

## 1.4. Same name but different things? DIY practices in New England and Switzerland

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### Abstract

Many studies have well documented how actors use Do-It-Yourself (DIY) practices for cultural production in different places across the world. However, too few comparison studies examining the differences between these various uses of DIY have been carried out. This paper considers how DIY can be understood and applied in various ways. For this, we use the results of two field studies conducted in different DIY music worlds: New England' basement show network and Swiss indie rock. Using an ethnographic approach, we describe how actors practice DIY in different aspects of music making. Our results show that considering DIY not as universal but rather as relative and contextual enhances its understanding.

**Keywords:** DIY, Switzerland, New England, music production.

### 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2000s, several authors have drawn attention to Do-it-Yourself (DIY) practices for music production. They emphasize DIY's roles in the emergence of new musical genres, the diffusion of music across the world, and also in the persistence of certain musical practices (see Culton & Holtzman, 2010; Gordon, 2005; Hein, 2012; Holtzman, Hughes, & Van Meter, 2007; Luvaas, 2013; Tarassi, 2012). With regard to those works, it appears clear that DIY, either understood as a way to claim anti-capitalism in music production or as a focus on self-production (Hein, 2012), can take different forms depending on the actors and the contexts. But while DIY practices have been well documented across the world, few comparative studies have been carried out. With that in mind, this paper aims to highlight the value of considering how differently DIY can be put into practice in different contexts and by different actors. Indeed, being able to describe the similarities and the differences between DIY practices across the world is necessary for understanding what DIY means to music. This paper compares two field studies conducted in different DIY music worlds<sup>3</sup>: New England's basement show network (Vidal, 2015) and Swiss indie rock (Riom, 2016).

These studies show actors putting DIY into practice differently in these two settings, underlining that DIY practices need to be understood in relation to their contexts. Indeed, examples from both of our case studies show that DIY is a way to respond to the challenges that these musical worlds are facing (show organization in New England and album recording in Switzerland). Furthermore, we see that there are not clear boundaries between underground and industry, but rather there is a continuum of practices.

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<sup>3</sup> Here we understand musical world in the sense of Crossley (2015). Such an approach allows us to take into account all the actors taking part in the collective act of music production beyond boundary making processes (Becker, 1984; Mueller, 2016).

## 2. Cases and methods

In both of our case studies, we used a panel of qualitative methods including interviews, participant observations, and virtual ethnography. The first study that we compare is an ethnography conducted on a DIY network organized around the production of live shows in non-profit spaces (e.g. basements, record stores, and art galleries) in Boston, New England. This network consists of about fifty bands of different genres and a dozen independent bookers whose aim is to ensure fair compensation to the bands, accessibility to the shows for people aged under 21, and more freedom for artistic experimentation. The second study was conducted in Switzerland with six bands who identify themselves as indie rock (even when the definition of that musical genre was not always clear). The aim of the study was to understand how these bands identify and participate in the indie rock world. Fifteen individual interviews were conducted with the members of these bands along with observation at shows and online tracking.

The two cases share some important common features that can be highlighted. First, most of the interviewed musicians do not make a living from their music. Most of the bands do not have media exposure and are barely known, even on a local level. Also, the majority of the actors spontaneously used the term DIY during their interviews to define their own approach to musical production. In both cases, there is no unified aesthetics defined and artistic innovation and experimentation were greatly valued. Furthermore, as in many other musical worlds, most of the actors are male, and both of these musical worlds exist in a dense urban network in a midsize city<sup>4</sup>.

We should also notice that our participant recruiting processes reflect the differences between the two cases. In the case of Boston's basement show network, the researcher got in touch with the participants through their shows, while the Swiss indie rock bands were identified through their recordings, via their Bandcamp pages, or their labels' websites. In other words, the way we discovered our informers emphasizes what their most visible activities are.

## 3. New England

The DIY basement show network<sup>5</sup> in New England presents several features. As mentioned before, bands perform a wide range of genres (songwriter, garage, noise, experimental electronic, indie rock, etc.). Often they are at least acquainted with one another if not playing at the same shows. This network, mainly centered on live music, is made in Boston of over one hundred musicians, a dozen booking agents, some bloggers, a couple record store owners and micro-labels, as well as show-goers. Shows are mostly performed at unofficial venues, such as houses, art galleries, and record stores. The setup is minimal, and bands are plugged directly into a portable PA system. As houses are unlicensed for performances, shows there are illegal. Therefore, location addresses have to be kept secret, and the different spots are identified by pseudonyms. Bookers may be tied to one place, but it is common for independent bookers to book shows in multiple unofficial venues. Bands may perform up to once a week and tour once or twice a year in the eastern half of the country. The tours are self-organized and rely on the support of local DIY networks all over the country. It is also common for musicians to play in two or three bands. With a dense network of cities located a couple of hours away from Boston, bands commonly perform in the neighboring states without staying overnight. Bands from Boston are well connected to many other bands across New England.

When they are self-producing, bands usually release music on cassette tapes and digitally via Soundcloud and Bandcamp. Burned CDs are very uncommon to find. Releasing a record needs

<sup>4</sup> About 14.7 million inhabitants around Boston and 8.2 million inhabitants around Zürich.

<sup>5</sup> According to Mercklé (2004, p. 4), a social network is "constituted by a set of social units and relationships these social units maintain with one another directly or indirectly, via chains of varying length. These social units can be individuals, informal groups of individuals, or more formal organizations" (our translation).

greater means, which involves financial support and assistance with contacting the media that typically only a label can provide. Releases are recorded in home studios and are sometimes mixed. Rather than an end, tapes are used just to leave a mark and to help a band support itself at home and while touring. One monthly fanzine and one website are dedicated to covering the local network by giving information on the shows and on new releases. Both are run by the same non-profit which is also the main booker. This network answers a triple need for economic sustainability, accessibility, and aesthetic freedom. In terms of economic sustainability, this network is the result of a specific American context, where public subsidies barely exist for popular music and musicians can only rely on a capitalistic market for funding. The crisis of CDs as a format, progressively replaced by online options, and the rise of live performance as a revenue source partially informs how this network is mainly focused on the live performances. Booking shows in houses allows booking agents to redistribute all of the door money directly to the bands rather than paying a large fee to the venue and giving the bands the meager leftovers. Shows are donation-based; show-goers usually pay \$5-10 per show, and the door collects on average \$100-200 per show. Line-ups tend to include 4 bands, the opening band being a new local band and the closing one a more established local band that is able to draw an audience. Thus, a band's recognition is largely induced by the quality of their live performances and their extensive touring. Most of the interviewees only discovered new music by going to shows, where they have a better feel for how a band sounds. In terms of accessibility, houses are all-ages, while bars are only open to adults over 21. This means, in a city where a fourth of the population goes to college or university that they can reach a wider audience. Last, this network wants to guarantee a certain aesthetic freedom; it provides a space for music that wouldn't get booked elsewhere, especially noise and experimental music, a space for show-goers to get exposed to them and expand their appreciation of genres. It is also providing a space for bands to hone their performance skills and musical identity, where technical skills matter sometimes less than their energy and conviction.

Tension between interviewees or with other actors in the music community in Boston was useful to pinpoint where the stakes lied. Most of the conflicts around DIY that were mentioned during interviews related to live performances.

Some of the conflicts were related to organization, especially regarding economic sustainability. Even if profitability is not the main goal, there is a need for money to support the musical activity; though they are usually housed for free by the people who book them, touring bands need to pay for gas at the very least, as well as food. Local bands need to pay for equipment, a practice space if they cannot practice in someone's basement, and their releases. Most show-goers willingly pay the door fee, as it is only a couple of dollars. Hence, "free riders" who claim they cannot afford to donate because they need the funds to work on their craft or who will not pay for political reasons are criticized by those who analyze these behaviours as individualistic and hypocritical. Those individuals are seen as detrimental to the logic of solidarity and support necessary to build and sustain the network that can only happen when contacts, skills, material and financial resources, and opportunities to perform and record are shared between participants. Ties are created when people support each other and then get supported in return down the line.

Other tensions were related to boundary-making. A common critique of bars and music venues disqualified them as places that only care about business. According to interviewees, those places care mostly about filling the room, which pushes them to book bands that are already known to attract large crowds, such as cover bands or national acts, and are thus not taking risks music-wise. Additionally, the sociability at bars, where the music is loud and it feels improper to talk to strangers, does not foster the same kind of bonds between participants as private house shows, which are seen as intimate and safe. They thus try to present themselves as the opposite to bars and the only option for supporting music described as innovative, experimental, and potentially with a very limited draw.

## 4. Switzerland

In the Swiss indie world<sup>6</sup>, bands do not often play live (only around 15 shows per year). The shows that they do perform mainly take place at official venues<sup>7</sup> or festivals which have both good infrastructure and professionalized staff (technicians but also booking agents and promoters). Only a few shows take place in less official settings such as squats<sup>8</sup>. Most official venues are more interested in booking big international bands recognized by the main music media (Pitchfork, Stereogum, Les Inrocks, etc.). Thus, Swiss bands often play only as supporting acts and are not always well considered by the venues' booking agents. Furthermore, Swiss bands have trouble touring abroad independently because they either do not have the financial resources to organize their own tours (booking, promotions, travel, etc.) or they are not well connected enough to DIY networks in other countries which could help them tours at lower cost (for more details see Riom, 2016). For these reasons, finding shows can be difficult, so bands that can afford it hire booking agents and promotion agencies. Such professional support helps them to be integrated into the Swiss music market and to get shows.

Regarding recording, bands tend to release an LP about every three years. Usually it is a classic LP with between ten and fifteen tracks. For most of the bands, writing and recording music is their main activity. Interviewed musicians explain putting a lot of effort into the recording process. The music is mainly recorded in small home studios (recording in a professional studio is very expensive in Switzerland). Friends or the musicians themselves handle the technical aspects of recording often sending to professional studios only for final mastering. Such work process allows them to take their time and "feel comfortable". Most bands put out vinyl, CDs, and occasionally tapes. The recording process and the associated production costs (cover art, mastering, manufacturing, etc.) are covered both by the money earned during shows and also largely by public funding. Indeed, most of the largest cities of Switzerland as well as the cantons have implemented policies to support independent music production<sup>9</sup>. Such support mainly offsets costs of recording and touring abroad (once you have a booked tour). Some of the interviewed bands have received up to 2000 CHF (about 1800 Euros) for their records.

Record releases are important for the bands recognition. In order to get performance offers, a band needs to release some music first. Then, it can hope to get some press coverage (especially if it works with a promotion agency) and be booked by venues across the country. It is rare that music media writes about a Swiss band because of a show; the media attention is mainly focused on their albums. Moreover, this is also the way that musicians are used to promoting their music; promotion deals are usually made for a new album release. A band might play twenty shows in the months following the release of an album before going back to a relatively calm performance schedule. Another manifestation of the importance of records is in awards given by media or music industry associations. At events such as M4music (the Swiss equivalent of SXSW) or on indie music blogs such as Orange Peel, awards mainly recognize albums. This leads to albums being the main basis for Swiss indie band reputations.

<sup>6</sup> We call the Swiss indie world the network of actors around the bands I have interviewed, even though these bands are not always directly connected to each other. We use the label "indie" because it is the common label used by the bands themselves to define their music (for instance on their Bandcamp pages). Of course, "indie" can take a different meaning depending on the context and the period (Kruse). In our fieldwork, it mainly refers to guitar-oriented music inspired by Anglo-Saxon bands ranging from Sonic Youth to Radiohead, the White Stripes, My Bloody Valentine or Arcade Fire. A selection of Swiss band music can be heard on the following YouTube playlist: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uAq3zaG-aM&list=PLw-by-Or2prtzKHww7hF\\_e6gl\\_NZrPQXK](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uAq3zaG-aM&list=PLw-by-Or2prtzKHww7hF_e6gl_NZrPQXK).

<sup>7</sup> Here we understand unofficial venues in the sense of Bennett and Rogers (2016).

<sup>8</sup> From the early eighties until about ten years ago, Switzerland had a very large squat movement, and a large variety of shows took place in such spaces. However, nowadays, the majority either have been closed or had to accept regulation in order to stay open and/or get public funding (professional staff, norms and rules, etc.) and eventually started to book more established acts just like the official venues.

<sup>9</sup> In Switzerland, cantons (the Swiss regions) and cities are responsible for most cultural policies. The federal government is only in charge for the movie industry. There are federal institutions such as Swiss Music Export, but these are mainly financed either by cities and cantons or private funding.

In the Swiss indie music world, DIY forms of organizing mainly impact music recording. As said before, bands play most of their shows at official venues, and several hire professional booking agents to find gigs more easily. The interviewed bands release their music either themselves individually or through DIY collaborative labels that they or others run. These DIY labels are more platforms to publish and promote their music than commercial enterprises. The labels do not own the music, and they do not fund the bands' careers. Money from record sales covers the recording costs. Conversely, these labels are a way to share resources and skills. Indeed, the value for the bands is to be able to both reach their expectations in artistic and technical terms and also record at lower cost. Through the cooperative labels, musicians help each other with the different labors of producing music and its peripheral arts (for instance music videos). Thus, it is a way to collectively share know-how. Furthermore, label names are relatable and can lend credibility to the member bands. Labels serve as a promotional amplifier for the bands to divide up effort and to pool contacts. They even occasionally book and organize label nights where the label's bands play.

If DIY organizations mainly answer the challenges of music recording, the boundary-making behaviour toward actors seen as non-DIY focuses on this aspect too. During our interviews, musicians were critical toward bigger independent but commercial labels. They argued that signing on to such labels would mean a loss of artistic freedom. They highlighted that since the commercial label has to invest money in your career, they would have a say in the music. And such labels, because they have to be economically viable in order to pay the employees and cover their costs, make choices that are not motivated by only artistic aims. Furthermore, several interviewees insist that, even if it could be beneficial for the music, they would not work with professionals to record their music, because they do not want to approach music that way. They emphasize, insisting on the pleasure of making music, that what matters to them is working with people with whom they feel comfortable, friends and people with whom they share a common approach. In their views, it is crucial that the band controls the complete process of the production.

## 5. Conclusion

Our main goal in this paper is to show the importance of local contexts in particular economic markets and opportunities, to better understand how DIY as a notion is used by the stakeholders and how it is connected to recognition and fame. In both cases, our informers draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and people whom they consider as having commercial-centered aims. In their views, the legitimacy of their practice comes from their independence over any requirement of profitability. However, if these boundary-making processes definitely share some common features, their modalities are different. Identifying different points of tension and friction within our field is particularly helpful in identifying different representations of music as well as different stakes in different DIY economic circuits. The Switzerland scene emphasized recordings and so built boundaries around recording, while the New England scene emphasized live performances and so built boundaries from that.

In Switzerland, musicians can benefit from state-funded subsidies for recordings, which usually allows them to cover the costs of the studio recording, mixing, mastering, and pressing into records or CDs. The media (magazines, blogs, etc.) covering music pay particular attention to record releases and have the biggest collective voice publicizing bands. Comparatively, live performances are few and not the main means of getting notoriety: Swiss bands usually play only a dozen show a year given the competition with foreign bands to play at live commercial venues. The lack of non-commercial venues and the difficulty of organizing European tours prevent Swiss indie bands from finding other opportunities to perform.

In the United States, there are hardly any state-funded subsidies for music that is not classical or jazz. Popular music belongs to the realm of the capitalistic market. In New England, the dense network of cities and longstanding tradition of DIY hardcore, punk, and indie shows in non-commercial spaces provide many opportunities for local underground bands to perform on an

almost weekly basis. Bands build their fame by playing live sets and by touring along the east coast, which most bands do at least once per year for two to three weeks at a time. In terms of revenue, bands only get paid for their shows while touring (around \$100-200), while otherwise supporting themselves by selling their tapes. When playing at home they agree not to get paid in order to support the visiting touring bands.

One interesting result of these different environments is that, ultimately, Swiss bands try to reproduce the sound of their recordings when playing live, while New England bands record their albums as if they were playing a regular live show. Our results emphasize the relation between different DIY practices and the context where they take place. In the two cases, different challenges addressed to the actors by their social, political, and economical environments produce different forms of DIY. Furthermore, we have highlighted that boundaries drawn by the actors are strongly related to the perceived stakes and conflicts when producing music. Therefore, DIY should not be considered as a set of practices universal and uniform, but rather multiple and heterogeneous. It takes shape differently within different *spaces*. This acknowledgment challenges the idea of clear boundaries between underground worlds and music industries and, it opens new ways to understand the relationship between musical aesthetics and their production contexts.

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