7.5. The "L" train in New York City: mediating the Brooklyn music scene(s)

Jonathan Rouleau[1]

Abstract

The neighbourhood of Williamsburg in Brooklyn has gone through major transformations in the last decade and the "buzz" over its independent music scene is certainly an important vector of change. Recently, many musicians have decided to settle in neighbourhoods east of Williamsburg, in areas such as Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bushwick and East Williamsburg. What is particularly striking is that the movement of musicians seems to lead them to establish themselves near the "L" train stations. Keeping the history of New York Music scenes in mind, and faithful to the idea of the "L" train as both a medial form and as a mediator of movement, my paper seeks to understand the ways in which the music scene gravitates around the live music venues near the "L" train stations.

Keywords: Brooklyn, mediality, L train, music scene

In June 2010 I left Montreal for Brooklyn in New York City, the most populated of the five boroughs, in order to pursue the first portion of a three-part fieldwork project on the Brooklyn music scene. When I started conducting research on the "scene", a concept recently defined by Will Straw as "the circumscribed spheres of sociability, creativity and connection which take shape around certain kinds of cultural objects in the course of these objects' social lives" (Straw, 2012, p. 8) I found quite rich coverage of the scene in social media, as well as in British[2], French[3], and American[4] newspapers and blogs. In these accounts, Brooklyn, especially the neighbourhoods of Greenpoint and Williamsburg, was often depicted as a capital for indie rock. While much of this media coverage often fetishized the bohemian cool, it was also reflecting a thriving music scene and creating a craze for popular music "in" and "of" Brooklyn.

In Williamsburg I certainly had the impression that I was in the coolest hood in America, as the *Washington Post*[5] once stated. Bedford Avenue, one of the main commercial streets in Brooklyn, particularly around the L train station, looked like the paradigmatic example of what the great urban theorist Jane Jacobs (1961) would have celebrated: a mixed-use area with lively pedestrian traffic. If Williamsburg was already an incubator for new bands as well as a hub for live music in the 90s, it was in 2001 that it gained serious attention when a central

[1] McGill University, Canada.

[2] http://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/feb/27/brooklyn-indie-pop-scene; http://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/nov/30/popandrock.travelnews

[3] http://www.lesinrocks.com/2009/10/16/musique/special-new-york-brooklyn-capitale-rock-1136645/

[4] http://www.thelmagazine.com/newyork/the-brooklyn-diy-music-scene-a-users-guide/Content?oid=1624758; http://nymag.com/arts/popmusic/features/61874/

[5] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/20/AR2007022001912.html

figure of the music scene today, Todd Patrick, started organizing independently produced and all-ages concerts in the area. Nevertheless, it soon became obvious that Williamsburg was more a hub for circulating music – both in record shops and in music venues – than for creating it. The expensive rents and a certain marchandization of the Williamsburg scene by the media and real estate actors made many of the music scene participants move east, particularly to the neighbourhood of Bushwick.

What I found fascinating is that many of the manifestations of this emergent Bushwick scene, which were smaller, more communal, and oriented towards a DIY ethic, were physically located near some of the L train stations in Brooklyn. I thought it was quite peculiar because in Brooklyn, the L train does not follow a specific street as is the case in Manhattan, where the train follows 14th street. While my goal was not to identify a specific sound or musical genre in Brooklyn, I decided that I would examine the ways in which the scene gravitates around the L train stations in Brooklyn. In others words, I was conceptualizing the scene in relation to its *mediality,* that is, by approaching the L train as a media that "records, transmits and processes information" (Griffin and Kittler, 1996, p. 722). I then avoided, to a certain extent, an analysis that would be exclusively based on the participants' discourses about the independent music scene, and their propensity to discuss the authenticity of ways of living and neighbourhoods, as well as authenticity in music. What I discovered is that the L train, as well as the live music venues that surround it, shape the Brooklyn music scene today. But the story of this scene, and the story of the L Train, are deeply connected – both symbolically and geographically – to previous music scenes in New York, specifically in Lower Manhattan.

Since 1931, the L train has existed in the shape we know today; that is, from Eight Avenue in Manhattan to Rockaway Parkway in Brooklyn. Greenwich Village and the East Village, in the lower part of Manhattan, are both bounded by 14th street on their northern boundaries – where the L train is located. Greenwich Village and the East Village were major music scenes in New York; the former is notably associated with the American Folk Revival while the latter is deeply linked to punk and new-wave. Furthermore, these two scenes are intimately tied together.

It was in the 1960s that the East Village began to separate from the Lower East Side as artists, intellectuals, musicians, political radicals, and writers moved in the area. They were attracted by cheap rents and by the beatniks that were already established there. The East Village was one of the most important punk scenes in the history of popular music. While punk became better known in 1975–1976 with The Ramones, it has roots in the countercultural movements of the 1960s. Indeed, many artists had affinities with bands from like MC5, The Velvet Underground and The Stooges. What I'd like to underline here is that the famous New York music scenes shared a geographic proximity and a will to explore edgier aesthetics, even if the predominant music genre was different. And it's still the case. Today, the farther east one goes the more alternative the music scenes become – I will return to this point later. As Smith, Duncan and Reid highlight in the book edited by Abu-Lughod *From Urban Village to East Village*, "the East Village was enthusiastically hailed in the 1980s as the newest artistic 'hangout' in New York City and art galleries and studios have been the shock troops of neighbourhood reinvestment" (1995, p. 156). The alternative and artistic golden age of the East Village probably ended in the late 80s. After being the last hotspot for alternative musicians in Manhattan, many artists decided to leave. The next alternative scene in New York seems to have settled on the other side of the East River.

In 1986, the "Brooklyn Loft Law" permitted the conversion of industrial buildings to lofts. While the gentrification – or the "'L'ification" – of Williamsburg had already started in the 1980s, it sped up quickly in the 90s. Many areas in the neighbourhood were affected as a result. Between 2000 and 2010, notably because of the residential rezoning of Williamsburg, the Bedford Avenue train station, the first stop on the L train in Brooklyn from Manhattan, witnessed a drastic increase of passengers, going from almost four million in 2000 to nine million in 2014: "One significant reason for this successful development is the easy and quick commute to and from Manhattan, being only one stop on the L train" (Shratt, 2010, p. 38). The Metropolitan Transportation Authority reported that ridership on the L train increased at every station in 2013 (as cited in Flegenheimer, 2014).

Today, Williamsburg hosts a variety of institutions and businesses – cafés, live music venues, art spaces, record stores, vintage clothing stores – that elevate the visibility of the scene to insiders and outsiders. These "third spaces", as Ray Oldenburg (1989) would put it, help people to make new social contacts and extend the local community. In the same vein, Charles Landry (2008) uses the term "soft infrastructures" to highlight the associative structures and social networks, connections, and human interactions that encourage the flow of ideas between individuals and institutions (p. 133). Nevertheless, Williamsburg is probably the area in New York where the processes of gentrification are – or at least, were – clearest and fastest.

It seems that the most alternative factions of the music scene have always been moving east in New York since the 50s. In the last few years, the L train stations that follow Bedford Avenue station have witnessed and contributed to the emergence of a new scene. While a Hispanic population still largely inhabits the neighborhood of Bushwick, recently, a number of cafes, restaurants, and live music venues mainly directed toward (and constitutive of) the emergent scene have opened. The surroundings of the Montrose train station are quite evocative: the street is practically divided in two, where one can find little cafés, bookstores, organic food groceries, and bike shops on one side of the street, and Hispanic grocers and restaurants on the other. These new cultural offerings might lead to the creation of "exclusive geographies," as Paul Chatterton (1999) would put it, since these shops encourage cultural homogenization by directing their products toward a young mobile class with similar interests.

While the rents are less expensive in Bushwick than in Williamsburg, they are not cheap. Today, much of what's considered residential to the Bushwick's artist community are warehouses renovated into loft spaces – one can see here a fetishization of grit and decay. Christopher Mele describes a similar process on New York's Lower East Side: "While the images and symbols of urban decay remained the same, their representations and attached meanings shifted from fear and repulsion to curiosity and desire" (2000, p. 233).

As I mentioned earlier, the music scene east of Williamsburg on the L train is aesthetically more alternative as experimentation is encouraged more. Noise rock and garage punk also get more attention. The live music venues in Bushwick, like Silent Barn, a key institution that is open to performers and a public of all ages, are also closer to the DIY ethic. The venues are also sometimes difficult to find because, to use Alan Blum's (2010) concepts, the "pubic theatricality" or "visibility" of the scene is less obvious than in Williamsburg.

While Bushwick and the Silent Barn are safe and comfortable places for the music scene participants to perform in ways that diverge from mainstream norms, to paraphrase Sharon Zukin (1995), they have a will to keep a fast and efficient connection to the city – Manhattan – which still host lots of music venues. In others words, Bushwick is not cut off from the live music venues and other music institutions in the East Village and Greenwich Village. The L

Train, as a medial form, shapes the music scene today and ties it together with other scenes in Lower Manhattan. In one word: the L train is at the same time a vector of change and stability.

I hope I demonstrated the underlying ways in which a mode of transport can mediate a music scene and thus open new fields for inquiry in popular music studies. I do believe that media theory could contribute to innovation in the music field, as we would be able to depart from an analysis of a scene in relation to a somehow limited anthropology of values. In New York, I am curious to see in the next few years if the scene that gets the most attention is going to move farther east or "settle" in a different neighbourhood or borough.

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