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Local Identity and Independent Music Scenes, Online and Off

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Independent music scenes were prominent in the last two decades of the 20th century, but today indie music can be disseminated online, and internet tools allow people in distant locations to engage with each other easily online. With the popularity of the internet, some local spaces devoted to music are becoming less popular and less viable. Yet local spaces continue to provide the infrastructure for music scenes. On the basis of archival research and interviews with scene participants, this paper argues that the decentralization and globalization of music production and dissemination have not resulted in the disappearance of local identities, local scene histories, or the perception that there are local sounds.

Local independent rock and pop music formations enjoyed attention from the popular media and academics in the 1980s and 1990s. The proliferation of independent record labels and independent distribution, the emergence of college radio as a medium for breaking bands, and the focus on musical production in localities like Athens, Georgia, Minneapolis, and other cities away from the traditional media capitals of New York City and Los Angeles made independent or "college" music a hot topic. Indie music scenes provided recruiting grounds for the mainstream music industry and markers of identity for music scene participants. In earlier research on the topic, I referred to such local formations as "scenes," a term that describes both the geographical sites of local music practice and the economic and social networks in which participants are involved.

Today, with the widespread popularity of the internet, the nature of these local scenes has changed. Indie music can now be disseminated online, and people can connect easily across localities, regions, countries, and continents. As internet options for the discussion and sharing of indie music increase, the local spaces devoted to interaction around music are changing, and sometimes disappearing. Increasingly in the years since the 1980s and early 1990s, the internet has become a key player in the production, promotion, dissemination, and consumption of independent music.

The internet has altered the landscape of indie pop and rock music. It has not, however—and as many argue—marked a clear break from previous local and inter-local practices that have defined indie music and local scenes for those involved. Inexpensive forms of music production and dissemination, both within and across localities, were defining features of pre-internet scenes, as were the perceived interchangeability of musicians and fans and the ability of scene participants to connect across geographical boundaries. The internet, however, has clearly made these practices more widespread and in some ways more immediate, and, in order to understand these changes, this article focuses first on the key findings of my earlier case study, carried out in an Illinois university town, which may help to illustrate general trends in indie pop and rock music scenes in the years immediately preceding the emergence of the internet as a key player in music distribution, consumption, and even production. Following that, the role of the internet in local and inter-local music relations and practices will be examined.

The Unwired Scene

In the 1980s, the college towns of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, had not occupied a central position in the history of music-making practices and/or styles outside the mainstream music industry. Still, Champaign-Urbana spawned many indie pop/rock bands that were regionally popular, and in a few cases nationally known, including, in the 1980s, the Elvis Brothers, Turning Curious, the Farmboys, Weird Summer, and Combo Audio. By the early 1990s Champaign was home to several alternative acts that had signed major label deals—such as Poster Children, Adam Schmitt, and Titanic Love Affair—and to small independent labels like Parasol and 12 Inch Records.

Many artists recorded for these very small local labels that were unable to pay them advances before recording; however, larger indies like Touch and Go and Frontier were able to fund the production of records and videos. Very few indie pop or rock bands in communities like Champaign-Urbana recorded for large indies, though; many more released records for smaller indies like Parasol. Parasol was part of a growth in independent labels in the United States that began in the 1980s and that was accompanied by an increase in the number of bands recording their music (as opposed to simply performing it live).

Therefore, by the early 1990s Parasol found itself at the intersection of two distinct vectors: 1) the emergence of the seven-inch single as an important marketing tool in indie music, especially indie pop; and 2) a specific history of indie music production in Champaign-Urbana. The rise of the underground seven-inch market coincided with the mainstream music industry's determination that the vinyl phonograph record was no longer a profitable, and therefore viable, format. Independent labels, and especially smaller indies, were reluctant to abandon the cheap vinyl format for CDs, since many did not have the available capital to invest in CD production and most indies did not want to be relegated to the production and distribution of cassette tapes. Undoubtedly, part of vinyl's appeal to independent companies selling

alternative rock and pop is that the major labels' effort to make the format obsolete in effect made whatever appeared on seven-inch vinyl seem to be in opposition to the mainstream. Furthermore, the format catered to a rather select audience: those who still owned, or were willing to purchase, turntable technology.

In the 1980s, before Parasol, several indie bands in Champaign-Urbana released albums, singles, and/or tapes on local labels like Office, Trashcan, and Popsicle. The existence of small local labels, and the availability of relatively cheap analog recording equipment (usually four- or eight-track), enabled bands to make recordings available locally without relying on signing major label or major indie deals. According to Trashcan's founder, its entire purpose was "to break the local scene" (qtd in Springer 8.)

In fact, a 1989 local newspaper article declared "Champaign-Urbana is on the verge of becoming a trend-setting music scene with national influence" (Springer 8). While this optimistic prediction did not exactly come to pass, several local artists were signed to major label or major indie deals, including Poster Children, which released records on indies Frontier, TwinTone, and Sub Pop, and then moved to Sire; Hum, which signed to RCA, but which released records on independent labels like Dedicated, 12 Inch Records, and Mud (a Parasol-affiliated label); and former Champaign musicians Ric Menck and Paul Chastain, whose band Velvet Crush recorded for Warner Bros. in the United States and Creation in Britain.

Parasol did not have as much success selling records in Champaign-Urbana as it did through mail order even though there was a sense that Champaign-Urbana was an increasingly important regional scene. For instance, singles by Champaign music scene veteran Nick Rudd did not sell well in Champaign: his first single on Parasol sold eighty copies in England and one at the record store at which he worked. While those in the greater indie pop subculture saw Parasol as important in getting local music to the public, Merritt argued that, despite a roster laden with local talent, he was not doing them much good in the local area: "I'm just putting out singles, and nobody's buying them."[1] He recalled a time in the early 1980s when there was more of a sense of community in the Champaign scene:

> It used to be a single came out in this town and everybody bought it. "Stabs in the Dark" [a 1982 compilation album of Champaign indie pop and rock bands] came out and everybody bought it whether they liked the stuff or not, because it was local . . . . I guess there's something wrong with putting out 45s because a lot of people don't even own turntables anymore, but even so, people should buy this stuff.[2]

Thus, it was at a moment in the early 1990s when the Champaign scene was most in the national spotlight that one of its key participants saw the scene as least cohesive.

One obstacle to local music dissemination was the University of Illinois's student-run radio station, WPGU, which, into the 1990s, was an album-rock station, and this made the station a site of contention. Indeed, a local musician remarked in the early 1990s, "I'm always so blown away when I go to another town and I hear their college radio station, because PGU is—I hate to get on anyone's case—but they're really awful."[3] In the early 1990s, WPGU switched to a "top of the alternative charts" format.

But most scene participants did not see this shift to another commercial format as particularly adventurous, and thus, for most Champaign-Urbana listeners who wanted to hear non-formatted alternative music radio shows, the only option was the community radio station, WEFT. As a community radio station, WEFT's overall philosophy was (and is) to provide the community with programming that was not otherwise available, and in Champaign-Urbana this included independent pop and rock. Within its programming mix in the late 1980s and early 1990s, alternative rock and pop occupied about 20% of WEFT's slots. WEFT also devoted slots to a number of other types of music and programming that were not available on radio stations in the listening area, including alternative news and information, world music, bluegrass, folk, and jazz. For listeners looking for non-major label alternative rock/pop on the radio in Champaign-Urbana, WEFT could be a rather frustrating source of material. As a local musician noted, WEFT was "so sporadic, it's hard to know when you turn it on what you're going to be hearing."[4]

Another source of frustration for musicians and others was the relative lack of live performance venues. By the early 1990s there were two clubs in Champaign-Urbana that booked indie acts, Mabel's and the Blind Pig, but most local indie musicians complained that Mabel's, the larger of the two venues and the one that was located near campus, was essentially closed to them. This had not always been true; during much of the 1980s Mabel's was the primary performing venue for local alternative acts. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the club had booked more mainstream local acts, prompting a record-label owner to state that "Mabel's doesn't book bands like ours for various reasons."[5] However, a local musician added that, with the opening in 1990 of the Blind Pig, a club located away from campus, "it's been both easier and better for bands to find a place to play."[6] Still, the Blind Pig was often criticized for its small size, heat, and location, and the limited number of venues meant that Champaign-Urbana musicians often found their hometown to be one of the harder markets to enter.

Locality and Meaning

Because indie music had been so closely identified with specific geographical and physical spaces, the way in which it was and is understood in relation to local identity is important. Subjectivities and identities were formed, changed, and maintained within localities that were constituted by geographical boundaries, by networks of social relationships, by a sense of local history, and in opposition to other localities. As I noted when originally writing about this research, "an important way in which musicians and others involved in local scenes understand their own involvement [is] as something that both identifies them with and differentiates them from individuals and groups in other communities" (Kruse, "Subcultural" 38).

Situating oneself within that kind of context is and was a way of asserting the importance of one's position in scene history. For instance, a particular Champaign musician constructed his involvement in local music as "pioneering" by articulating

his band's relationship in time and space to other bands and local scenes; he claimed "I think we were one of the first completely original local alternative college bands, after the Vertebrats—there was probably no one before them. We were sort of paralleling what the Replacements were doing in Minneapolis without even knowing or hearing of them."[7] By locating his band on a level of importance similar to that of a seminal local band and a nationally prominent band, the musician identified his band as one of local and possibly even national importance, at least within the confines of his narrative. Indeed, music scene participants in many places in the United States were, in the early 1990s, for the most part aware of some version of local music history and placed themselves within that tradition, whether it was in Champaign's indie pop scene, San Francisco's punk scene, or Seattle's grunge scene. Participants were part of social formations in which existing musical practices and traditions affected emerging music.

The notion that there was a "Champaign scene" in the 1990s came at a time when participants were also being connected in some way with trends and entities that transcended locality: for example, Parasol and the other "local" indie pop seven-inch labels, like Slumberland, or Poster Children and other harder rocking indie bands, like Minneapolis' Soul Asylum. On the level of scene social interaction that transcended geography, a Champaign indie musician explained the role played by touring in making interlocal connections:

> People come to me asking about certain people in certain towns. Tonight I'm going to go see Die Kreuzen, who we always used to stay with every time we played Milwaukee. If they were in town, they expected to stay with us. We're part of a group where you see someone every six months or every three months.[8]

Trans-local networks such as these, because they brought institutions and people in disparate local scenes together in broader systems of cultural production and dissemination, underscore the degree to which the economic structures of indie music were, in the 1980s and 1990s, interrelated in numerous ways with social practices.

The social and economic connections and structures of indie music could, in the end, be seen as networks in which musical knowledge, genre, geography, and position in the independent music business located subjects within one or more sets of relations. Shared musical knowledge and practices were important in the formation and maintenance of inter-local social and economic systems, and thus made it impossible ever to understand a formation like the Champaign-Urbana music scene in isolation. As I have noted elsewhere, indie pop and rock music scenes were part of "overlapping networks in which genre, geography, position in the independent or alternative music industry, and other factors located subjects within one or more social networks" and were central in participants' processes of identity and identification (Kruse, *Site* 137). Today, in the age of the internet, looking at scenes in isolation makes even less sense, as the ability to connect with others across scenes and to disseminate independent music has become easier than ever before.

Place, Identity, and the Internet

In the early 21st century, the ubiquity of the internet and of other home digital technologies can mean, for instance, that, if there is no local broadcast radio station that plays fairly obscure independent music, one can tune into an internet radio station that does, including the individual radio stations generated by users of last.fm, a music-based social networking site. One can watch video of live shows on YouTube rather than enduring the hassles associated with seeing live music in person. And the internet, with its ease of connecting people across localities, regions, countries, and continents, may well play a role in a decline in a sense of local identity and of being part of a particular local history within a music scene, and in the growth in the sense of inter-local identity. As internet options for the discussion and sharing of indie music increase, the local spaces devoted to interaction around music may well, for better or for worse, disappear, signaling a change in terms of local and interlocal social and economic relationships and practices. To give one example, a London-based founder of indie labels and of a venue in the San Francisco area observes that one of his favorite local record stores:

> closed down earlier this year and is now only an online mail order website. ...
> I seem to have lost touch with them since they became online only—I used to love
> going in to the guys working there and would always end up buying more based on
> their personal recommendations.[9]

The online marketplace, of course, provides its own stores and opinion leaders in its virtual spaces, and websites like eMusic and Pitchfork are certainly more available to more people worldwide than indie hipster bricks and mortar operations and the people who staff them ever were.

   In this new media environment, can "local sounds" and local music identities continue to exist? In their 2002 book *Soundtracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place*, John Connell and Chris Gibson claim that the spread of the internet has increased the flow of subcultural music and information across disparate localities, thus helping to "de-link the notion of scene from locality" (107), and that, for those involved in little-known music genres, the internet enables a sense of offline "imagined community" that is crucial to scenes but not tied to geography. Even as some local spaces survive, the internet has likely accelerated the process of regional, national, and international sounds and practices interacting with local music (279). Increasingly, it is argued, geography doesn't matter, thanks to the internet's ability to facilitate "virtual scenes." Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson contrast virtual scenes with conventional local music scenes, which feature live offline events like concerts. Virtual scenes are comprised of mediated one-to-one communication, largely between fans, which, they argue, makes the virtual scene one much more of the fans' making (11). Specifically, they claim:

> Fan clubs dedicated to specific artists, groups, and subgenres have proliferated by
> using the internet to communicate with each other. Like the participants in

translocal scenes, participants in virtual scenes are widely separated geographically, but unlike them, virtual scene participants around the world come together in a single scene making conversation via the internet. (Bennett and Peterson 10)

Despite this, the authors argue that in the new media environment local spaces and identities remain important, providing the necessary infrastructure still required for music scenes to survive (107). They add that for many of the musicians they studied, local space affected the music recorded and evoked a sense of place (278). Indeed, Connell and Gibson report that staying local and playing small club and pub circuits is prized by some bands and labels, who believe that these activities connote a degree of "authenticity" that breaking through to larger, more heterogeneous audiences would not (278). Yet indie pop and rock musics have always existed in relation to the mainstream music industry, and they cannot exist unless many parties involved in their production and dissemination find it profitable (see Kruse, *Site* 5–6).

Still, indie music is largely defined in and by discourses of authenticity, and therefore the construction of situated local practices as authentic practices and the physical sites of local music remain important for scene participants despite the accessibility of music through the internet. A European indie music fan, and internet and society scholar, comments that "indie rock concerts are still important, record stores are as well, as places to talk about and listen to music, network with people."[10] The founder of a small independent label in the San Francisco Bay area also reports little decline in the number of local spaces, like record stores and other informal public places, in which music and knowledge of local music history are disseminated.[11] Regarding record stores in particular, the European fan and commentator argues that "indie rock fans don't stop buying music in local indie record stores, they now consume more music, from more different sources."[12] Globalization has not, apparently, resulted in the disappearance of local identity, local scene history, and even the sense that local sounds exist. Of course, "local sound" is an ill-defined concept. In previous research I noted that "the assertion that a local sound exists leads one to listen for the similarities between [and among] bands within a locality: those who seek to find a local sound therefore tend to find it" (Kruse, *Site* 133).

Because the notions of local sound and locality in general remain meaningful to scene participants in asserting systems of difference and similarity through which identity is formed and understood, they need to be part of any analysis of digitally assisted situated music practices. For instance, even in the internet era, one music writer in the eastern United States observes, "I still see much evidence of regional pride, not just here, but in other scenes and larger cities as well. It still means something to be a Philly band, or a D.C. band, or a Cincy band, or a Portland, OR band."[13] To the extent that a perception persists that the notion of "local sound" is becoming passé because of the effects of the internet, one San Francisco area musician remarks: "It seems to me that the 'death of a local scene/sound' started before the internet became a force in music though,"[14] and another adds "I think the Bay Area has been 'music scene' challenged for about 25 years."[15]

We must, however, acknowledge that today the internet can be key in forging inter- or trans-local connections. As Connell and Gibson point out, it is now easy for "parallel sub-cultures to become connected" through the internet and related resources (107). An indie label owner I interviewed agreed that the internet allows "a disparate fan base to get in touch with each other."[16] In his examination of goth scenes in Britain, Paul Hodkinson (142) finds that participants in goth subcultures are able to refer to web pages that serve as clearing houses for information across localities about events, bands, and places. Because goth is largely a style-based subculture, it is not surprising that Hodkinson (142–3) finds a particular trans-local internet effect to be the transmission and discussion of information on style and shared subcultural values. At the most basic level, internet discussion boards and other resources facilitate personal connections across localities. One scene participant in Britain, when asked if she felt less localized because of connections made through the internet, replies, "Yes, you know people from London, you know people who go to Slimelight [London goth club], you know people from Edinburgh, you know people from Glasgow, you've talked to them" (Hodkinson 143).

Bennett and Peterson, on the other hand, find it important to separate online—or "virtual"—scenes and offline "conventional" music formations. As Hodkinson's research demonstrates, and as I will argue, the conventional and the virtual are not truly separate. It is true, and obvious, however, that music scene participants are now more easily able to access and connect with each other, whether they are nearby or far away, because of the internet. Moreover, the internet helps fans be in contact not only with each other, but also with musicians. As Marjorie Kibby observes, having "an electronic place in which to 'gather' enables a direct link between fans, and even makes possible a direct connection between fans and performers" (91). Again such connections are not new, but, because of the relatively easy accessibility of individuals through the internet, digital communication technologies further contribute to the long-accepted "common sense" in indie music that there are few differences or barriers between musicians and fans (see Kruse, *Site* 119–20).

Economics and Local Musics

There is little doubt that the internet has the potential to break new bands. For instance, the internet helps bands on tour. A west coast label owner notes that the bands he knows that tour "find it easier to find gigs, places to stay, and people to [whom to] sell tickets and merchandise."[17] Furthermore, record labels that were not previously able to get their product in many record stores, or to many buyers through mail order, or played on the radio, can easily have a presence on the internet, no matter how small or obscure the label (Connell and Gibson 278). Increasingly, bands don't need to record for a major label to sell music. Established acts like Radiohead, the Beastie Boys, and Nine Inch Nails have in recent years released their albums on their own, in part online, and have reaped the financial rewards of eschewing major label contracts (Stone). Moreover, new acts are finding they are able to build a

following and sell their music online without major label relationships if they are willing to do the work of touring and promoting their recorded music. A 2009 *New York Times* article cites the example of the Toronto band Metric, which, after releasing three albums on independent labels, chose to pass on major label contracts because of the degree to which it would have been financially indebted to the companies and the rights the band would give up in signing a major label contract. The band instead produced and released its own album—with some funding from the Canadian government—and is doing the hard work of selling its own album directly on iTunes, with much success (Stone).

Selling music online is not the only way to benefit from an internet presence. Merely sharing music may ultimately lead to sales. Rich Egan, the co-founder of the independent label Vagrant Records, claims that "[o]ur music, by and large, when kids listen to it, they share it with their friends. . . . Then they go buy the record; they take ownership of it" (qtd in McLeod 529). Unlike the major labels, argues Kembrew McLeod (529), small independent record companies do not see peer-to-peer file sharing of music as cutting into their business; in fact, they find it a good way to promote their often obscure music genres and bands. But another independent label co-founder and co-owner disagrees about the efficacy of file sharing and MP3 files in general as a way to sell CDs. He states: "One of our artists, Jill Tracy, does very well selling MP3s of individual songs. For the rest, I think MP3s function as try-before-you-buy items and ways for bloggers to spread the word about our CDs. I don't think it sells us many CDs, though."[18]

New technology has been integral in, at the very least, making local music available to more regional, national, and international audiences than ever before. In addition to the internet, a technology that has been important in getting local music to larger publics is digital recording technology. Musicians can now, relatively inexpensively, make professional quality recordings even if they do not have the financial backing of a record company to pay for studio time or are located far away from a recording studio (Connell and Gibson 258). As discussed earlier, reasonably inexpensive home recording devices are not new: in fact, they played a key role in the growth of indie pop and rock music during the 1980s and the embrace of "low-fi" recording quality as a marker of "authenticity."

Digital technology, however, creates a cleaner, more professional sound, and Connell and Gibson maintain that the further spread of home recording facilitated by digital technology "in many metropolitan areas has suggested the potential for decentralization, through cheaper and more accessible technology, internet resources, and capabilities for global distribution and marketing for unsigned bands" (258). Indeed, McLeod adds that "[t]oday, there is the very real possibility that most musicians can make a living from a small but loyal fan base, and completely bypass the bloated entertainment industry" (530). A Milwaukee music writer I interviewed lists the various levels on which the internet and related technologies have allowed musicians to reach fans with high-quality recordings and circumvent the conventional music recording and delivery systems:

> In the past, gatekeepers controlled access to recording equipment, to recordings
> themselves, and to distribution and promotion. The internet, in some ways,
> obviates all of that (certainly the first two). It's theoretically possible now for a band
> to form entirely online (whether locally or not), record its songs entirely on
> computer-based software, and (this is probably the key step) through buzz built by
> big mp3 blogs (notably Fluxblog), end up with a recording contract and a fair
> amount of fans.[19]

Hypothetically, we may thus be looking at a world where a radical decentralization of
music production and distribution is imminent. A musician living in the mountains
of Tibet could access the same information technology and channels as one located in
Los Angeles or London, and his/her location would be, in theory, of little or no
importance. And certainly this is happening to some extent, allowing distant artists
operating outside the mainstream music and media industries to reach audiences all
over. Sites like Indaba Music, for example, allow online collaboration to take place
among musicians, encouraging the formation of creative music communities via the
internet.

   To the degree, however, that this model is unproblematically applied, it is indicative
of a belief in what media scholar and political economist Vincent Mosco calls "the
digital sublime": the complex of myths surrounding the internet. As Mosco puts it, the
internet provides us with:

> A story about how ever smaller, faster, cheaper, and better computer and
> communication technologies help to realize, with little effort, those seemingly
> impossible dreams of democracy and community with practically no pressure on
> the natural environment .... . Moreover, the story continues, computer networks
> offer relatively inexpensive access, making possible a primary feature of democracy,
> that the tools necessary to empowerment are equally available to all. Furthermore,
> this vision of the internet fosters community because it enables people to
> communicate with one another in any part of the world. (Mosco 30–31)

Yet internet access is much more limited than middle-class Americans might think,
especially the kind of broadband, home-based access best suited for uploading and
downloading music files. Also, digital technologies of recording and distribution may
be relatively inexpensive for some but still very expensive for many others.
Furthermore, it is quite obvious that gatekeepers still exist in the internet era.

   Of course, one cannot dispute that the mainstream music industry is now less
important in determining the music that reaches the public than it was a decade ago.
As Andrew Shapiro argued of the late 20th-century internet in his 1999 book
The Control Revolution (16), the distributed nature of the internet's structure, its lack
of a central clearing house of information despite efforts to try to centralize control,
means that traditional hierarchies can be subverted and gatekeepers can be bypassed
online. Indeed, as Napster made evident in the early 2000s, the internet provides an
ideal structure for connecting producers of content with audiences, and users of
content with other users, all outside established hierarchies: indeed, outside any
hierarchy.

William Dutton, however, observes "if the proliferation of communication options becomes overwhelming, people might well look again for gatekeepers to filter, prioritize, and select information for the user or consumer" (375). In a universe in which a computer user potentially can access, for instance, thousands and thousands of songs, how do people know where to find music they like? New digital recording and distribution technologies mean that local musicians are competing with thousands of other DIY local musicians to sell their records online, or to be noticed on MySpace, or to have their MP3s downloaded, or to have their songs offered on eMusic (or, if signed to a cooperating major record label, iTunes). Connell and Gibson contend that, with the advent of music distribution on the internet, "[u]nless musicians [with web pages] could generate significant links from other websites, or could mobilize audiences for self-promoted materials, their sounds were likely to be lost in a 'sea' of digital noise" (261).

Indeed, despite the great optimism about the ability of the internet to circumvent gatekeeping apparatuses of the mainstream industry, many music listeners may be turning to other gatekeepers, like iTunes', Amazon's, and other online commercial behemoths' links to what people who bought a particular song or CD also bought or to what an algorithm has determined that the consumer might like. Indie artists in local scenes still struggle to be heard, despite the decentralizing technological forces that have emerged in the past ten to fifteen years. But, the problem for musicians and small labels of having one's music heard via the internet, and for listeners of finding music that they like on the internet, are problems specific to those who have affordable, high-speed internet access. It is wonderful to have one's music played on internet radio, and to hear new music on internet radio—to give one example—but what about those in the United States who cannot afford a broadband connection, or an internet connection of any type, or who lack access to a computer? For them, internet radio is irrelevant. And what about musicians and potential listeners outside the developed world, the vast majority of whom cannot afford computer access, and, even if they could, may well lack the infrastructure—electricity, an internet connection—to go online?

Authors Connell and Gibson argue that digital technologies cover only "a selective geography at the global scale" (263), because internationally, access to broadband connections—and even non-broadband connections—is extremely limited. As an international scene participant I interviewed put it, "I see that, while the internet should afford local scenes greater attention, instead it seems to reinforce the big global hubs."[20] Thus, the internet, and the transference of aspects of music scenes to it, combined with barriers to access and the resulting national and international digital divides, make problematic assertions about the net's ability to provide local music, including indie music, with vast new and trans-local audiences. There is no doubt that the internet has increased music's ability to transcend geography, but as more independent record labels move exclusively to the internet—even if they are still primarily selling CDs, which do not require a computer to play, and not MP3s—recreational high-speed internet access may become crucial in participating in music

scenes. That kind of access is currently present in about half of American homes (Horrigan and Smith 1).

Embodied Communication and the Internet

For musicians, fans, and other participants in indie music who have internet access, the technology helps, for example, to enable embodied social interaction between and among geographically proximal participants, in more or less organized ways. Music writers may find themselves targeted by local bands seeking publicity. One states that, "even though I have never limited myself by any means to writing about local bands, these are the bands most likely to seek me out to send promos, invitations to shows, and MySpace friend requests."[21] Obviously, however, the internet has proven an extremely useful technology for increasing face-to-face opportunities for all kinds of music scene participants, not just writers. A Boston-area musician and writer says: "Craigslist is an amazing tool for hooking musicians up. I joined the Hyphens as a consequence of searching for people looking for bass players in the Boston area."[22] He adds:

> Also, in two cities now—DC and Boston—I've observed/participated in online forums centered around local print publications that became nuclei for (aspects of) the local music scene—providing a moderately incestuous pool for band-member swaps, opportunities for inter-band networking and cross promotion. On both of these forums, you'd often see messages of the "so, which shows is everybody going to tonight" form.[23]

This phenomenon is observed on a slightly larger geographic level by Hodkinson of British goths, of whose online conversations he writes "rather than removing the need for physical travel, the tendency was for such virtual interactions to encourage goths to want to see their friends in face-to-face circumstances" (143).

That the internet may largely be useful for creating and maintaining contacts in music scenes that are also face-to-face connections should not be surprising to those familiar with the research on local internet networks. In their study of an entirely wired housing development in a Toronto suburb—a development that they call "Netville" in which every home has free, high-speed internet access—Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman find that the great majority of internet users use the internet to communicate with those they already know, and that users who do form online relationships often take these relationships offline. The latter observation is especially relevant to relationships in local music scenes, which may be formed more easily among those who first "meet" online rather than in the physical spaces of scenes, like clubs and record stores, where various barriers to meeting and getting to know people—the awkwardness of approaching strangers in public, the uncertainty that people in these places share one's interests, the possibly diminishing number of certain kinds of sites like record stores, the background noise of clubs—make undertaking the task of creating personal connections prohibitive. Furthermore, Hampton and Wellman found in Netville that "wired" residents knew the names of twenty-five neighbors, while those who did not go online and use community internet resources

knew the names of only eight neighbors. Also, "wired" Netville residents had more face-to-face contact in their neighborhoods: they regularly talked offline to twice as many neighbors as their "wireless" counterparts and visited each other's homes 50% more often that those who were "wireless" (367).

Clearly, the internet can lead to a greater network of weak-tie local connections for those who use it, and its local resources and, even absent explicitly social-networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, it can and does bring otherwise unconnected community members into contact—including those involved in local music—and increase one's sense of neighborhood and local identity. This is not to privilege face-to-face communication. A wealth of academic research demonstrates that online communication is as valuable and meaningful as offline communication (see, for example, Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig and Wigley on college students' relationships and email, the work of Joe Walther and others). However, we should not and cannot assume that the internet operates outside notions of locality or located-ness, or that these concepts are no longer relevant to how people identify and understand themselves and others in an increasingly online world. In fact, as personal mobile communication devices become pervasive, noting one's physical location has become a notable and common theme, in, for instance, "tweets" on Twitter and status updates on Facebook.

Even as we acknowledge the importance of new technologies in the creation, diffusion, and consumption of music, historically technological advances in these functions have not necessarily served to lessen the importance of locality and local identity—in fact, sometimes such dissemination has the opposite effect. The popularity of the phonograph and recorded music in the early 20th century meant that, for instance, blues music from different cities could be recorded, shipped, and sold all over the country. When one could buy records of New Orleans blues music in St. Louis, and vice versa, a real sense of what New Orleans blues versus. St. Louis blues versus Chicago blues developed. Broader dissemination thus helped to create and reinforce ideas that there were distinct local sounds and local identities as more listeners became more aware of regional forms of music. It also allowed people to blend and fuse regional sounds with the new sounds to which they were being exposed, and it created connections—at the very least, imagined communities—in which individuals could see their own local practices as not entirely unique and isolated. Local identity remained important, but so did broader generic identities, and practitioners and fans were interpellated in relations of similarity and difference through which they were locally identified, but also identified within a system of translocality.

Further study is clearly needed in order to understand the intricate and multiple interactions among local indie music institutions, individuals, histories, and sites and emergent technologies that allow for some, but hardly all, greater access and connection to people and resources across local music scenes. Given the history of utopian narratives about new communication technologies creating global communication and understanding, and the continuing existence of local and

regional cultures and of barriers to technology and information access, the complete erasure of physical geography in subcultural music identities, histories, and institutions is not likely to happen any time soon.

Notes

[1]   Geoff Merritt. Personal interview. 19 Dec. 1991.
[2]   Merritt, 19 Dec. 1991.
[3]   Adam Schmitt. Personal interview. 17 June 1992.
[4]   Schmitt, 17 June 1992.
[5]   Merritt, 19 Dec. 1991.
[6]   Schmitt, 17 June 1992.
[7]   Don Gerard. Personal interview. 19 Dec. 1991.
[8]   Gerard, 19 Dec. 1991.
[9]   Thorsten Sideboard. Personal interview. 18 June 2007.
[10]   Christian Fuchs. Personal interview. 10 May 2007.
[11]   Joseph Mallon. Co-founder, 125 Records. Personal interview. 19 June 2007.
[12]   Fuchs, 10 May 2007.
[13]   Jenny Grover. Personal interview. 11 May 2007.
[14]   Bradley Skaught. Personal interview. 8 May 2007.
[15]   Gil Ray. Personal interview. 8 May 2007.
[16]   Mallon, 19 June 2007.
[17]   Mallon, 19 June 2007.
[18]   Mallon, 19 June 2007.
[19]   Jeffrey Norman. Personal interview. 11 May 2007.
[20]   Margie Borschke. Personal interview. 9 May 2007.
[21]   Grover, 11 May 2007.
[22]   Doug Mayo-Wells. Personal interview. 9 May 2007.
[23]   Mayo-Wells, 11 May 2007.

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