4.2. One is the loneliest number: "one-man bands" and doing-it-yourselves versus doing-it-alone

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Abstract

There has been a notable resurgence in the phenomenon of the one-man band in the past ten years, as documented by Adam Clitheroe's film, *One Man In The Band* (2008), BBC Radio 4's "One Man Band" (2013), and Dave Harris's enthusiast compendium, *Head, Hands, and Feet* (2012). Music festivals exclusively featuring one-man bands have also recently been curated in London and Montreal. The reasons for such renewed interest are complex, but include concerns ranging from the aesthetic (total creative autonomy), the romantic (the image of the lone troubadour), the technological (the mass production of looping software and pedals), to the economic (no bandmates with whom to split income at a time when traditional revenue streams, especially recording sales, have dwindled). This article examines the one-man band resurgence and the themes above from an auto-ethnographic perspective, using the author's own experience as a one-man band performer as a case study.

Keywords: one-man bands, one-person bands, creative practice, aesthetics, social construction of technology

Introduction

It is hard to imagine a more perfect example of DIY music-making than the one-man band. A one-man band performance is the dramatic enactment of musical self-reliance, of not needing anyone but yourself to play multiple instruments and make a full sound. It is also an economic model of music-making that resists the problem of relying on intermediaries who inevitably take a cut of revenue streams: no need for a trucking company and roadies to haul gear, and no bandmates with whom to share royalties or gig fees. Many one-man bands build their own idiosyncratic instrument setups or incorporate recycled instruments into their act, so that even the reliance on instrument manufacturers and retailers is often minimized. Finally, a one-man band is necessarily the artistic vision of a single person, a musician doing it by his or her self, doing it alone, keeping it simple.

Or is it so simple? The romanticization of the one-man band as a creatively autonomous artist or lone troubadour is appealing, but how has the status of the one-man band changed over history? Can the various one-man bands performing in the 21st century be grouped together as a coherent underground music scene, or do they operate in isolation from one another? Do one-man bands in certain genres, such as punk and indie rock, embody different meanings than more traditional comedic one-man bands? And does a one-man band actually

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have a better chance of economic self-sufficiency than music-making groups involving more than one person?

In this article I will explore the trajectory of one-man bands as a DIY culture in four sections. First, I consider the history of one-man bands and the challenges of what to include and exclude in any definition of the culture. Second, I examine the factors which have contributed to a resurgence of one-man bands in the 21ˢᵗ century, drawing from research on the changing dynamics of the music industries, theories of musical "liveness" in the digital age, and my own creative practice as a one-man band performer. Third, I argue that one-man bands present a challenge to both existing theories of the social construction of technology and invention versus innovation (e.g. Hughes 1989; Pinch and Bijsterveld 2004), and raise problems for the current hierarchy of value for popular music versus 'serious' music research in higher education. Finally, I consider the political implications of taking DIY culture to its logical extreme of total self-reliance - what I call DIA (do-it-alone) culture - and whether the alleged political subversion associated with DIY risks leading to an abandonment of the collective cultural (and public) good.

Definitions and histories

When we think about the term "one-man band", a few stereotypes may spring to mind. In a recent article, Dale Chapman (2013) notes that on the one hand, we have a traditional image from the vaudeville era of one musician playing some kind of crazy homemade multi-instrumental contraption. The appeal of the one-man band here is comical; no serious music can or will be made on such machines, and the eccentricity of the contraptions raise questions about the corresponding eccentricity of their makers. The one-man band seems tied up with what one might call the aesthetics of loneliness or the fetishization of art by outsiders or even outcasts. Compare this image, however, with a thoroughly 21ˢᵗ century conception of a one-person band. Chapman uses the example of indie-rocker St. Vincent (née Annie Clark), who, although she now employs a full rock band, paid her dues on the touring circuit as a one-person band (at this point I should state the obvious that the term 'one-man band' is problematically gendered; hereafter I will use the term one-person band). In its 21ˢᵗ century incarnation, the one-person band is more likely to take full advantage of the latest technological developments to create the sound of a large ensemble through loop pedals, samplers, laptops, and other live multi-instrumental enabling devices. These people aren't viewed as novelties; the are legitimate artists, and in recent years the concept of the one-person band has been completely re-appropriated by these new kinds of solo artist.

There is a long history of musicians trying to play more than one instrument simultaneously. Indeed, my interest in one-person bands as a topic for investigation emerged out of another research project on the social history of the drum kit. As I investigated the social conditions that gave rise to the invention of the drum kit at the turn of the 20ᵗʰ century, it became clear both the kit and one-person bands were intertwined in so far as they offered interesting DIY solutions to problems of (1) *musical labour* (edging out competition for gigs by offering to play more than one instrument at once), and (2) *problems of space* - being able to cram a lot of instruments into a portable setup for the purposes of both transport and, in the case of the drum kit, limited space on indoor stages and in orchestra pits. One way to trace the early history of the drum kit is to focus on the development of one of its most important components: the bass drum pedal. This device allowed drummers to place the bass drum on

the floor and free up their hands to play the snare drum and other cymbals, and effects, and there are also many examples of one-person bands in the 19th century using homemade bass drum pedals of various kinds. Some of the more business-inclined pedal inventors successfully sold their inventions to others, and became entrepreneurs. Therefore in the last two decades of the 19th century one can see the first patents for bass drum pedals appearing in the USA. The first pedal to be successfully mass produced was patented by a Chicago drummer named William F. Ludwig in 1909. However, equally fascinating are all of other the one-off, failed bass drum pedal designs, because even the most terrible designs seemed to possess their own kind of beauty, as are the one-person bands that sometimes made and used them.

The homespun, one-off, and often comical aesthetic of one-person bands is key to understanding their continued popularity through the last two centuries. Indeed, others have remarked on the DIY appeal of one-person bands not just as performances but as musical instrument inventions that are deliberately not made to be mass produced or imitated: chief among these is the busker and author Dave Harris, who has produced an exhaustive compendium of one-person bands around the globe. Over the 400-plus pages of his book, Harris groups one-person bands historically, geographically, and stylistically, suggesting that they can be traced at least as far back as the tradition of the pipe and tabor player in 13th century Europe. From there, the majority of his book is devoted to short artist biographies of all the one man bands Harris could find, grouped according to continent and also by genre. Harris's personal preference seems to be for folk, blues, country, rock, and punk-based one-man bands. However, for my purposes the key distinction that Harris makes is not typological but ideological: when explaining his rationale on what to include and exclude in his book, Harris writes:

> The [one-man band] genre includes a large number of electronic based acts. [But] …this book is about the live performing, manually operated OMB's, those who use "head, hands, and feet". (Harris, 2012, p. 6)

Despite acknowledging the time and skill required to create backing-track based performance, the ideology of homemade instrument setups and using "head, hands, and feet" in a live setting is clearly of great importance to Harris, and despite paying lip service to loop-based one-man bands, the fact that the title of the book is *Heads, Hands, and Feet: A Book of One Man Bands* clearly naturalizes the heads/hands/feet style of one-person band practice as the real, or "authentic" one-person band tradition. By contrast, Chapman's concept of 21st century one-person bands cited above constitutes a competing tradition, which I will hereafter refer to as the "loops, laptops, and layers" one-person band.

One-person bands in the 21st century

There has been a notable resurgence of interest in one-person bands since the year 2000, evidenced not only by Harris's compendium and Chapman's article, but also by a range of documentaries. Adam Clitheroe's film, *One Man In The Band* (2008), argues that a new generation of performers - which include acts such as Thomas Truax, Bob Log III, Dennis Hopper Choppers, Man From Uranus, Duracell, Ninki V, Honkeyfinger, and The Two Tears - have broadened out from Harris's preferred blues, country, and folk-inspired traditions to produce follows a more eclectic and often experimental range of musical styles, "ranging from theremin rock to hurricane drum solos and a backing band made of bicycle wheels". More

recently, DJ Tom Ravenscroft presented the BBC Radio 4 documentary "One Man Band" (2013), in which he reported on the new phenomenon of music festivals exclusively featuring one-person bands that have been curated in London and Montreal (the third annual Montreal One Man Band Festival took place in May 2014).

Chapman suggests that "over the last 30 years, we have begun to see a shift in the way that solo multi-instrumental music is understood as a cultural phenomenon", and that in particular one-person bands have "undergone a process of gentrification" in the within the white middle class world of indie rock (2013, p.457). As opposed to earlier one-person bands which were treated as novelties not to be taken seriously, and multi-tracking projects which were constrained to the confines of the studio, Chapman suggests that from the 1980s onwards musicians like Robert Fripp experimented with new kinds of "live solo multi-instrumentalism" by taking sample and looping technologies out of the recording studio and into live performance. As digital looping devices became more affordable, portable, and popular, so too did the number of solo acts looping themselves to create a full band sound live by themselves - notable examples from the 2000s include Andrew Bird, St Vincent, KT Tunstall, and Ed Sheeran. These new bands have disassociated themselves from the comedic conventions of one-person bands and instead command respectability as legitimate artists. For Chapman, this shift in status of one-person bands parallels a wider societal shift towards championing individual achievement over that of the collective encapsulated in the ideology of neoliberalism, which "holds that the overriding goal of state policy should be to foster an environment that privileges the individual as a self-interested economic unit, set loose within an unfettered global marketplace" (ibid. p.459):

> Live solo multi-instrumentalism, while by no means complicit in this turn of events, might help us to understand how neoliberal modes of thought might come to seem appealing or pleasurable. While the individual artists associated with this practice may themselves be stalwart advocates of socially communitarian values, the "heroic individualism" of the one-person band serves as a tactile and visceral endorsement of a much more atomised social order. (ibid. p.467)

In addition to Chapman's theory, I think there are other significant economic and aesthetic factors that have contributed to the renewed interest in one-person bands, of which I will discuss four: changes in music industries revenues; the rise of the "maker" movement as a reaction to mass-produced "black box" consumer products; the changing discourse of "liveness" in the era of laptop "press play" performances; and the unique aesthetic possibilities afforded to composers in one-person bands.

First, the most significant change in the dynamics of the music industries in the last twenty years has been the growth of the live music sector and the contraction of revenue from record sales. In the UK, for instance, 2008 marked the first year that Britons spent more on live music concert tickets than they did on recorded music (CDs, downloads, and streaming combined), making the live industry the largest source of revenue in the British music industries - a reversal which has held intact in subsequent years (Brennan & Webster, 2011; Prynn, 2008). Irving Azoff, a longtime artist manager whose clients include The Eagles, Van Halen, Steely Dan, Christina Aguilera, and other artists spanning the last several decades, expressed the impact for artists this way:

> The way the industry is monetized has totally changed. The order used to be: first, records; second, live; third, merchandise. Now it's: first, live; second, third-party sponsorship; third, merchandise; fourth, publishing; fifth, records. So that's a big difference. (quoted in Seabrook, 2009)

Put simply, changes to the business models of the music industries in the last twenty years have forced musicians to (1) rely increasingly on live income over revenue from recorded music, and (2) mercilessly cut their touring costs to maximize the efficiency of what has become primary source of income. It is difficult to measure precisely to what extent these changes have influenced the number of artists choosing to tour solo where they would otherwise have used multi-person line-ups, but anecdotal evidence from interviews with artists and promoters suggests this is definitely a consideration for some.

There are also aesthetic factors involved in choosing to perform as a one-person band. Musicians are not simply performing the "loops, laptops, and layers" version of the one-person band aligned to Chapman's conception of live solo multi-instrumentalism via digital technologies; on the contrary, many are also embracing the traditional "heads, hands, and feet" version of one-person bands proposed by Harris (2012). One-person band DIY culture cannot therefore be simply attributed to the mass production of looping pedals being sold to musicians; other musicians are, perhaps partly as a reaction against the proliferation of loop pedals, choosing to build their own instruments and custom one-person band setups. One finds evidence of this phenomenon at "maker" fairs that take place throughout the world, which encourage citizens to "make" and understand the objects they use as opposed to unreflexively consuming mass-produced goods: I was recently invited to perform with my one-person band, Citizen Bravo, at the 2014 Mini-Maker Faire in Edinburgh, while Johnny Eriksson was awarded Maker of the Year at the Stockholm Mini Maker Faire for his "Popmaskinen" electromechanical one man band (Hobson, 2014). One can also find more high-tech dedicated musical instrument invention conferences that occasionally feature unusual one-person bands, such as the Music Tech Fest and conference for New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME). Related to this trend are the new ways in which "liveness" has been contested due to increasing use of loop pedals, backing tracks, triggered samples, and laptops at gigs. In his assessment of live performance, Philip Auslander once predicted that "the symbolic capital associated with live events" would likely to diminish in an increasingly mediatized world (Auslander, 1999, p. 160). However, precisely the opposite has happened: live music has as much if not more cultural importance today as ever. However, what constitutes "liveness" in the "loops, laptops, and layers" age has been the subject of much controversy - witness the scandal EDM musician Deadmau5 caused when he suggested that he and his fellow superstar DJ's frequently just "pressed play" for their live concert performances ("Deadmau5 clarifies 'press play' comments about fellow DJs," 2012). Sociologist Nick Prior theorized live laptop music performance in particular, and illustrates how notions of "liveness" have become contested through the introduction of the laptop performance with an example from his ethnographic research:

> A small audience watches and listens as the laptop jam unfolds... And whilst the audience members are patient they also look slightly perplexed for it is clear that they are searching for the tangible links between bodily movement and sound that characterize conventional forms of performance. But the visual hooks aren't there. Should one applaud, then, when the signs of creativity are so heavily mediated (Pinch & Bijsterveld 2003)? Who is producing what? Are they really just checking their e-mails? (Prior, 2008, p. 913)

In this context, the resurgence of the "head, hands, and feet" one-person band can be viewed as an antithetical response to "press play" performances, especially when the definition of "one-person band" itself has become contested via the appropriation of the term to apply to newer "loops, laptops, and layers" performers.

21st century one-person bands address these conflicting ideologies in different ways. Robert Stillman, drawn to one-person bands for the unique aesthetic possibilities inherent in a single person simultaneously performing multiple analog instruments, is representative of a traditionalist approach. Stillman (2014) has theorized his own compositional practice in a website and divides the aesthetic particularities of "head, hands, and feet" one-person bands into several categories, including Coordination, Independence, and Musical Structure; Instruments, Technique, and the Role of the Feet; Expressive Rhythm and One-Man Band; The Integration of Composition and Performance; and Studio Production. A selection of the 23 aphorisms from his "one man band manifesto" include:

- One-man band performance asks the body to do something it would rather not do. The sound of one-man band music, therefore, is not perfect. Rather, it is the sound of the outer limit of ability.
- One-man band is not quantized.
- One-man band creates its own context.
- People want to know how one-man band works.
- One-man band is lonely.
- Because there is no accepted technique for one-man band, the standard is an imaginary one created by the one-man band, and usually impossible. (Stillman, 2014)

The kind of aesthetic emergent from the manifesto excerpts above is clearly at odds with the "loops, laptops, and layers" ideology of the one-person band. For Stillman and similar one-person bands, the non-quantized, old-fashioned "head, hands, and feet" ideology provides the richest and most rewarding possibilities to create music. Meanwhile, Artist Daniel Wilcox decides not to choose sides and instead attempts to resolve the two conflicting ideologies by drawing from both of them. Wilcox describes his "robotcowboy" one-person band as having the following aim:

> robotcowboy is a performance project consisting of w a wearable computer system and various peripheral devices which enable a single performer to become a mobile, technological "one-man band" free to roam the stage, the street, and the world. It is both an homage to the "one-man band" tradition and an exploration into a post-digital renewal of embodiment and physical instrumentality in electronic musical instruments... It is hoped that the concept of "wearable music computer" can one day become as ubiquitous as that of "laptop musician" in a return to the fragility and excitement of live music. (Wilcox, 2007)

Both Stillman and Wilcox developed their one-person band practices in an academic context. However, the status of one-person band creative practice as research still lags behind more established "art" music creative practice, and it is this issue which I will turn my attention to next.

Invention versus innovation in DIY music cultures

To summarize so far, one-person bands are a longstanding DIY musical practice, and the definition of a one-person band – be it "head, hands, and feet", "loops, laptops, and layers", or something else – has changed over time and remains contested by current one-person band practitioners. There has been an apparent resurgence of interest amongst both artists and audiences in one-person bands in the 21st century, and the reasons for this range include

economic, aesthetic, technological, and political factors. I want to start tying some of these discussions together, thinking about one-off designs that aren't mass-produced, and about the opposition between one-person bands as being comical novelty contraptions versus music to be taken seriously, and also challenge the distinction between invention and innovation. Ultimately I want to ask whether and how one-person bands can be valued as both art and research.

My starting point is an auto-ethnographic analysis of my own creative practice in a punk-influenced one-person band called Citizen Bravo. In 2012 I collaborated with an artisan blacksmith named Dave Frazier to create sketches via computer assisted drawing of a one-man band with a suitcase kick drum as the focal point (Figure 1).
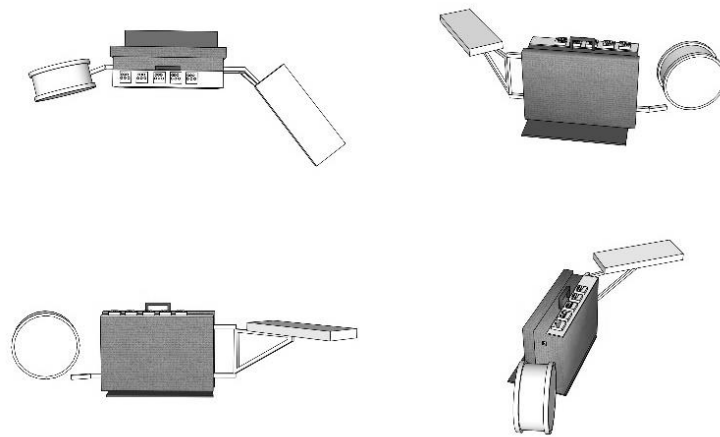

Figure 1 – Citizen Bravo design plans

We then set to work building the design, the central feature of which is a steel frame scaffolding which fits inside a vintage suitcase. The steel frame performs several functions. First, it holds the shape of an otherwise flimsy cardboard suitcase so that various components can be attached. It can also accommodate the other components of the setup inside the case so they be easily packed up for transport. In each corner of the frame are two modular arm sockets, and the suitcase shell has holes that feed in different customized stainless steel arms depending on what component needs to be attached. Finally, the weight of the frame means that when the suitcase is used as a kick drum it doesn't budge from the forward force applied by the bass drum pedal. We also added decorative design elements (e.g. skateboard keyboard stand, skull maracas) to keep with a punk visual aesthetic (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2 – Citizen Bravo in "transport mode"

Photo by Campbell Mitchell, used with permission.

Figure 3 – Citizen Bravo in "performance mode"

Photo by Campbell Mitchell, used with permission.

This is clearly a "head, hands, and feet" band, and I've deliberately chosen not include any loop pedals, because part of the aesthetic appeal for me is precisely the anachronistic reliance on the connection between visible physical effort and the production of sound. I want making music on this machine to be a struggle, something that may or may not fall apart as I perform it.

Although I have a dual background as an academic and musician and currently work in a university music department, I was appointed as a popular music studies scholar rather than an engineer or "art music" composer. In practice this means that while my composer colleagues are able to submit their music as research outputs, and my computer music colleagues are able to do the same with their invented musical instruments (which usually exist in the form of software or digital interfaces), I am expected to produce peer-reviewed journal articles rather than music or invented instruments. But what exactly is it that prohibits a one-person band like Citizen Bravo from being submitted as a legitimate research output?

To answer this one must first briefly outline UK academic research culture: research by British academics is evaluated every seven years by a system called the Research Excellence Framework, or REF. Composers of classical music are allowed to submit their compositions as research, and this is a common practice, but as far as I know no one has ever tried to submit work resembling popular music as research. According to the guidance on Music for the REF:

> 'In assessing work as being [of a quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour], panels will expect to see evidence of, or potential for, some of the following types of characteristics across and possibly beyond its area/field:
> – a primary or essential point of reference
> – of profound influence
> – instrumental in developing new thinking, practices, paradigms, policies or audiences
> – a major expansion of the range and the depth of research and its application
> – outstandingly novel, innovative and/or creative. ("REF panel criteria and working methods," 2012)

I'm not suggesting that my one-person band fulfills the over-the-top criteria listed above to qualify as outstanding research, but if I'm to be frank, I'm not convinced that the compositions routinely submitted by composers of contemporary classical music fulfill them either, and that's the problem. For all that we like to claim that the boundaries between high and low culture have been dismantled and dissolved in a postmodern world, for all we like to claim that popular music has now firmly established its presence in universities, there is a clear hierarchy that remains at the core, and creative practice counting as research is just one example. Who defines the field for popular music as academic creative practice? Who does so for "art" music? How big does your area and field have to be exactly? How many records to you have to sell, how many people have to recognise your work as an "essential point of reference"? Do all musical fields work in ways that are comparable to one another? Obviously not. What if there is no field, and the whole point of the one-person band is to represent the practice of idiosyncrasy, the peculiarities of one individual doing it themselves, doing it alone? What's the purpose of the REF in the arts? Is it time to rip it up and start again?

I suggest that part of the problem in submitting a one-person band as a research output lies in its one-off aesthetic. The technology historian Thomas Hughes makes a distinction between invention (defined as creating something new) versus innovation (defined as transforming a field), and this distinction is entrenched in frameworks like the REF (Hughes, 1989, p. 43). According to this definition, one-person bands are clearly inventions, not necessarily innovations? Do some one-person bands transform the field of one-person band

practice, and others not? This is to raise another question: if you invent a new instrument or technology, and if you (and maybe you and your friends) are the only ones to use this instrument, is what you're doing in any way innovative? What if the point a particular musical invention is precisely its one-off-ness, its value as a DIY construction not intended for mass production? I encountered this tension in my own creative practice building Citizen Bravo: my co-designer, the blacksmith Dave Frazier, was accustomed to patenting his designs which he felt to be innovative and potentially profitable, and with our design he expressed interest patenting the steel frame and modular arms design with a view to reproducing and selling the design to other musicians; meanwhile, I *didn't* want to reproduce the design even if it had commercial potential precisely because I wanted my one-person band to be one of a kind. Indeed, the one-off aesthetic of one-person bands neatly exposes the bias towards patents and mass production underlying Hughes' definitions of invention versus innovation.

Technology sociologists Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld have suggested that "new technologies sharpen the perennial issue of what makes for good music and 'art'", and elsewhere that "the introduction of a new instrument 'provides a way of probing and breaching the often take for granted norms, values, and conventions of musical culture" (T. Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2004, p. 640; T. J. Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2003, p. 538). One-person bands do precisely that, especially in the context of the value of popular music versus art music at universities. Some ideas and artworks, especially in underground and DIY cultures, are not *intended* to spread - their value is in their singularity.

Who needs people? Doing it alone

I wish to conclude by drawing from some ideas put forward by two keynote speakers at the *Keep It Simple, Make It Fast!* conference and applying them to the case of one-person bands. First, in his assessment of the indie rock scene in Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood, Will Straw noted the absence of images representing that particular scene. Citing Dick Hebdige and Hakim Bey, Straw suggested that some scenes are "iconophilic" (e.g. punk), operating "above ground" with visible presence; while others are "iconophobic" (e.g. early 1990s rave culture), operating "below ground", fighting to remain invisible and thus avoid being co-opted and comodified. Or as Straw puts it, paraphrasing Bey, "the purpose of a radical politics is to create temporary autonomous zones which leave no traces and attract no looks". I suggest that one-person bands do not easily fit into either of the above categories. On the one hand, one-person bands are often visually spectacular and draw attention to their own visuality. On the other hand, they tend to be temporary, mobile, performing in unsanctioned zones, ready to move on if they get any hassle from authorities. Furthermore, while one-person bands have clearly shown signs of cohering as a global community through documentaries (Clitheroe, 2008; Ravenscroft, 2013), books (Harris, 2012), and dedicated one-person band festivals, they don't cohere in the same way as other music scenes. Straw offers a tentative definition of a scene as "a cultural phenomenon which arises when any purposeful activity acquires a supplement of sociability" (Straw, 2014). One-person bands clearly have some elements of this sociability: they interact with audiences, and even with one another at multiple one-person bands jam sessions at festivals. But other characteristics of one-person bands - especially their economic, technological, and performative isolation and self-reliance - are at odds with Straw's definition. Given their aesthetic of embracing novelty and one-off-ness, is it possible to legitimately assert the existence of a unified one-person band *scene*?

Straw also made the intriguing provocation that the organization of culture in the 21st century "follows the perception that what is scarce is sociability, not interesting cultural expression", and that in the digital age "what art must resolve is not an absence of meaning but an absence of interconnection" (ibid.). My attempt to formulate a responsive hypothesis about one-person bands follows: the resurgence of one-man bands represents a move away from DIY to DIA, from doing-it-yourselves to doing-it-alone, which is compelling because it performs a wider sentiment of disconnection from others. Even though the DIY acronym stands for "do-it-yourself", in the case of music there is normally still an assumption that music-making remains a collective, social practice; in other words, even music scenes that self-identify as DIY are much more frequently "do-it-your*selves*" than "do-it-your*self*". One-person bands, on the other hand, even though they also operate in social contexts, are compelling precisely because they dramatize musical isolation - they imagine what might happen if you woke up to discover you were the last musician on earth but still wanted to jam with multiple instruments.

The idea that art in the 21st century must resolve an absence of interconnection links neatly with the work of another KISMIF keynote talk by Augusto Santos Silva on "art beyond context", where Silva suggested that sociologists of art have too often focused on studying the context of artworks rather than the text of the artwork itself (Silva, 2014). Following Adorno, Silva proposed that sociologists should take seriously the notion that "art is itself social, itself a totality, the one that acts as mediator". For Silva, art is beyond context insofar as (1) the text is itself a context; and (2) the text is a means to understand the context; he concludes by encouraging a dialogue between sociology and art studies /criticism, and between sociology and art studies / criticism with art itself.

The ideas of Straw and Silva meet when applied to the case of the one-person band. As a text, a one-person band performance is itself social, is itself a totality that generates its own context; and the context it generates can be understood as a representation of interconnection and a comment on the possibility for both tragedy and comedy when faced with an absence of interconnection. Chapman has suggested that the success of one-person band practices "rely on an ideology that privileges social atomisation", and succeed in a neoliberal culture that "takes pleasure in representations of self-sufficiency" (2013, p.467). However, I think that the meaning of one-person band performances is less fixed than this: they can also act as a critique of that culture. The problem of doing-it-alone, of course, is that it risks abandoning the collective cultural (and public) good. Is it possible for a musician or their music to fully abdicate their inherited context in the world? During a time where many feel disenfranchised from existing political, economic, and artistic institutions, the response of some artists has been to severe the link between themselves and wider society and create insular DIY micro-scenes. To these micro-scenes, the one-person band seems to say - what if you're ultimately left all by yourself, trying to play all the instruments at once? It has the potential to be fun and even rewarding, but more than anything, but eventually it gets lonely and becomes a struggle.

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