line of thought then, the drive of indie is therefore not to seek the largest possible audience but to seek fans and listeners who actively appreciate the corresponding experience associated with the music.

Indie artists don’t just separate themselves from mainstream music through the sound they create, however. They also manage to distinguish their identity through production, promotion, and distribution. Though some movements may emphasize it more than others, the DIY ethic runs throughout indie music, encouraging experimentation and innovation. Corporate sponsorship of any capacity is avoided altogether within the independent scene, with indie groups maintaining a strict adherence to self-production, anticonsumerism, and musical eclecticism. Artists often can be found at merchandise tables both before and after performances, selling their hand-made t-shirts and self-pressed records. From hand-made zines to re-appropriated concert shirts to self-released vinyl, indie artists have continued to play active roles in various outlets of the music industry – promotion, distribution, production – and in doing so have maintained a sharp separation from the mainstream.

**Indie in the Internet Era**

With the introduction of file-sharing capabilities and video-uploading sites in the late 90s and early 2000s, aspiring artists and labels became able to more actively and affordably produce and promote their music. Today, musicians that would have otherwise gone unnoticed or remained at a local level now have access to an unmatched audience, allowing for niche scenes to form and flourish across the music industry. The independent music scene now finds itself on the same playing field with corporate labels, having equal access to this new distribution and
publicity technology. No longer are scenes limited to the geographic boundaries of their fanzines and flyers. With simply an Internet connection, musicians can upload songs and videos that can be seen by millions of potential consumers; major record companies no longer control the major flows of production or distribution that were once off limits to the indie scene. The global access offered by the Internet has consequently opened up the music market to an abundance of previously obscure and unheard independent sounds. With sites dedicated to particular styles and aesthetics, online users are presented with an organized collection of every sound created under the indie banner, from sub-Saharan psychedelia to Detroit techno. Along with this shift in availability, however, has come a shift in identity. As more and more scenes become visible to the population, independent identities that were once easily recognizable have blurred; black leather jackets and 120 BPM rhythms no longer act as identifiers to subculture participants, as notions of genre have been discarded to create one large, diverse independent scene.

As mentioned earlier, with so many diverse sounds flooding independent music, identifying and navigating the virtual scene becomes not just difficult but entirely subjective. Definitions, boundaries, and distinctions between independent musicians, critics, websites, and members inherently vary from person to person, regardless of whether or not they are considered an outsider or insider. Taking this into consideration, I have chosen to explore the sounds that I perceive to be the most prominent and influential within the larger independent community, taking into account my own personal biases, associations, and boundaries. In doing so, I plan to stay true to the subjective nature of the independent scene, as well as the subcultural competition it inspires among its members – the need to be perceived as the most authentic member of the scene. Moving forward then, I will survey the landscapes of several independent sounds, as well as the corresponding identities of their members, using my own observations and experiences,
coupled with research I have gained from independent sources I find to be most authentic within the community.

**Lo-Fi**

One of the first of these indie sounds to emerge extended from the foundations laid by late ‘70s punk, early 80’s California hardcore, and the Seattle grunge sound. Low-fidelity music, or lo-fi as it has come to be called, bases its aesthetic on the same strict DIY platform of these earlier subcultures, using cheap production equipment, broken instruments, and oftentimes 8-track or cassette tape recorders to achieve a distorted and filtered noise that hisses at the listener. Artists such as Wavves, Ty Segall, and Vivian Girls typically couple this noise-pop sound with lyrics about consuming drugs, partying, and being “bored.” (Williams 2009) They are clearly proud of the low-quality production of their recordings. They embrace the confrontational sound as their own, and at the same time they manage to make this clear to the listener. They glamorize the new-age DIY lifestyle, merging excessive California youth culture with the snotty-ness of downtown critics.

The strict DIY nature of the music extends into the collective identity of lo-fi musicians. Lo-fi groups use poor recording equipment not solely out of aesthetic choice (though more recently this has been a large factor) but also out of financial necessity – a class similarity exists among many lo-fi musicians. Artists typically do not have the financial means to afford quality production, so instead they embrace the aesthetic imperfection of the lo-fi equipment they can afford. This is, however, where the similarities stop among lo-fi artists, as various genders, sexualities, geographic locations, races, and ages are represented within this digital niche. The identities among lo-fi fans are as equally as diverse, though it is clear that groups such as Times New Viking and Best Coast attract individuals who fall within the 18-24 year-old age range. The
focus on consumption, emphasis on monetary constraints, and the outspoken angst that
accompanies lo-fi act as beacons for the disaffected teens and young adults of the digital age.
These fans embrace the fuzzy guitar tones and flaunt their apathetic attitudes. The music, in this
way, directly reflects the fans – neither care what anybody thinks because in their minds lo-fi
represents the most authentic sound.

Freak Folk

At the same time that lo-fi musicians were exploring the limits of noise and cheap
production, another independent sound was also emerging -- the freak folk aesthetic. Combining
acoustic instrumentation with influences such as avant-garde music, psychedelic pop, and
baroque pop, freak folk artists create long, experimental and often instrumental passages. (Van
Waes 2009) Freak Folk’s early roots can be traced to ‘60s acid folk artists like The Incredible
Strings Band and The Godz. (Van Waes 2009) These early exploratory folk artists transitioned
traditional acoustic folk songs into more psychedelic art songs, drawing sounds from exotic and
musically overlooked locations like Morocco and India. (Van Waes 2009) The folk experiments
of the ‘60s and ‘70s have been expanded on, however, by the new generation of freak folk artists,
such as the Brooklyn-based Woods and the improvisational group Akron/Family. A name that
deserves special attention in the independent freak folk resurgence, however, is Animal
Collective. Composed of members, Avey Tare, Panda Bear, Deakin, and Geologist, Animal
Collective emerged from the avant-garde folk tastes of its Ivy league members, and employs
antiquated synthesizers, acoustic guitars, and household objects to create a freak folk sound that
fits within the digital context of the group’s origins. (Simonini 2005)

Closely tied with Animal Collective’s avant-garde folk leanings is the use of
hallucinogenic drugs, specifically LSD and psilocybin mushrooms. Members of the group have
expressed their own personal use in various interviews and use at live performances is widespread among attendees. Live freak folk shows are often accompanied by psychedelic light shows, costumes, and various artistic accents. Along with hallucinogenic drugs, these additional elements help to create a specific psychological space in which the music is to be heard. Consequently, acts such as Animal Collective and Woods, have been associated with the countercultural identity of the late ’60s. The dedication to experimentation in all aspects of the freak folk sound and culture directly reflects that of the hippie movement; both the hippies and the new-age freak folk artists create music not for the sake of music but for the corresponding experience it provides.

Though there are strong comparisons to be made between these movements and their approach to music, freak folk manages to slightly separate its sound and identity from the counterculture through more modern elements. Rather than adopting the open, free-flowing lifestyle of the hippies, freak folk represents a much more exclusive club. The sporadic, experimental nature of the music is often a divisive component among music listeners. Like the exclusive education of its members, Animal Collective’s music is only for those ears that are sophisticated enough to comprehend the experience that comes along with it. Freak folk members therefore manage to combine the liberal leanings and freethinking lifestyle of the counterculture, with the ivory tower exclusivity of its avant-garde sound.

World Music

In addition to inspiring new-age freak folk artists, the acid folk artists of the late ’60s and early ’70s also sparked the emergence of world music. World music has been described as the fusion of popular Western sounds with traditional indigenous music, examples of which, on the mainstream stage, include worldbeat, Paul Simon’s *Graceland*, and Peter Gabriel’s work with
Pakistani Sufi singer, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. (World Fusion Music) In more recent years, however, world music artists have emerged in the independent scene. With blogs such as Awesome Tapes From Africa, the recent interest in sub-Saharan cell phone music, and the revival of Arab musician Omar Souleyman’s work on the US-based Sublime Frequencies record label, world music has become an established sound within independent music thanks in large part to the tremendous reach offered by the Internet. With the widespread availability of digital technology, world musicians have begun to combine musical aesthetics that were previously off limits. Pop music, big beat music, and ambient music now accompany the traditional sounds of ethnic music. The larger role of synthesizers and other electronic equipment in world music has opened the door for new and innovative sounds with their own distinct ethnic twist.

Due to such a strong influence by indigenous music, world musicians’ identities are often tied to geography. While world artists certainly overlap in certain musical elements, the different ethnic sounds they incorporate invoke differing associations in the listener. The music of Omar Souleyman, for instance, which consists of pop and folk sounds from Syria, cannot directly be linked to the music released on Sahel Sounds, an independent record label dedicated to West African guitar music, despite the clear overlap in their use of Western synthesizer-based music. World music is therefore a very fragmented independent scene. While certain areas have larger factions than others, such as the Sahara, they are not large enough to warrant their own movement. Like the broader independent scene at issue, world music is combined of various sounds, identities and cultures. Listeners are consequently forced to notice the subtle elements of the formal composition of the music in order to position the artist in the accurate cultural context. They cannot rely simply on the blanket phrase “world music” to determine cultural identity.
Determining the identity of world music fans is even more difficult, as geographic ties and influences on fandom play far less of a role in the Internet age. While the majority of fans may be members of the ethnic traditions from where the music originates, many members are not. The Internet has broken the geographic barriers of cultural tradition and made indigenous music available to a much broader audience, both increasing and diversifying the identities of its members. Live performances and blogs provide a meeting place for fans of world music, but trends among gender, sexuality, race or lifestyle are difficult to discern in these locations. What is clear, however, is that fans of independent world music, like those of lo-fi and freak folk, pride themselves on the detailed awareness and exclusivity of their musical taste. Though a small number of fans have nationalistic or cultural ties to the music, most appreciate its obscurity; the music is Westernized enough to provide the listener with some familiarity, but it also maintains enough foreign influence to satisfy the independent enthusiast who wishes to separate himself from the mainstream.

**Chillwave**

The sound that has perhaps come closest to encompassing indie as a whole is a type of music that incorporates various elements of lo-fi rock, freak folk, and world – chillwave. Dubbed chillwave by the illusive online blogger “Carles” for its relaxing beats, this indie movement has become an influential force within the larger independent scene. (Garin) Combining elements of new wave, psychedelic pop, IDM (Intelligent Dance Music), and ambient house, chillwave trades “on the memories of electropop from the 1980s, with bouncing, blipping-dance music hooks (and often weaker lead voices),” reminiscent of early shoegaze and dream-pop artists such as My Bloody Valentine and The Verve but with less aggression. (Pareles) Artists such as Ariel Pink, Neon Indian, Washed Out, and Toro y Moi use extensive back-catalogs of obscure
influences to help create a sound and image that maintains the sophistication of lo-fi, freak folk, and world but also provides a more encompassing aesthetic.

This “glo-fi” movement, as it has been called, borrows the use of cheap production, instrumental passages, and non-Western influences, and forms a sound that is distinctively and purposefully independent from the mainstream. From the poor production quality to the exotic samples and loops to long psychedelic solos, Chillwave has nearly exhausted the modern independent scene’s musical styling’s and developed its own genre – a height that no other indie sound has yet reached, and an issue un-faced by non-chillwave artists. Chillwave artists, however, are skeptical of making this claim. Alan Palomo, the lead vocalist for Brooklyn via Texas-based group Neon Indian, is quick to question the validity of the connection between these groups: “Now it’s just a blogger or some journalist that can find three or four random bands around the country and tie together a few commonalities between them and call it a genre.”

This kind of apprehension runs common among chillwave artists, and with such separation between them, no true genre has been able to form.

With such an all-encompassing sound, chillwave attracts fans from various independent niches. It is not uncommon for someone to be both a member of the chillwave sound and a fan of world or lo-fi. Fans consequently range greatly in terms of age, race, gender, and sexuality; and, other than common musical tastes and a shared devotion to “chilling” as the name implies, no collective traits exist to identify members. It should be noted, however, that, like the fans of the sounds it draws from, chillwave fans maintain a deep appreciation for the obscurity that separates their music from that of the mainstream. You will not hear chillwave music on the radio or on television. And though it can be found on the Internet, its heavy electronic effects,
filtered vocals, and obscure influences act as natural deterrents for those not serious about engaging with the music. This is the way both fans and artists of the movement like their music.

**Indie As A Whole**

One problem with having so many independent genres is that the nuances between their respective identities begin to overlap. There is no simple way to distinguish members within the glo-fi sound itself, let alone distinguish them from those of the lo-fi, freak folk or world sounds. Independent sounds have therefore seemed to coalesce under Raymond Williams’ concept of a constantly changing cultural form. (Williams 1956: 37) In other words, indie has become one large scene composed of various sounds that are perpetually forming, evolving, and dying out. It is this trajectory, however, that allows the competition among independent scene members to play out – fans are constantly seeking the most authentic sound, while artists continue to explore and create what they perceive to be most authentic. The overlap of identities, exploration of sound, and desire for authenticity in fact drive and propel the independent scene, allowing for it to flourish and continue growing. Yet, despite the differences among modern indie sounds and their corresponding identities (or lack thereof), the indie scene has managed to establish itself on a set of very basic principles; several similarities run common throughout the diverse array of subgenres of modern indie music.

Like the pre-digital independent participants, modern indie members maintain a strict stance against mainstream culture and the corporate music world. In fact, with the assistance of digital technology, indie musicians have further isolated themselves away from the corporate system; today, they are able to more easily practice the DiY lifestyle using the Internet. But with such a focus on technology, it should come as no surprise that the indie scene has been affected. In perhaps the most noticeable shift, the indie scene, for the first time, has transitioned into a
virtual community. Indie members can connect with one another from around the world and engage in discussion. They can share ideas and collaborate on projects. And they can even promote and distribute their music on an international level. According to Bakardjieva, these online communities are no different than ‘real-life’ communities – they “cannot be declared inferior…simply because they lack face-to-face materiality.” (Bakardijieva 2005:3) The indie scene consequently has unlimited reach. New sounds can be created and discovered, and the competition for knowledge that has come to define the indie scene continues to occur.

Oddly enough though, there also remains a strong commitment to tangible media within the independent music scene. Online record distributors and mail order services provide members of the indie scene with the ability to purchase low-numbered runs of vinyl records, cassette tapes, and cd-rs from small labels and directly from the artists themselves. In true DIY fashion, modern indie artists and their fans have maintained an appreciation for the intimacy of physical releases. This is not to say virtual releases don’t exist; they do. In fact, most upcoming artists are discovered by indie labels through virtual streaming sites such as Soundcloud and Bandcamp – websites that allow musicians to create accounts where they can store, sell, and share their music. This commitment to physical releases, however, reveals much about the indie scene’s treatment of music, as well as their relation to the mainstream music culture, a space where digital transactions have actually exceeded physical.

In the following chapter, I will work to explore indie’s relationship to music through the various experiences I have had at different independent meeting places. In looking at record shops, concerts, and blogs, I hope to gain a better understanding of the value system within the scene, as well as how that value system is determined. Establishing the structure of authenticity within the scene will ultimately allow for a better understanding of the relationship
between the indie movement and the mainstream. In order to do this, I will continue to explore notions of community, production, and distribution, taking into consideration my own interpretations and perceptions, while also looking at the interactions and exchanges between indie members.
Chapter 3

Record Shops, Concerts, and Blogs: Experiences with Authenticity at Independent Meeting Places

For a subculture to subsist must there be forums or spaces where its members can interact? As mentioned before, the punk scene had its grimy, Bowery clubs. The ravers of the UK dance scene had their squat parties and weekend festivals. And the Philadelphia ravers had their Old City nightclubs and special event nights. The modern independent scene has adopted many of these same meeting places, but it has also extended itself to broader arenas. From multi-day summer festivals to record shops and squat concerts to online blogs and forums, indie scene members have a number of spaces to interact with one another, and consequently help to better cement the movement as an organized, structured, and discernable subculture. At these various venues, specific elements and interactions occur that contribute to both individual and collective identity. The largest contributing factor to these identities is the notion of authenticity. From the locations audience members stand at a concert to the spatial organization of vinyl records in record stores, even the smallest details contribute to the individual and collective images of the movement and at the same time separate them from mainstream participants. But what are these subtleties? And what exactly do they say about indie’s individual members, as well as the subculture as a whole?

Record Stores

In my research I have visited several record stores throughout the country (two of which I will focus on) and, though they all proudly showcased their independent reputation, I witnessed various differences and nuances among them. These subtleties all, however, still manage to construct and represent the individual store’s identity, and at the same time, reflect the
independent stance they champion. One of the first stores I visited was Love Garden in Lawrence, Kansas. For those that have not been there, Lawrence is primarily a college town, home to the University of Kansas, and as such it is filled with creative, artistic, liberally minded young people and adults, a small reprieve from the conservative leanings of the state. The main shopping district in Lawrence is on Massachusetts Street, a long strip of old buildings with a number of independent boutiques, bars, and restaurants. This is where you can find Love Garden. The storefront has a colorful exterior, while its windows are neatly organized with flyers and advertisements. Upon entering onto the hardwood floors, I was greeted with shelves of refurbished turntables, amplifiers, cd players, speakers, and tape decks to the right, and rows of vinyl records to the left. On the walls above the vinyl were neatly displayed rare records and popular new independent releases – “staff picks” – including artists such as Autechre, Scott Walker, and electronic composer Andy Stott. The vinyl is divided into two sections within the store – new and used – with roughly a 3:1 ratio favoring used. The only other products offered in the store are a number of store t-shirts, a small shelf of cassette tapes, and a small offering of used CDs, found in the very back corner of the shop. The shop itself, however, is an open space, quite large with high ceilings. It has a home-y and airy feel, with the shop dogs lying in their beds and alternative music playing over the speakers, leaving customers with space to roam freely and browse.

This open and approachable feel also extends itself to the staff – mostly 30 year-old white males and females dressed casually in jeans, sneakers, and flannel or a t-shirt. The attitude among employees was friendly, and several times I heard them greet various customers by name or help them find a particular item. Of the various patrons, types ranged. Everyone from college students to middle-age vinyl collectors, and hipsters to older shoppers in search of a favorite
childhood record entered the store during the hour and a half I was there. What the customers and employees clearly did share, however, was an appreciation for the shops manicured and meticulous assortment of records. Love Garden offers a vast array of sounds, from Nigerian tribal music to British house and ambient music to extensive jazz and soul selections. With so much to offer, navigating the store became an important part of the shopping experience for me. Regulars to the store could be seen bouncing between apparently random sections with focus, as they seemed to have adopted a particular strategy for tackling the inventory. Other customers could be seen browsing the aisles with no specific artist in mind. For these customers, communication was an important part of finding an item. Language within the store, however, is quite complex and precise due to the number of genres represented on the racks. References to obscure sounds and sub-genres, record labels, and associated acts were frequently heard in the shop, and store employees oftentimes commented on the items being purchased or sought out by customers with critiques or recommendations.

The next independent record store I visited was Other Music, the acclaimed East Village music shop devoted to underground sounds. Located near NYU’s campus in downtown Manhattan, Other Music is surrounded by various boutiques, coffee shops, and bars, most of which maintain the same alternative ideology. The store itself is small. The exterior falls in line with the surrounding buildings, claiming the same older, East Village architecture. The windows are simple with minimalist advertisements. Upon entering the store, it was clear that the interior had stayed with this theme, keeping white walls and simple track lighting. No posters line the walls; instead they promote their favorite records and top sellers above the main stock quite like Love Garden does with their “staff picks.” Most of the space in Other Music is divided equally between used cds and vinyl. I found CDs throughout the left side of the store upon entrance,
while vinyl was organized in racks along the right side of the store. The store, however, also offered a decent sized selection of DVDS, independent zines and foreign music magazines such as UK’s *Wire* magazine. Over the speakers, music plays loudly, typically with one of the many underground genres which Other Music claims as their specialty: indie, electronic, avant-garde, psychedelia, international, vintage rock, folk. The shop has a very efficient size and organization to it; the stock is neatly selected and arranged, and very few advertisements or decorations exist other than the store’s merchandise.

Due to the lack of space in Other Music, interactions within the store were tricky. The knowledgeable and talented employees (many of them are also musicians within the independent scene) for the most part remained silent behind the counter, leaving as much space for customers to browse as possible. The staff was diverse, while their attire was understated – minimalist graphic t-shirts, slim-fitting pants, and long hair. Even while checking out at the register, communication with staff members was minimal. Interactions between customers were different, however; the small size made it difficult to maneuver the aisles, oftentimes forcing me to wait for someone to finish searching the racks of music or for me to butt in front of them. Frequenters to the store clearly knew how to maneuver between sections, dodging quickly between other customers with focus. For others, however, the shop was clearly intimidating, as neither the staff nor the section titles offered any assistance. There is no freedom to roam in Other Music, unlike in Love Garden, and, coupled with the store’s precisely manicured selection, only certain customers will be attracted to it. So what is it exactly that customers are coming here for? Since 1995, Other Music has provided music aficionados with, as their name suggests, some of the most obscure and innovative sounds in modern music; the store bases its entire aesthetic on the sounds of fringe movements and nothing else. From Polynesian electronica to modern reggae
and soul, Other Music meticulously curates its stock, and intentionally works against the sounds of corporate music and the stock size of big box music retailers. More recently, Other Music has further explored the independent scene, extending itself into production as well. Operating under the name Other Music Recording Co, it has recently started to release music from artists such as Ex Cops, Nude Beach, and Shintaro Sakamoto.

Both Love Garden and Other Music, though different in many ways, speak very much to the notion of authenticity within the independent community. In both cases, the hierarchy of the independent scene and its assets of subcultural capital are directly determined. One of the ways this is accomplished is through the spatial organization of the store. In both Love Garden and Other Music, particular emphasis is placed on certain items; advertisements in the window support a specific artist, albums on display draw larger attention, and the weight given to certain products - in this case vinyl records - suggests that they are in fact more important. Customers recognize these details, and are attracted to them. In my most recent visit to Love Garden, numerous individuals purchased records from the “staff picks” display, including the most recent Spiritualized release, while I seemed to be the only person venturing to the small cassette tape shelf. To customers both in and out of the independent scene, these items are conceived of as more authentic than others and, consequently, knowledge or possession of them provides the individual with a form of subcultural capital within the store and independent scene.

This idea must be taken a step further, however, and attention must be paid to the specific artists, genres, and labels given weight in the stores. In the case of Love Garden, the veteran independent artist Spiritualized’s new album came to represent the “best” or “coolest” recent release to both the employees and the customers. The physical album was quite literally lifted above the rest in an attempt to display its worth, and those purchasing it were granted capital. A
similar idea can be applied to one of my experiences while visiting Other Music. As loud tribal tunes blared overhead in the East Village music shop in the fall of 2012, I noticed several customers intrigued by the sounds from above who ultimately purchased the album that had been playing. In this case, the silent staff used the store speakers to voice their praise of Sahel Sound’s Alkibar Gignor. In addition to playing it over the speakers, however, the staff had also made sure to display a copy of the record at the checkout counter, further emphasizing the album’s coolness. Vinyl records are therefore not the only kind of capital, the artists and genres one listens to – in this case African tribal music – also reflect an individual and collective identity, leaving some to become seemingly more authentic than others.

Language is also a reflection of authenticity within record stores. As mentioned before, with so many genres and sub-genres, properly describing and identifying the music is a challenging but necessary part of existing within the independent community. During one of my many visits to Love Garden, I found my own understanding of the indie language being challenged. As I was purchasing Sam Flax’s *Age Waves* tape, the employee behind the counter (who I had met before) asked, “What kind of music is this?” Today, this can be a difficult question to answer – “Rock” or “Jazz” is no longer specific enough to understand the diverse sounds at play in indie music. Vocabulary within record stores must also reflect knowledge of sub-genres, fringe movements, and similar artists. As I was asked this question, I thought for a moment, and said, “It’s pretty similar to the other lo-fi artists out now, Mikal Cronin, Jay Reatard, and stuff like that.” Fortunately, my answer was sufficient for the employee, he explained his appreciation for those artists, and said that he would “have to check it out.” This interaction, however, reveals an important aspect of authenticity and hierarchy within the indie scene. Listening to the music is no longer the only part of being a fan or supporter of
independent culture; one also has to have an in-depth understanding of its nuanced and evolving language if they hope to be taken seriously in the community.

Concerts

Fans of independent music do not just meet at record stores, however. Loft concerts, bar shows, and independent gallery performances have also become meetings places for indie members. With intimate settings, a lack of corporate sponsorship, and oftentimes drugs and/or alcohol, concerts remain an important space for understanding the nuances among members, the culture, and their organization. During my time within the independent community I have attended a number of these performances, including impromptu squat shows in warehouses, multi-day independent festivals, and various small venue performances. In looking at the interactions that occur at these shows, along with evaluating the subcultural capital that is exchanged, the independent hierarchy becomes clearer, and the notions that help to construct it become apparent. I will look at two of the past performances I have attended – a warehouse concert in Kansas City, Missouri and a three-day festival in Chicago, Illinois – and work to unpack the various interactions and exchanges that occur within each scene.

The first of these two concerts I went to see was a quickly put together show involving two bands – Lower Dens and the headliner, North Carolina electro-pop group, Future Islands. I had heard about the show earlier in the day after reading a posting on an online forum, and decided, along with a friend of mine, to go. The show was said to be taking place at midnight at a warehouse space known as the Pistol Social Club in the West Bottoms of Kansas City, a primarily industrial and empty part of the city. We arrived casually late – roughly 12:30 – because we both figured it was unlikely the show would start on time. The space we entered was a two-story tall, brick warehouse. The inside was unfinished but rugs had been placed in a
section of the large, open space and musical equipment was being set up in a corner. Old televisions were littered and stacked throughout the room, and cameras captured the 9-person audience, transmitting what was occurring in the room through each TV. There was no stage, two cases of beer were available, and the bands were taking donations for gas money. My friend and I made our way to a table near the entrance and began listening to the first performance from Lower Dens. Some members of the crowd slowly bobbed their heads while standing; and others sat and stared, while Future Islands mingled with event goers. As my friend and I took our standing positions roughly ten feet in front of the band for the second performance, others began to do the same. Future Islands is notorious for having upbeat and exciting performances, and this performance revealed why - balloons were dropped from the ceiling, the lead singer ripped and tore his shirt while crying, and the crowd danced, while my friend and I bobbed along in observation until almost 3 AM.

Though most attendees at this show fell within the 18 - 25 age bracket, the crowd still managed to reflect an array of ethnicities, genders, races, and socio-economic backgrounds given the size. Most of the crowd maintained a casual appearance in their attire, wearing shorts, t-shirts, and sneakers, and most everyone in attendance was friendly and approachable, including the performers. For most of the evening, the crowd was dancing or bouncing along to the music and, due to the intimacy, crowd participation was encouraged. One female audience member replaced the lead singer for a song, several individuals sang along, and two male audience members drank beer throughout the show with the lead singer. In this way, the show seemed much more like performance art than a concert; it was interactive, collaborative, and aesthetically different from typical staged concerts. By the end of the performance, audience members shook the band members' hands, and several individuals stayed to mingle. The
performances themselves were quite good despite the poor equipment in the venue. And both bands seemed genuinely pleased with how the show was ultimately conducted.

The second show I attended was a three-day festival located in Union Park in Chicago, Illinois. Composed of numerous up-and-coming independent artists such as Washed Out, Kurt Vile, and Neon Indian, as well as larger indie acts like Pavement, LCD Soundsystem, and Raekwon, the festival ran from roughly 1 PM to midnight, with each artist doing approximately an hour long set. The park itself is located in the western part of the downtown Chicago loop. Festivalgoers have easy access to public transportation, and the park offers some reprieve from the Chicago summer heat. Two main stages were set up in the park, as well as a smaller third stage, so multiple performances were able to occur at once without any of them being disturbed.

Food, alcohol, and water were available for sale at particularly high prices ($6.00 for a medium-sized bottle of water), and only a handful of bathrooms were set up throughout the festival. Multiple stands selling merchandise were scattered around park grounds, and VIP sections were partitioned off for those who had purchased access. On the first day, my friend and I made our way to the middle of a crowd to see Lightning Bolt, an experimental noise and art punk duo from Providence, Rhode Island. It was the middle of the afternoon and temperatures were well over 100 degrees. The stage towered over the crowd, which consisted mostly of teenagers and hip young couples. As the band begin to play, however, the crowd quickly rearranged, as several large mosh pits emerged to the thrashing of Lightning Bolt’s drums. As the couples retreated from the stage, a breakdown in the audience occurred – it was divided into sections based entirely on how the audience members were reacting to the music. Some individuals continued to mosh – mostly sweaty young males – and some danced, including us. A majority of the crowd, however, stood still as Lightning Bolt performed their one-hour long set. Little communication
occurred during the performance, as the band focused entirely on their music, something they are known for doing. By the end of the set, audience members were visibly exhausted; numerous people retreated to what shade was still available and many sat with water and fans waiting for the next performance.

The following day, my friend and I decided to see some calmer musicians perform, so we made our way to the smaller third stage to see Philadelphia native, Kurt Vile. The third stage I found to be much more of an intimate setting than the previous stages, and most of the audience sat on blankets and listened or stood in the back and watched from a distance. Audience members were dressed according to the heat; meaning shorts, t-shirts, and tank tops were all popular items among festivalgoers. As Kurt Vile took the stage, audience members rocked along and many mouthed the lyrics. Only a select few young males made their way to the front of the stage, slightly dancing and waving their arms to the music, a much tamer version of the mosh pits at Lightning Bolt. Throughout the show, Kurt Vile acknowledged the crowd and oftentimes supplied stories and explanations for his songs. During these slight interludes, numerous audience members, mostly older couples, left and returned with beer, water, and food, while many people smoked both cigarettes and marijuana. The crowd at the Kurt Vile show, and the festival as a whole, offered a diverse representation of race, gender, ethnicity, and geography but, like those at the Lightning Bolt performance, only a little difference existed among socio-economic backgrounds, especially when compared to those in attendance at the much smaller Future Islands concert.

There was, however, a slight schism between attendees that seemed to correlate with the energy of the nine Future Island concert attendees; many seemingly committed fans, mostly males in the 18 – 25 age range, seemed to challenge the rest of the audience at these shows, often
rushing the stage, moshing, and camping out well before a set was to begin, as if to assert their unrivaled fandom for the music. The remainder of the fans took a much less concerned approach; oftentimes skipping shows altogether, missing large portions to get food or water, and leaving early. Two different groups therefore seemed to emerge – the diehard independent fans that choose music over beer and the yuppie couples who came after reading about how hip the festival was expected to be in their paper. This disconnect between independent fans further reflects the hierarchical structure of the subculture. The committed fans seem to gain some value from their positioning at the concert, as well as through their dancing, arm waving, and head bobbing, while they look down upon the remainder of the fans who come off as less committed to the movement. Proximity and dancing have consequently become important parts of authenticity at concert events. Like the energetic theatrics of Future Islands’ lead vocalist, or the moshing from audience members at the Lightning Bolt show, those with most visible authenticity garner the most credentials within the community.

This kind of audience participation plays into the notion of independent events more as performative art rather than simply a rock concert. With acts such as Dan Deacon, who employs massive audience-driven dances, and Lightning Bolt, whose fans share an appreciation for violent flailing, independent acts have become about more than music; they also champion collaboration, experimentation, and free expression. Concerts therefore take on a more atmospheric quality, quite like the trance-inducing, psychedelic concerts of Animal Collective. Authenticity is applied to artists and musicians that are capable of transporting listeners to another space, and doing it, more specifically, through means that are rarely if ever witnessed at large scale concert series or mega-festivals such as Coachella or Bonnaroo. With drugs, light shows, collaboration, improvisation, and guest appearances, independent acts bring the audience
into the creative process and reject the tightly controlled creative aspect of the corporate music world. Fans that come closest to experiencing the music, or in some cases come a part of it, are in turn viewed as those most authentic, and are positioned further up in the hierarchy than audience members in the back.

What became really interesting for me when comparing these shows, however, was discovering that the same knowledge of independent culture needed in record stores is also needed in the crowd. Audience members who were capable of singing along to the lyrics or of shouting out song requests when asked, immediately positioned themselves as true fans, while those who simply enjoyed the music appeared less involved in the community. This was clear at nearly every show I attended during my research, regardless of crowd size, venue, or location. Being a part of the independent community also means understanding the catalogs and backgrounds for the artists and musicians within it. Even specific comments directed at the crowd by the artist can reflect the nuanced nature of the language that accompanies the music. While seeing New Jersey folk group, Real Estate, the crowd was informed that “Bradford” (Bradford being Bradford Cox of experimental rock group Deerhunter) would be coming on stage as well. Whispers shot around the crowd as to who “Bradford” was, while a select few audience members began clapping and chanting. Those aware of Real Estate’s “Bradford” reference in this case came to reflect the true followers of the scene. They are not only committed to the music; they also take the time to learn the facts and members of the subculture. These kinds of instances have become commonplace at independent concerts, and again play into the idea of collaboration within the movement. Artists are collaborating with other artists and fans are taking a more active role in the creation process.
Blogs

The newest (and perhaps most frequented) space for indie members to connect with one another is online. Blogs, in many ways, have become the main source of information, communication, and collaboration for those in the indie scene. Artists are able to submit music and contact blog operators about new projects, which bloggers can then filter and publicize accordingly. Due to the ease and immediacy of the Internet, fans are capable of attaining information related to the scene at unprecedented speed and volume. In my own time exploring the blogosphere, I have visited countless blogs dedicated to a vast range of music from which I have developed a large portion of my opinions regarding authenticity, as well as my style, taste, and understanding of the scene. In looking at perhaps the most recognizable indie music blog, I hope to express more clearly the value system (in addition to the themes of sound, style, community, production and distribution) of the indie scene, but do so in an entirely new context – virtually. Doing so will provide another useful (and necessary) dimension to our understanding of the indie scene, allowing to better identify the differences in the scene from the pre-digital era and consequently better recognize the relationship between indie and the mainstream.

When discussing blogs and music websites one should first look to Pitchfork Media. Now based out of Chicago, Illinois, Pitchfork began in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1995 as the product of Ryan Schreiber, a teenager with no previous writing or journalism experience. (Itzkoff 2006) Schreiber reportedly began the site in attempt to provide the Internet with the virtual equivalent to the fanzines of the punk scene, supplying frequently updated news and information regarding independent music. Today, Pitchfork averages approximately 240,000 readers per day, and more than 1.5 million unique visitors per month. (Itzkoff 2006) It currently stands as the most frequented independent music source online. (Itzkoff 2006) But what makes Pitchfork this
popular? Aesthetically, Pitchfork is primarily a simplistic site – black fonts are used on a white background, with photos, album covers, and links organized in both lists and blocks throughout the page. Along the top of the screen run advertisements for various products (both corporate and independent companies), while the page title and menu bar are positioned directly below, offering links to various pages including “News,” “Reviews,” “Tracks,” “Features,” “Best New Music,” “Nothing Major,” and “Staff lists.” Articles offer similarly traditional content, including reviews, interviews, concert recaps, and daily news stories. In many ways, Pitchfork offers the same services provided by a countless number of both virtual and physical music resources. So what separates Pitchfork from these other publications?

To begin, let us first visit the writing style. Abandoning traditional journalistic writing, Pitchfork opts for a far more conversational tone. Numerous pop culture references can be found embedded throughout articles and reviews, and rather than adopt the traditional third-person point-of-view, writers typically write in the first-person, oftentimes directly addressing the reader. With these elements in mind, Pitchfork’s writing style seems to be very much a rejection of traditional journalistic discourse. Value is placed not so much on the content of the stories, but how that content is reflected upon and presented to the fans. Stories that include obscure references, indie jargon, and atypical syntactical construction are given more weight than more straightforward journalism pieces. In my many visits to the site, articles at times came off as overwhelming, as I felt bombarded by re-appropriated adjectives and ultimately lost in obscurity. Interestingly, though, I also felt as if this was the author’s intention. Though articles are conversational in tone, they at times come across as challenges to the reader. It seems as though the author - who in many ways has come to embody the aca-fan as put forward by Henry Jenkins – wishes for his content to be overwhelming so that the obscure knowledge he has of the scene
reigns supreme over the less educated reader. This competition that in turn drives the indie scene, in this way, is not limited to purely physical spaces. It also extends online. This writing style has several implications beyond just these, however. For one, the writers at Pitchfork adamantly reinforce the notion of community. Rather than maintain a barrier between tastemaker and fan, lines begin to blur. Though articles represent a form of competition, readers still find themselves drawn into them with words such as “our” and “we,” making it seem as though, that through their opinions and inclusion, they are actively taking part in the construction of the larger indie movement. It should also be noted that Pitchfork employs approximately 150 different staff writers – not to mention the many guest writers, musicians, and other scene members involved in the publication – to contribute daily to the site. In doing so, a network of indie members is established across the globe. Where once a journalist was just that, a journalist, Pitchfork’s approach to music journalism has allowed for identities to overlap. Now, fans, artists, producers, and promoters can become journalists, and vice versa.

Along with the many staff writers and guest writers comes the issue of subjectivity. Like most music review sources, no aggregate scores are composed as with sites such as Metacritic, and no quantitative breakdowns exist to explain reviews. In this way, Pitchfork very much channels the competitive nature of the indie scene - the writers too seek to discover and promote the most seemingly authentic sounds and do so in a way that reflects their knowledge of the scene. When discussing subjectivity, however, there is no better place to look than with what is actually published. Pitchfork has long been associated with “breaking” new bands (and act that has garnered them significant cultural currency), specifically emphasizing the more lo-fi, bedroom sound created by guitar-based rock groups such as Arcade Fire, Broken Social Scene, Wolf Parade, and of course Bon Iver. (Shaer 2006) With this specific focus, however, Pitchfork
has often been criticized for having too narrow of coverage, with some individuals going as far as claiming that the site centers itself on creating hype around particular sounds, styles, and artists – Animal Collective and the freak folk movement quickly come to mind. (Shaer 2006) Regardless of the validity of these allegations, they do in fact point to a truth – in the publishing world, and more specifically the indie music world, hype and confrontation are good for business. This isn’t to say that Pitchfork’s obtusely constructed reviews and preference for lo-fi, downtempo rock are intentional choices. Rather, it seems to me that Pitchfork, like every other member of the indie scene, is participating in the subjective competition for authenticity. It just so happens that with such a broad viewership, reader reactions inevitably spark further debate and, in turn, readership rises. It is perhaps these claims, however, that get to the very heart of the indie scene. For Pitchfork, these artists are the most authentic, and their biases and subjectivity are incapable of being separated from those artists.

**Conclusions on Authenticity**

Pitchfork is by no means exempt or excluded from the competitive structure of the independent music scene, quite the opposite in fact. However, the flaws and complaints noted by other journalists and readers are issues not with Pitchfork exclusively but with the indie scene as a whole. As I also witnessed at the various concerts and record shops mentioned before, authenticity, and the amorphous nature of that term, can be found in every aspect of the independent movement, from our styles, preferences, and identifications to our interactions and cultural practices. For indie members, this is the very nature of the scene, the game, the challenge. In the following chapter, I will move away from my own experiences to those of other members in the scene in order to create a clearer portrait of how the indie scene functions. In speaking with various members of the indie scene, including artists, producers, and label owners,
I hope to continue to explore the subjective aspects of the scene, as well as the notions I have been following – community, production, distribution, and authenticity.
Up to this point, my exploration of the independent music scene has included attempts to convey the diverse landscape of its sounds and meeting places, as well as the boundaries, language, and identities that help to compose it. With this chapter, however, my focus will move away from my own subjective understanding of the movement, to the subjective perspectives of other members within the scene. In my research, I have been able to speak with various members of the independent community from around the world – critics, bloggers, label owners, and musicians - and have gathered their own interpretations and understandings of how the movement defines itself and functions within the current post-digital era. From their relationship with technology to their understanding of business ethics, these active indie members may employ different approaches in their contributions to the scene but it is these diverse understandings that help to define the movement as a whole. Therefore, using these various viewpoints, I will attempt to broaden the scope of analysis of the independent community, and explore how these subjective interpretations of the scene help to shape its sound, style, sense of community, production and distribution practices, as well as its collective identity and distinction from the mainstream.

Community

The sense of community that surrounds the independent movement has existed since independent’s early years such as with the Memphis blues sound. Quite unsurprisingly, this notion still remains a fundamental cornerstone for the indie scene and its members. Though geographic boundaries no longer exist to push participants together, indie members still manage to maintain close, personal relationships – both virtual and actual - with other members. For
many of the indie scene members I interviewed, these relationships grew out of childhood friendships, as well as local interaction, a characteristic reminiscent of the pre-digital era. One of the first of these interviews that I conducted was with field recording artist Kevin Greenspon. Based out of Los Angeles, Greenspon blends ambient, electronic, drone, and harsh noise compositions into shorter songs, acting as “miniature film scores.” Greenspon’s musical process and independent outlook, however, largely stem from those who surround him. “My best friends are all doing labels or making art/music too, and we’ve been helping each other for years.” For Greenspon, it is these close, local relationships that help to provide some immediate sense of community in the vast virtual scene. His friends give guidance, collaborate, and assist in many ways, and he does the same for them. Greenspon even went on to explain how these personal relationships invoked in him “a real sense of brotherhood.” Independent members are not in competition for Greenspon, but collaboration; the main concern in his localized movement is the creative process, and members seek to help in that process in any way they can. In this way, Greenspon’s post-digital independent scene allows for the same local and translocal factions to emerge, maintaining the same type of close-knit relationships as those prior to the introduction of the Internet, but it also provides members with a broader, less personal forum to participate within as well.

This isn’t to say that the virtual independent scene does not invoke the same sense of community as local movements, however. For Christian Schick, a blogger and musician based out of Northern California, the Internet provides an avenue for more isolated independent participants to connect with one another, and in fact allow them to feel as though they are a part of a larger community despite not meeting face to face. “A lot of these people know each other, hang out, and collaborate, and also network with each other online. But it’s also as if this
signal/approach kind of caught on with disparate, unacquainted artists loosely scattered across
the US and Canada, so there are these different, loosely-affiliated satellite scenes and lone
experimentalists all tinkering away under this new approach/sensibility." Schick seems to
suggest that the Internet can allow more rural, isolated independent members to function in the
same way as a local, more urban faction – it can provide a place for like-minded participants to
collaborate and communicate quickly and easily. “For a while – until a couple years ago – I was
stranded in the suburbs, after growing up traveling, and for me, the Internet was a good way to
always stay in touch with all the music and ideas that I was interested in, but wouldn’t have had
access to while stuck in the “burbs.” Essentially, the Internet allowed Schick to learn about and
become a part of the underground communities that were once limited to the urban arenas they
were initially formed in.

This ability to connect is not limited simply to fans, however; labels and artists often
communicate through the Internet, and critics look to different labels for new releases. As Matt
Lajoie, an experimental psychedelic artist and label owner, pointed out in my interview with
him, the Internet has allowed him to join “a complex trading scene that is the apex of a ‘pen-pal’
type relationship.” Lajoie communicates with various members of the indie scene over the
Internet, and in return is exposed to different artists, releases, and labels. On another level,
however, he develops personal relationships with these members and, as a label owner, this has
tremendous benefits for Lajoie – he has the ability to communicate with individuals from around
the world, consequently making the opportunity to promote new and different sounds much
easier. To become apart of Lajoie’s community, however, is another story. In my time speaking
with Matt, he revealed to me exactly what he is attracted to within the scene and, conversely,
what does not attract him. Putting it bluntly, Lajoie explained, “I can pretty much assume that if
you’re releasing cassette-only or vinyl-only albums, and if you think that CDs and digital
downloads are kind of tacky, then we probably have a lot to share and learn from each other.” In
Lajoie’s eyes, there are certain divides between members of the indie scene, and the virtual
world has seemed to exacerbate them further.

When speaking with Blake Gillespie, the Senior Editor of Impose magazine -- an online
music magazine dedicated primarily to independent music -- about this same subject, he
emphasized a similar relationship and also highlighted his own hierarchical view of the scene.
“There are labels in which I trust their ear. I know they won’t let me down. There are also labels
that only sometimes gain my interest. And yes, there are labels I flat out just do not like because
I’ve learned too much and disagree with their ethics or taste,” said Gillespie. Like Lajoie,
Gillespie points to the connectivity afforded by the Net. He can connect with specific labels,
discover new music, and in turn find new material to publish for his own blog. In this way,
Gillespie relies entirely on the Internet for him to contribute to the indie scene. Gillespie also,
however, hints at another interesting ability of the virtual indie scene with this comment; like
Lajoie, he too notices the ability to reflect a specific virtual identity through sound, aesthetic,
and/or ethics.

As with local and translocal scenes in the pre-digital era, identity is an important part of
not just gaining membership to the independent community but also moving up in its subcultural
hierarchy. Interestingly, however, the identities of post-digital independent members cannot be
discerned through appearance alone, unlike with previous indie movements. As Sherry Turkle
points out, the Internet has largely “contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it,
people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves.” In the virtual age, indie members
operate in very much this same way – individual identities begin to overlap, merge, and die out.
Consequently, a large part of identity in the post-digital age instead has to do with one’s contributions to the indie scene. As Schick pointed out in his interview with me, the Internet is a space to foster activity: “I’m totally fine with the blogosphere, as long as people make the best of it...that people writing/critiquing/theorizing try to explore new ideas/be constructive, rather than just passively digging through the past, and that artists and promoters continue to provide/support a space for underground activity and inspiration to happen.” In Schick’s eyes, those members who contribute more frequently and promote innovation are more highly regarded than those who merely dig “through the past.” Where Lajoie attributes identity to one’s relationship with analog technology, Schick attributes it to one’s forward-thinking interactions and contributions.

**Sounds of Modern Indie**

As discussed earlier identity is also closely tied to the music of the independent scene. The music of the indie scene, however, has become much more difficult to follow in the post-digital era. Though indie scenes once flourished without the luxury of post-digital technology, indie members today rely on the Internet to keep up with the constantly changing modern indie scene. A large reason the scene has taken this constantly changing form seems to be due to its ability to connect similar minds from all over the world – ideas can spread faster, collaborations occur more efficiently, and the music itself is more readily available. As Greenspon pointed out in our interview, the independent scene has taken advantage of these capabilities. “It really does help make what you’re doing more readily available to people all over the world...even if a lot more people aren’t necessarily buying your albums, they’re listening to them, or aware of their existence at least.” In Greenspon’s eyes, given the access to music offered by the Internet, the indie scene has been able to expand and evolve unlike ever before, extending past local and
translocal scenes and attracting members from around the world. Greenspon does note, however, that since the development of the Internet, the number of participants who are not as serious about the scene has increased. “It seems like now there might be ten times as many people out there, but most of them only want to do 10% of the work...there’s been a proliferation of people thinking it doesn’t take much to get something going.” Greenspon seems to suggest that though the number of indie music acts has increased, so has the amount ‘bad’ indie music.

A large part of developing one’s musical identity consequently centers on understanding the music that exists within the scene and, more importantly, being able to distinguish between it. In other words, post-digital indie members largely determine their identities by their ability to navigate the musical landscape; they must be aware of the facts of the music – artist history, song titles, associated labels, etc. – and then be able to adequately differentiate between subjectively good and bad music. With the enormous amount of music available on the Internet, however, this can be difficult, as sub-genres and sub-movements continue to merge and overlap, making identities even more difficult to discern. When discussing this with Schick, he also viewed the relationship between sound and identity as a critical aspect of the indie scene, but he then took this notion a step further: “The surface details and style continue to grow and evolve. Again, it’s basically a metaphor for maintaining an identity in the digital age. Is it a genre? I guess it’s like a meta-genre or meta-identity over which all these sub-styles ripple and change. It reflects this new landscape and new condition.” For Schick, the various surface-level differences extant in the music of the indie scene reflect the need to develop and maintain an identity in the post-digital era; the core of the music, however, meaning its ethics and broader relationship to the mainstream, remains constant despite its constantly changing landscape. In this way, independent identities seem to take on two-dimensions. On one hand, independent members can side with a
specific sub-genre or artist and that association consequently becomes their sub-identity within the movement. On the other hand, however, and at a broader level, indie members largely reflect the same principles and ideologies, therefore uniting them all under the common indie banner.

With the indie scene divided up into numerous niches, many fans, artists, label owners, and critics seem to solely frequent the same resources for finding new music, leaving a large portion of the indie scene undiscovered by independent participants. With such heavy emphasis on individual sounds, questions of originality within these sub-genres (and within the indie movement as a whole) have emerged. Blake Gillespie, however, remains adamant that originality remains at the scene’s core.

“It will seem as though all has been done, nothing new under the sun, etc. Then, someone will come along and cultivate a sound that alters our perception of music. I won’t say that such things [derivation] don’t happen because of a website’s influence or a label promoting a niche sound that an artist tries to appeal to. Not every artist will be groundbreaking, nor should every artist strive for that. Originality is far form lost.”

In Gillespie’s eyes, originality is a crucial aspect of the indie scene, and indie participants will continue to seek it out. He seems to suggest that indie music comes in waves, originality ebbs and flows within the scene, but it is often being sought. Gillespie’s view, however, addresses an important part of the music making process. Though artists may strive for originality, it is often difficult to obtain. In my discussion with another indie member, Alexandr, a cassette tape label owner based out of Moscow, Russia, he too agreed to the difficulty of creating original music, but also seemed to suggest that this is not unique to the modern indie scene. “Yes, I agree. It is something very hard to do. I think it always has been.” For Alexandr, the difficulty in creating original work is purely part of the artistic process. Indie music, like any other creative outlet, will have works that are derivative, as well as works that are entirely original.
Schick’s view of originality differs from that of Alexandr and Gillespie. Rather than seeking originality, Schick believes that indie music has instead been discouraged by the mainstream success and ultimate demise of the grunge scene. “I kind of think Nirvana ‘saving’ music from ‘corporate’ music, and the subsequent, rapid decline of the ‘alternative’ project towards nu-metal and post-grunge has discouraged anyone in the DiY or indie world from trying to really create a bigger sound or style that would appeal beyond their niches.” For Schick, Nirvana’s movement to the mainstream, corporate stage, and the ultimate demise thereafter acts as a modern deterrent for indie groups to explore outside of their particular underground sound. “Pop has been more-or-less accepted as the undisputed victor of the center/mainstream,” according to Schick. But this does not mean, however, that originality no longer exists. As Schick went on to point out, “there’s enough originality from certain geniuses or weirdos in the underground to keep things really interesting.” Though underground artists may be unwilling to extend beyond their niche sounds, there are still artists in the indie scene that are innovative and original in their creations. Like Alexandr and Gillespie, originality is still sought out by many of the participants of the independent scene.

These debates over originality in the indie scene seem to largely stem from the music’s fascination with the past. The modern lo-fi sound, for instance, is closely aligned with the late ‘70s punk and early ‘80s hardcore scenes. The same can be said for the freak folk scene and the early acid folk artists of the late ‘60s. For many, these similarities seem to signify a form of nostalgia or an attempt to re-create the past. When speaking with Alexandr about the preference of low-quality production in the indie scene, he had a very simple response. “Some simply like the shit sound. They are more comfortable on rough surfaces, antipode sterile sound. Other people feel sad for the past.” It seems simple enough; some artists (and their fans) prefer the
rougher quality of cheaper and out-dated production equipment, while other artists do in fact have a fondness for the sounds of past indie movements. As I began asking about the artists on his own label, however, Alexandr noted that other factors do play a role in the sound that is ultimately produced. When asked whether or not the mediums and aesthetics used by his, predominately Russian, artists were a matter of expression or economic necessity, he responded that they were largely an issue of “economic necessity.”

So what is it specifically that attracts indie participants to particular sounds? What do they value? While speaking with Schick, Alexandr, and Gillespie about these questions, the true subjective nature of the scene began to come into focus, as many of their responses reflected differing opinions. For Schick, originality obviously plays a large role in his attraction to certain music but he also seeks out music with a transcendent quality to it. “I tend to like music that kind of gives you a ‘high’ or somehow changes your experience or perception.” Quite like the live, experimental performances put on by Animal Collective, Schick’s music resonates within him, “tapping into or evoking either more universal feelings or feelings distinct to a time and place.” This transcendent quality comes through in the music Schick promotes on his blog. With artists such as Gary War and How To Dress Well, as well as modern world music videos such as “Street Songs Vietnam,” Schick’s music does seem capable of transporting the listener to another time and space; it is ethereal and ambient, leaving the songs open to interpretation.

Alexandr views indie music differently from Schick, but only slightly. Rather than music that attempts to transport the listener to a distinct time and place or instill a universal emotion, Alexandr prefers sounds that place him in an entirely new landscape. Music, according to Alexandr, should “attempt to create a world, not a representation of the environment.” Like Schick, this approach to music comes through quite clear in Alexandr’s own business – his small
 experimental tape label in Moscow. Artists that have released on the label include Travel Kyoto, Piper Spray, and X.Y.R., all of which maintain a similar ambient quality, often employing pedal effects, analog synths, loop stations, and field recordings. Vocals (if any) are used as another instrument in the compositions rather than the focal point, making lyrics nearly impossible to discern and marking a severe separation from mainstream music. Even the descriptions of the various cassettes available on his label, Singapore Sling Tapes, discuss creating new dimensions. Listed as the description for one of Alexandr’s most recent releases, HCMJ’s *Imp Mischief* is the following: “Two creatures of the dark forest, robbing unsuspecting travelers and stealing from small villages, fall into a vortex of spheres that propel them into the heart of the unknown infinity.” For Alexandr then, music (and the corresponding descriptions, artwork, and live performances) that invokes the idea of other worlds is regarded more highly than others, and he tries to convey this through his own label quite like Schick’s blog reflects his preference for more ethereal music.

Gillespie’s attraction to certain music comes not from some form of transcendental quality like Schick or Alexandr, but often from the advice of trusted friends. While speaking with Gillespie about how he discovers new music he explained, “A recommendation from a trusted friend. Another website I respect covers the band. I tell a knowledgeable record store clerk I’m looking for something that sounds similar to another artist and they direct me to a band. A PR [public relations] agent I trust sends a band my way.” Where Schick’s and Alexandr’s experiences with and relationships to music come in quite personal and introverted ways, Gillespie’s is more social. Those surrounding him direct his personal taste and in effect help to shape his musical library. Other subtleties attract Gillespie’s attention as well, however – “the name, the album art, the song title, a cheeky reference I get, how the band names looks or how
It seems that for Gillespie both an artist’s attention to detail, as well as its reputation, play an important part in his musical experience. And, unsurprisingly, this approach is reflected through his work, as guest writers and various staff writers contribute the bulk of material for the site—keeping with Gillespie’s social approach to music—and close attention is paid to which photos and advertisements are chosen for publication. In my own time contributing to the site, contributing meant choosing an artist or release that I enjoyed at the time and selecting an image that best represented the details and subtleties of the music. In this way, Gillespie’s online magazine directly reflects his own preferences and the resulting identity—it combines both social (albeit virtual) interaction and attention to detail.

**Production, Distribution, Consumption**

Despite all the Internet has done for the independent scene in terms of its growth and development, it has still managed to change the way members of the scene personally engage with their music. One of the most noticeable differences with the introduction of digital technology has been the transition away from tangible media, with digital sales recently surpassing physical sales. Interestingly though, the indie scene remains firmly embedded in both camps, championing the interconnectedness of the Internet and the physicality of vinyl and cassette forms. When asked why indie artists continue releasing physical copies despite often losing money, Gillespie responded, “They are phenomenal forms of musical mediums. Vinyl just feels like how music was meant to be heard beyond the live setting—which is truly the only genuine form. Vinyl captures it the best because it was the first discovery. Cassettes are an awful format, but have aged to a point that musicians...[can] best utilize the medium.” Gillespie’s response hints at an idea previously brought up—the genuine form. Many indie members seek to truly experience the music and, as Gillespie pointed out, the ideal place to do this is at live
performances (for some indie members this means moshing at a lo-fi event and for others this could mean using hallucinogenic drugs at a freak folk performance). When live performances aren’t available, however, vinyl becomes the next most authentic experience for Gillespie, revealing all the unedited cracks, pops, and incongruities of the original recording.

Lajoie holds a similar opinion as Gillespie, but also recognizes tangible media as “art objects”: “Every DiY release – whether it be cassette, CD-R, vinyl, zine, whatever – has intrinsic beauty in the fact that human hands labored over it, that the artist’s hands touched the physical object that is now in your collection.” Though Lajoie operates his own Bandcamp, Soundcloud, and Facebook pages, he still maintains a firm appreciation for the sound of “vinyl playing through a hi-fi stereo,” as well as the labor and artistry that went into its creation. The act of collecting is also important to Lajoie. He respects the objects as art in and of themselves, and views them as another important dimension of releasing music. For Lajoie, MP3s and digital releases do not convey the same appreciation for the total artistic experience – the art of the music and the art of the object. He even takes this notion a step further, claiming, “I honestly believe that it’s the MP3s that are the fad, and vinyl and cassettes will be around for the long haul.” Yet, despite Lajoie’s adamant stance regarding physical releases, it is difficult not to acknowledge the current affects the Internet and MP3s have had on indie music, specifically the way indie members engage with the music.

“The rise of Internet-based listening is a huge influence on how music fans treat what they’re hearing...I feel like our attention spans have been drained substantially,” said Greenspon in our discussion. Where once listeners were nearly forced to listen to entire albums in the order specified by the artists, now listeners have the ability to listen to the music in any order they choose, oftentimes skipping ahead or rewinding. Music in the digital age has become more
focused on individual songs than on the album as an entity, and this is reflected in the way users navigate the blog culture. “Online, I might listen to the first 10 seconds of a song, jump forward a minute or two, listen to a few seconds and then hit the next track,” said Greenspon. This shift in listening styles can obviously be attributed to the ease with which one can switch between songs on the Internet but it can also be connected back to the sheer amount of music available on the Internet. For Greenspon, indie members simply don’t have the time to give proper attention to every album. With so much music to sort through, indie members must learn to efficiently maneuver the virtual world in order to gain at least somewhat of an understanding of the indie landscape. This issue, however, is not limited simply to indie music. Mainstream music faces similar challenges in the post-digital age. So what is it exactly that allows these indie scene members to differentiate themselves from the mainstream music world?

Amanda Brown, owner of Los Angeles-based psychedelic record label Not Not Fun, claims that the movement towards digital files has in fact lessened our ability to engage with music on a deep level, while physical copies maintain our intimacy, attention and appreciation. For Brown, it is indie’s refusal to fall into the trap of this online commodification that allows the movement to separate itself from the mainstream:

“The climate of indiscriminate cultural channel-surfing seems to be having an effect on our collective attention spans, too. Albums are ditched in favour of one or two key tracks; we even fast-forward through YouTube clips. When music has been reduced to the status of junk mail, and groups’ entire discographies are skimmed and dismissed in half an hour, what depth of understanding or appreciation for these creations can we have?” (Brown)

Independent music isn’t just an aesthetic reaction to mainstream music for Brown; it is also a response to the commodification of sound. The indie scene, like most movements, is a culture of conspicuous consumption and, as Hebdige notes, it is through this consumption that the “subculture at once reveals its ‘secret’ identity.” (Hebdige 1979:135) In other words, modern
indie’s fascination and appreciation for tangible media – for consuming tangible media – is a way in which the subculture marks itself off “from more orthodox cultural formations.” (Hebdige 1979:135) In the eyes of independent fans and artists, sound has taken a backseat to the enormous profit margins available with virtual singles, mixtapes, and full-length records. The indie scene consequently works against this system by making available physical copies of the music in an effort to re-focus on the art itself. For indie music fans, the act of purchasing, playing, and storing music contributes to the overall experience of listening and allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation for the art.

**Conclusion**

My hope with this paper was not to encourage or discourage participation in the independent music scene, but rather to convey how a group of artists, promoters, label owners, and fans have come to define themselves and function in our digital era outside of the corporate music framework. This study would not have been possible, even relevant, without looking at the changing technological landscape, which the indie scene, along with the rest of the world, has been forced to adapt to. The difficulty in analyzing this group, however, resulted from the entirely subjective nature of the scene, which I hoped to address by confronting it head on. In acknowledging my own biases and perceptions, and coupling these with various interpretations of the scene from other members, I hoped to have provided a clearer portrait of how indie interactions play out on a larger level. The ultimate issue I set out to explore, however, has yet to be addressed: What, if anything, has changed in the independent music scene?

With the technological playing fields now level between mainstream media moguls and indie bedroom musicians, it would appear that the two are now one in the same. I propose, however, that this is not the case. Though many of the same cultural practices occur between
these two camps, the relationship between indie fans and indie music, as well as their strict DIY ethic, commitment to experimentation, and harsh rejection of corporatism reflect an ideology that differs severely from that of the money-driven mainstream. What has occurred, however, is a shift from the earlier pre-digital indie structure. Where once indie movements were limited by geographic boundaries, today the indie scene finds itself with unprecedented access to sounds and identities from around the world. Consequently, the indie scene has grown, and its members have diversified, for the most part, beyond classification. With this virtual dimension, the indie scene has also seen changes in authenticity and, more importantly, how authenticity is derived. While the New York punks wore their skinny levis and black leather while at CBGBs and other Bowery hangouts, thereby asserting their authenticity, modern indie participants must assert themselves in a different way. In our digital era, indie members must have a vast knowledge and understanding of the innumerable amount of indie artists and their respective musical catalogs. Today, being independent is still very much rooted in one's appreciation and comprehension of unabashedly experimental music. But it has also become a contest of consumption; a game between members that can only be won once someone has run out of subcultural insights or facts. Therefore, I propose that the independent scene has seen its largest shift not in style, sound, production or distribution (though one could easily make arguments for each) but in how the culture operates. The reflexive, highly subjective, battle for authenticity is a new development, one not played out by the UK ravers or early country artists. And in my mind, it is this shift that has transformed the independent scene most.
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