

6.3. Hindrances and enhancements to sub-cultures: An analysis to observe the effects of self-organised musical activities onto the finished creative product

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Abstract

With the continuing lack of dependence for the traditional record industry, musicians are looking for new and innovative ways to release their recordings so that their messages can be heard. The culture of self-organised art is one that creatives use as an outlet.

With so much emphasis on the culture, outsiders may gather the impression that the ideals of the people involved are more significant than the finished product itself. We must ask if the finished product becomes secondary to the scene: Does the environment that inspires artists to create shape how people judge the aesthetic of their work?

This research observes practitioners who have benefitted from creating and promoting within this idiom. It will focus on the interviews of selected practitioners of self-organised art, analysing how they approach obstacles such as time limitations and lack of funding resources and exploring the relationship between the culture and the finished creative product.

Keywords: performance, DIY, aesthetic, creative product.

1. Introduction

The world of DIY culture has been something of a sanctuary for artists, musicians, actors and performers, who otherwise may not have initially had their work acknowledged by traditional media outlets. It has also provided opportunities for many creative people starting out. Sometimes, however, the quality and value of the work depends upon the approval of the gatekeepers of the DIY scenes. Often, when the work is presented to the scene, its worth can be overlooked because of the contributions the individual has (or has not) already made to the scene and community.

I have been fascinated and influenced by DIY culture for some time and formed many bonds with fellow practitioners with similar interests. In 2012, I imported my interest in this culture into academia. For my master's dissertation, I researched house gigs and compared the performing mentality of those shows with those of more formal performances. In doing so, I noticed that despite how much I have embraced this culture, I often felt the cultural product was dwarfed by the ideals of the scene. This posed an interesting dilemma: How beneficial can the scene really be — not just career-wise but also creatively — when it prevents the artist from flourishing? As the rock band McLusky once sang: "what's the point of do it yourself when it looks so shit"²? The writer Christopher Small echoes a similar issue with regards to musical performance and the creative process, but in a more formal way:

The presumed autonomous 'thingness' of works of music is, of course, only part of the prevailing modern philosophy of art in general. What is valued is not the action of art, not the act of creating, and even less that of perceiving and responding, but the created art object itself. Whatever meaning art may have is thought to reside in the object, persisting independently of what the perceiver may bring to it. (Small, pp. 4-5).

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² McLusky (2004) *You Should be Ashamed, Seamus*.

To investigate these theories about art, perception, and the creative process further, I interviewed several people whom I considered to be my peers about what it means for them to be DIY and how they can separate the work from the ideals.

These interviews were selected with specific criteria in mind. Each person I interviewed had to be actively involved in DIY culture as both a performer — either playing in bands or solo artists — as well as work in some capacity as a practitioner. For this paper, I personally define a practitioner as someone working to support the scene outside of performing — whether this be promoting gigs, writing about music, curating festivals/all-dayers, owning a record label or any other activities relating to these disciplines. To fully satisfy the questions the research asked, a dual perspective was required and needed contributors that had experienced both sides of DIY culture. Though genre wasn't considered as part of this criteria, one lucky co-incidence of the interviewees was that they all played different styles of music. Coming from disciplines of alt folk, avant-jazz, post-rock, post-hardcore and art rock showed how this culture affects these seemingly unrelated scenes and is thus able to draw parallels with these contrasting yet complimentary viewpoints. These scenes are all UK-based, with three practitioners being based in London, one in Glasgow and one in Eigg. Keeping it UK-based was also not intentional; however, due to the existing connections of this writer, the UK was a natural first point of reference. As far as I am aware, none of the scenes I write about are connected with each other; this was intentional as I wanted to see if these groups thought in similar ways despite not having direct links with anyone else.

2. Choice verses necessity

In order to conduct this research, I asked each participant a uniform set of questions. The first question asked how these people got involved in DIY culture to start with, particularly how much of their attitude and interest was dictated by choice and how much by necessity. This expressed a need to belong to a certain subculture, with many of the musicians acknowledging that the way they adopted DIY values was through a mixture of a need to present their work in this way against a decision to.

With several creators not seeing how their work fit within the traditional, conventional, and orthodox attitudes of the commercial music industry, promoting themselves within a DIY context provided a useful outlet for sustaining a creative lifestyle. Many of the practitioners I interviewed still see DIY as the heart of what they do. One such example, Johnny Lynch, founder of Lost Map Records, curator of Howling Fling festival, and a songwriter who makes music under the name Pictish Trail says: "That sense of being compelled to (...) create drives the practical side of things — the music is always the motivation" (Appendix 1). The impulses of DIY can be instinctive, as promoters Upset the Rhythm point out: "When I put on my first show, I don't think I realised it was a DIY event at all (...) I certainly didn't think it would lead to a decade long pursuit." (Tipton as cited in John/Owl, p. 16).

This need for self-organisation enables the DIY community to release recordings without the dependence on other people. For example, Black Flag guitarist Greg Ginn formed the record label SST simply due to his impatience with their label at the time. As Clinton Heylin notes in *Babylon's Burning: From Punk to Grunge*: "In fact, they spent most of 1978 waiting for Greg Shaw at Bomp to issue their single 'Nervous Breakdown' (...) [These experiences] drove Ginn to finally put the EP out himself, forming SST Records for the very purpose" (Heylin, p. 543). In addition, the documentary "Salad Days" features an interview quote from Jenny Toomey (Simple Machines Records) who claims "99% of independent record labels that are ever started is because you've got somebody in a band whose band isn't yet good enough to be on another record label so if you want that record to come out, you better put it out yourself" (as cited in Crawford, 2014, 7'42"). The experiences from SST and Simple Machine Records prove the need and the opportunity to self-release records, due to the lack of interest in other potential distributors. This platform is still important to many musicians and performers as this need to distribute material continues to exist,

especially when other companies may be reluctant to release work due to the inexperience of the performers, the chance of the music becoming unfashionable, or the unprofitable nature of the product.

The other side of the coin is the idea of pursuing DIY by choice. Out of all the available outlets to present work, why do people choose this one? In his book, *DIY Too*, Robert Daniels questions this view by looking at people from more privileged backgrounds and asking if they really need to use DIY outlets or are they using it as some sort of pose. "I have a working class chip on my shoulder and resent those more privileged and opportune than me when they DIY (when they don't need or care to). I resent the luxury of the rich to 'play' poor" (Daniels, 2015, p. 18). This creates a friction between dedicated members of the community and those who may see DIY culture as a stop-gap. It can feel as if it's a look they're trying to emulate with no real interest in what's actually going on, particularly if they are people that don't have a direct link to that particular scene. This is reflected by Holy Roar founder Alex Fitzpatrick: "In an ideal world, it should always be necessity. But we live in a Western capitalist society where sub-culture and youth culture is forever appropriated by larger business in order to appear 'cool' or 'dynamic'" (Appendix 4). With publications such as NME³ writing about and romanticising DIY culture, there is a real concern that the culture created turns into a marketing project by larger and more profitable entities.

Both of these areas relate to each other in how the creators want their work to be perceived. While no one stated outright that they went to DIY culture by choice, a few of the practitioners did say that the reliance on self-organisation went together with the choice of artistic and aesthetic presentation. However, people such as Lynch claim that it has always been a necessity, "now more than ever" (Appendix 2); due to the non-profit mentality shared by several people within the scene, traditional outlets are less likely to be interested in covering severely niche work.

3. Time management and funding

I also considered the relationship between the ethos and the product by examining external hurdles caused directly by the DIY aesthetic, such as time and financial organisation — areas that several members of the recording industry had not needed to consider before. The time management process can certainly be an issue for the creative. For starters, there is often a tug of war between administrative tasks battling for time against the creative process. Cath Roberts, jazz saxophonist, member of Sloth Racket and co-founder of the jazz/experimental night LUME, notes:

Because of the nature of the work involved in running LUME (i.e endless admin), it would be easy to let it take over all available time and headspace, leaving nothing for actual artistic practice. So time management is very important — and for me, making sure that LUME is always in service of my creative goals (Appendix 2).

The problem with spending countless hours on practitioner methods is that one's own artistic merits can tend to be overlooked. Kenny Bates, guitarist/vocalist of post-rock band Bianca as well as promoter and founder of record label, Good Grief, recalls one such example of this and wrote about his experiences:

I think most folk know I'm the label guy too so [using the label] wouldn't work for my music! The biggest impact being a DIY label/promoter guy has on my music though is that it eats up

³ Retrieved from <http://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/diy-roundtable-politics-money-and-how-it-works-in-britain-in-2014> [Accessed 26/08/16].

all my spare time when I have a release or big show on the cards, so I don't get the chance to write and play as much as I want (Appendix 3)⁴.

While the limited time can sometimes focus artists, it can also leave them with less time to create, which leads to just as many musicians drifting away from the project. Despite several artists being able to juggle their work alongside outside factors such as day jobs and family commitments, many other artists are dependent on pursuing their artistic endeavours on a full time basis. As such, the work could potentially suffer and therefore not hold up to the standards of the creator. In my own experiences, I have abandoned various projects and compositions completely due to not dedicating enough time to the development of said project and eventually losing interest in the work itself. Because of this, I have missed opportunities to document these projects within the time I conceptualised them.

As with the aforementioned time and geographical restrictions, the issue of finances is yet another potential barrier that artists may be unable to overcome. Many of these projects are self-funded with non-profit intentions. Despite this, because several artists understand how hard resources are to come by, external funding is seen as less of a taboo than it perhaps has been in the past. For instance, bands such as Best Coast have been happy to endorse projects that were afforded to them by brands such as Converse,⁵ arguing that they can get capitalism to work for them and support other exciting ventures they may have going on. In his doctorate thesis, the musician, artist and academic Andy Abbott notes that "even when those spaces of non-capitalism are formed they risk eventual recuperation and co-optation. The process of DIY and autonomous activity is never completely beneath the radar or able to go unnoticed by capitalism" (Abbott, p. 63). These remarks relate to Daniels and Fitzpatrick's comments and criticisms about DIY culture being a possible stop-gap for image-conscious performers until an offer with more prosperity is proposed. Ultimately, performers using DIY culture as a potential gateway rather than an authentic commitment to the scene is something that cannot be overly-criticised. People being attracted to the aesthetic but unwilling to take on the struggles long term is understandable problematic.

Outside of co-operations and brands, there are many other musicians who are undertaking projects with the use of government funding. Cath Roberts, for one, successfully applied for Arts Council and grant funding for her event — the Luminous Festival in South London — which was an all-day gig focused on showcasing avant-garde jazz from both national and international bands.⁶ As far as I'm aware, most of my interviewees self-funded their projects, either through earnings from an unrelated day job or money saved from profits from previous work. A lack of funding has caused many ambitious projects to be compromised or, worse still, abandoned entirely. Therefore corporate or government funding is one of the ways that projects can materialise. Currently, the main issue with applying for funding is its potentiality to be another unnecessary hurdle to overcome; in Roberts' experience, it meant more time on paperwork and less time on creating the work itself. Conversely, many DIY scenesters have enjoyed the challenge of creating with limited resources. For several of them, this is one of the appeals of DIY culture in the first place.

4. Community and enhancements

⁴ It should also be noted that since the interview took place, Bianca announced their intentions to disband due to a relocation by one of the band members. This discovery felt relevant to the issues surrounding time management because of the external factors brought on to interfere with the project. Their announcement can be found <https://www.facebook.com/biancayouidiot/photos/a.205561439594703.1073741824.104963219654526/647381975412645/?type=3> [Accessed 19/08/16].

⁵ Retrieved from http://exclaim.ca/music/article/best_coasts_bethany_cosentino_talks_converse_collab_with_kid_cudi_vampire_weekends_rostam_batmanqlij [Accessed 24/08/16].

⁶ Retrieved from <http://lumemusic.co.uk/2016/06/06/26th-june-iklektik-lume-festival/> [Accessed 23/06/16].

Community is one of the biggest appeals about the scene. Due to the emphasis of the scene, many practitioners have started using terms such as “Do It Together” (Baker as cited in Daniels, 2014, p. 31) or as Derek Sivvers coined “Decide It Yourself”, adding, “I think many musicians have accidentally interpreted this as ‘Do It ALL Yourself’” (Sivvers, p. 26). This togetherness is echoed by many of the practitioners I asked, including Cath Roberts, who explained: “If I describe what we do as DIY, I’m more talking about the fact that LUME is artist-run” (Appendix 2).

Performing in front of a likeminded audience brings romantic imagery of a comrade-type atmosphere. For several artists, having these people around is vital to encouraging growth, developing skills, building confidence and improving ability within what, to many, is seen as a safe space. Simone Gray, vocalist of post-punk band Teenage Caveman and founder of experimental music night DIM, reflects this by saying: “I wouldn’t have been able to start DIM without the support of my friends” (Appendix 5). She goes one step further by adding “[The DIM scene] are very vocal supporters of each others’ work and getting their approval is the only approval that matters to me. That’s success”. More specifically, she adds: “The intersectional feminist punk scene has provided my band with a vital support network” (Appendix 5).

With the works often created for the community, a question begs whether these products would even exist without them. In *DIY One*, Hannah Nicklin notes: “DIY, in my opinion, is the best alternative there is, because it’s by definition grown and shaped as a certain place to fit and make room for the people that want to live in it” (Nicklin as cited in Daniels, 2014, p. 89). She also acknowledges the problems of this mentality too: “There’s a criticism of both these theatre and music DIY spaces — that they can be unscalable, insignificant, hard to find, and cliquy” (Nicklin as cited in Daniels, 2014, p. 91). Despite this, the influence of peers can bring out the best in people. Johnny Lynch puts it: “Being part of a collective, and being actively involved in putting other people’s music out, it’s those things that inspire me to make music” (Appendix 1). Bates expands on the attitudes of these communities: “Sure, getting a run of CDs and t-shirts together with no help is ‘doing it yourself’. But DIY culture is more than that” (Appendix 3).

From what I gathered, the practitioner aspects can be seen as extensions of the work. We can see how it compliments, enhances and marks it as a document of something that belongs to a particular scene. In his book, *Storm Static Sleep*, Jack Chuter includes an interview he conducted with the band Maybeshewill about their additional practitioner work, such as “the record label Robot Needs Home, the merchandise company Robot Needs Merchandise and the tour transport hire service Robot Needs Vans” (Chuter, p. 262). Band member John Helps explains how these activities relate to their musical output: “I try and find stuff that I can do alongside [the band] that compliments it...If you go home [from tour] to something that you really love doing, then there’s not really a problem with it” (Chuter, p. 263). These activities have helped integrate them into a particular scene and most people agree that these two areas compliment each other well and are very compatible. Lynch writes: “I don’t do these things to compare my success/failure with other artists, but rather to be part of something that is about celebrating the joy of music” (Appendix 1), while Fitzpatrick adds:

Are we DIY practitioners to an extent because of the type of music we support and release, thereby hindering our chances of reaching a wider audience? Or do we champion DIY ethics/aesthetics because that model and framework helps further our artists more than if we pretended to be something we are not (e.g. a corporate/major entity)? (Appendix 4).

By giving it a context, it can lead to a compelling back-story for the work. Due to the new information we are given about this particular project, it can draw people in and lead new audiences into new works. With this, the scene grows as new people desire to present works within it. As Lynch says: “It gives it a story. People love a story” (Appendix 1).

5. Conclusion

My findings found that despite the differences in genres and scenes, several parallels emerged between these practitioners, particularly how the scene dominates their work and creativity. All five of them admitted that their respective communities were a big part of their creativity and how indebted they all felt in support of their networks. In a way, they were almost co-dependent on these networks that they helped to create. Notable differences did emerge, such as the ways each of them saw their careers progressing. In this regard, Fitzpatrick and Lynch were the most interesting to observe. Despite their similar level of commercial success, the relationship between their current work and the DIY aesthetic contrasts. Both Lynch and Fitzpatrick have been known to deal with the music industry in a way that the other three participants, to the best of my knowledge, have not. Despite this, Fitzpatrick is more willing to talk about his experiences of working within the music industry than Lynch is. The other three participants had mixed views on expansion. Roberts valued the ever-growing avant-jazz community because of their ability to “share ideas and move the music forward” (Appendix 2). Bates expressed openness for this as well, saying: “There is a definite growing interest in this area of music though, and the acts I work with do get approaches from more open-ended events” (Appendix 3). Meanwhile, Gray’s need to “provide a nurturing alternative to many of the gigs/nights/exhibitions that seem unfriendly or elitist” (Appendix 5) appears to be the main priority with her practitioner work. Overall, the participants noticed how the role of the practitioner supports the performer and vice versa. This reciprocal relationship helps to understand and empathise with both the organization and performance elements of shows. Gray in particular notes how she is “much more punctual when (...) turning up for soundchecks” (Appendix 5) for gigs she performs.

Scenes are created and then established for the artists to access a network; when fully immersed, the comrade mentality is just as important as the actual work. Creating it for and with a community of likeminded individuals is what stimulates the work in a lot of cases. As Cath Roberts says: “I think it’s really important to find a circle of collaborators who can share ideas and move the music forward” (Appendix 2). There are many cases where the two go hand in hand. This goes back to the previously mentioned aspirations of DIY communities, where the motivation can bring the best out of the contributors. For example, in an interview I conducted with guitarist Chris Sharkey for the music website “TV is Better,” he says:

“It’s not a very nice feeling to think that you’re in a vacuum (...) The scene is really, really important. Not just for the validation, as I said, but, also just for the fact that you feel like you’re part of a team or feel like you’re part of a movement and that’s a very inspiring thing (...) If that wasn’t there, I would probably be still doing it but I’d probably be finding it more difficult”⁷.

Lynch puts it like this: “Being a musician these days means being both practitioner and performer (...) The release of a record, the strategy that goes around a record going from the musician to the fan, is a part of the creative process — it’s all about having original ideas” (Appendix 1). Kenny Bates also writes:

I get that there are some people who just have a huge heart for people and for music and would like to put their skills to use within the DIY community since they’re not musical themselves. That’s a beautiful thing and these people are really important, invariably very passionate promoters. I do think the best promoters, venue bookers, labels etc. are run by musicians, though (Appendix 3).

These quotes show the importance on not only being a performer in the scene but what else can be contributed outside of that to progress the culture and keep it moving forward.

⁷ Retrieved from <http://tvisbetter.co.uk/comeo/si-patton-meets-chris-sharkey> [Accessed 14/06/2016]

We must remember that ultimately, these spaces are created for communities to present work to each other and in hopes of developing an audience out of that. Through that, the work becomes attached to the scene and the work is the thing that gives the community its identity. Most of the bonds I feel I have made in these communities have been through these similar interests — not only the same music but ones with the same values that I possess. It is a place to develop ideas and as Gray writes: “I’ve learned everything I know by making lots of mistakes and following my instincts” (Appendix 5). This trial and error process is a big part of practitioner work. One must wonder if the ideas these artists present would have come to fruition in the first place had it not been for the scene.

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Appendixes

- Appendix 1: Personal interview with Johnny Lynch (musician with Pictish Trail, Silver Columns, founder of Lost Map Records and Howling Fling Festival). Via email. Commenced: 26/04/16
- Appendix 2: Personal interview with Cath Roberts (musician with Sloth Racket, founder of LUME). Via email. Commenced: 21/05/16
- Appendix 3: Personal interview with Kenny Bates (musician with Bianca, founder of Good Grief Records). Via email. Commenced: 18/05/16
- Appendix 4: Personal interview with Alex Fitzpatrick (musician with Cutting Pink with Knives, Pariso, founder of Holy Roar Records). Via email. Commenced: 24/05/16
- Appendix 5: Personal interview with Simone Gray (musician with Teenage Caveman, founder of DIM). Via email. Commenced: 28/05/16
- Contact Simon Paton for a transcript of the Appendixes

