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DIY Music and the Politics of Social Media

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DIY Music and the Politics of Social Media

Ellis Jones

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The problem?

Welcome to the democratic, DIY music business

In the world of popular music, things – as always – aren't what they used to be. The once-rigid sureties of the music industries have been challenged by the disruptive potential of new technologies for making, circulating and experiencing music. We have arrived, apparently, at a radically different set of relations. As evidence, take this excerpt from the blurb of a recent book by Ari Herstand (2016), entitled *How to Make It in the New Music Business*: 'In the last decade, no industry has been through as much upheaval and turmoil as the music industry. If you're looking for quick fame and instant success, you're in the wrong field. It's now a democratic DIY business.'

The arrival of a democratic, DIY music business sounds like fantastic news, if true. It sounds like particularly fantastic news for any music practitioners who may have had an aversion to the 'old' music industries and who may have already been actively seeking and building alternative formations of popular music culture.

These alternative formations exist. Despite the above rhetoric of radical disruption, DIY music is not a new phenomenon. It is an approach to the production and distribution of music that, at a conservative estimate, dates back over forty years. It is often associated with punk, post-punk and indie, as well as electronic music genres, including rave. But more than an association with any particular genre, DIY scenes have historically often been affiliated with particular aspirations relating to the democratization of culture. They have questioned the organization and purpose of the music

industries, and have called, implicitly and explicitly, for those industries to be radically re-organized or even wholly dismantled.

DIY might mean prizing the intimacy of a small venue, and the temporary community created within it, as an end in itself, rather than seeing it as a stepping stone. It might mean acknowledging the harmful aspects of competition invoked by a music industry that celebrates stars at the expense of valorizing a wider range of creative endeavours, and opting out of that race for fame and commercial success. It might mean seeing musical training as a manifestation of elitist distinction, and therefore emphasizing an 'anyone can do it' aesthetic over precise technical ability. These are some of the ways in which DIY music cultures have historically made claims for the distinctiveness of their approach in relation to the 'mainstream'.

But DIY today *is* mainstream. And when the case for the emergence of a 'DIY democratic music business' is made, the internet – and social media specifically – is usually offered as a major catalyst for such democratization. The internet, it is suggested, offers musicians a new, unguarded doorway to awaiting audiences. Media scholar David Croteau argues that 'while "independent," "alternative," and "DIY" media have long existed in many forms [...], one key to the Internet's unique significance is that it provides the infrastructure necessary to facilitate the distribution of all forms of selfproduced media to a potentially far-flung audience' (2006: 341). Of course, the fact that this 'far-flung' distribution is *possible* does not mean that engagement with a worldwide audience is guaranteed, and it by no means assures the democratization of the media landscape, but it has certainly brought about substantial change.

Whilst social media may not be a panacea, what I wish to emphasize here is the extent to which it has *realized*, in a meaningful way, some of the core aspirations of DIY music, and has impacted on the lives of far more people than, say, punk ever did. Or to put it another way, there is a substantial overlap between the aspirations of DIY music and the kinds of communicative potentials opened up by social media. DIY has historically been presented as a story of people who *ought to be consumers* rejecting the role prescribed to them, turning the tables on 'popular culture' and becoming producers, and finding a sense of self-realization and political subversion in this act. Jello Biafra, singer of seminal US punk band The Dead Kennedys, has offered the mantra: 'don't hate the media, *become* the media' (Biafra 2000). This is, broadly, the promise of DIY, and it has also been a key promise of the internet and social media.

For better or worse, the lineage of DIY culture no longer has sole dominion over certain aspects of 'do-it-yourself' practice. DIY is increasingly acknowledged as an obvious choice for all sorts of musicians. Moving forward then, this book is premised on an understanding that there are two kinds of DIY music, which are at least theoretically separable. One is a broad but ultimately coherent tradition of cultural resistance, often undertaken in the name of greater aesthetic diversity, economic equality and access to participation – and often with inherent or implicit connections to larger ideas of social justice. The other is largely a socio-economic consequence of changes in the music industries, as well as in the ICT (information and communication technologies) industries. These changes in turn articulate to an increasingly prominent neoliberal discourse which emphasizes the need for individuals to 'take responsibility', rather than to seek or expect support from state or corporate institutions. What follows is an investigation into how these two versions of DIY music are interacting, and what the consequences are. If social media was the key tool by which popular music activity became increasingly 'DIY', what might it offer for music that was *already* DIY?

In defence of the alternative

This book is part of a series called Alternate Takes, which encourages its authors to challenge or re-frame conventional wisdoms in the world of popular music studies. When I proposed this book, my 'alternate take' was that, despite the rhetoric of democratization outlined above, social media has in lots of ways been quite bad for DIY music – at least, for the kind with a long history of politicized independence from the music industries. I still think this, and it is a key argument of the book. But this position feels far less controversial now than it did when I began my research in 2014. We are increasingly aware that the current, platform-dominated internet constitutes an extremely lopsided economy that is bad for musicians of all kinds and a communicative environment that, more generally, seems to be quite bad for all kinds of people.

Critical internet and social media scholars have problematized optimistic rhetorics of user empowerment and unfettered cultural production. They have highlighted the uneven economic relationship between a handful of platforms and their billions of users (McChesney 2013, Nieborg and Helmond 2018, Srnicek 2017a); suggested that new opportunities for autonomy (i.e. the freedom to act on one's own will, rather than following the dictates of others) might also lead to insecurity, compulsion and selfblaming (Duffy 2017, Kuehn and Corrigan 2013); and that the collection and application of data from our everyday online communication might represent the 'capture' of hitherto un-commodified dimensions of human activity (Andrejevic 2007, Dean 2010, Manzerolle and McGuigan 2014). As well as all this, the peak participatory 'moment' seems to be more or less over; platforms like YouTube increasingly play host to content produced by powerful 'old media' corporations (i.e. major labels, large film studios, TV networks etc.), influenced by advertisers who 'do not want their advertisement next to low-quality home video content' (Kim 2012: 54).

What now feels more like the 'alternate take' is the idea that this politicized version of DIY music is something that is worth defending and protecting. There seems to be very little faith in 'alternative' music as a viable political project, and widespread scepticism that it even exists as something meaningfully distinct from other kinds of engagement with music. This scepticism is not new: the politicized distinction between 'mainstream' and 'alternative' music cultures is, in a sense, always facing an existential crisis. In the next chapter I suggest that this is a built-in consequence of DIY's ambivalent (i.e. love–hate) relationship to popular music. But it does seem that in the last two decades in particular, alongside the rise of social media and the new 'DIY' music business, a number of discursive threads have cumulatively questioned the idea that such claims to alterity could reflect anything other than a kind of social posturing.

There is a pessimistic, Frankfurt School-esque bent to this relativism: the idea that cultural choice is an illusion (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), mangled as an apolitical postmodern cynicism. But its closer academic relative is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural taste as 'distinction' (1984). It suggests that the only reason people are interested in 'indie' or 'underground' cultures is because it gives them a certain kind of credibility or status.

This intersects with a populist discourse – sometimes called 'poptimism' in music criticism circles (Rosen 2006) – which has questioned the political worth of any allegiance to alternative styles or scenes. This discourse negates a long-acknowledged tension between art and commerce by suggesting that popular music's commercial impetus is, in a sense, the very thing that forces it to engage with and reflect the cultural and political zeitgeist. Alternative music's relative hermeticism is consequently a source of aesthetic and political impoverishment. This in turn implies a kind of organic, frictionless inevitability to the social positioning of musical genres and traditions: alternative music is all fine and good for its own niche audience, it suggests, and mainstream popular music is good for its big, global audience.

Another discursive threat to DIY's validity relates to what the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher termed 'capitalist realism', whereby we come to see the presence of competitive market dynamics in our social lives as inevitable and unchangeable (2009). This is most evident, in this context, as a depoliticizing of cultural actors' decisions to engage with industries and practices that might once have been considered a betrayal of shared principles – the old notion of 'selling out' (Klein 2020; Klein, Meier and Powers 2017). These decisions are now seen as inviolably individual ('it's their choice') or as structurally overdetermined ('what else would you do?'), in such a way as to put them beyond critique. This perspective undermines any sense of collectivism in the setting of ethical norms and boundaries. The other consequence of this 'realistic' perspective is to see any alternative

ethical position as, ultimately, a marker of privilege: for example, rejecting the profit motive is seen as a gesture only available to those with the economic security to afford it.

An increasing focus on representational politics in contemporary society – in both left-wing and right-wing forms - has devalued DIY's emphasis on organizational change as a mode of cultural resistance. DIY has historically valorized the building of alternative distribution networks, and these tend to come with inherent restrictions on audience size. But if the focus is on gaining representational visibility, then bigger is better. This perspective is reinforced as our understanding of the cultural industries - arriving both through academic research and through social media granting access 'behind the scenes' – draws new attention to the significant levels of agency operating within structures once caricatured as hegemonic monoliths (including major record labels). What makes the DIY musician so different, in terms of political potential, to the up-and-coming artist working to be heard in a fragmented and uncaring music industry? Isn't the latter navigating the same tensions between art and commerce, and perhaps negotiating them more successfully? The recent glut of best-selling, politically conscious, critically revered works from star US-based artists (King 2019) seems to beg the question of quite what the problem with the music industries was ever supposed to be.

I have sympathy for most of these arguments. I do think that music should be something it's possible to make a living doing, although I don't think that means accepting a moral equivalency between different kinds of music-making, or concluding that people should do 'whatever it takes' to make money. It's true that 'alternative' resentment towards chart music often continues a long history of misogynistic critique of young women's engagements with popular culture (Ewens 2019). It can also be dismissive or suspicious of African-American musics, sometimes seeing its capacity for 'technological innovation and stylistic change' as evidence of commercialism (Bannister 2006a: 88–9). And, undoubtedly, DIY does struggle to embrace and support the participatory diversity that is so central to its rhetoric. Some of this does relate to the uncommon material advantages that DIY practitioners might take for granted, although the economic security of DIY practitioners should not be assumed, and I think it's sometimes patronizing and wrong to suggest that not-for-profit principles inherently exclude certain social groups. (The tax-avoiding super-rich do not seem particularly interested in not-for-profit activity.)

The UK DIY scene that I have studied and been a part of seems at least as prone as other music scenes to abusive behaviour and prejudice. People I considered friends have taken advantage of their power, or of others' vulnerability, in a scene that was (and still is) specifically presented as a safer space. The question of whether DIY (in the specifically 'indie-punk' incarnation that I study here) is systemically sexist or racist is not one I answer thoroughly here. But it is certainly true that it has often failed to properly account for intersectional injustices, tending to reflect instead the often-narrow social positions of its practitioners.¹ The scene I studied showed disheartening historical continuity in this regard: during my research period there were several flashpoints at which problematic racial politics were brought to the fore. There are times when DIY has been an important space for emancipatory struggles, most notably in its capacity to give voice to feminist and queer politics. But it's important to recall that this space has generally been hard-won by marginalized groups, rather than simply offered up willingly.

So, I will not at any point make the claim that DIY is an ideal kind of music culture. I don't think it constitutes anything so grand as a revolutionary political practice or a comprehensive social movement, and it also isn't unique in being a musical culture that shows marked differences to mainstream popular music, aesthetically, organizationally or economically. But I will claim that DIY, for all its imperfections, has the capacity to mitigate one problem in particular: the distance that popular music culture has from the lives of most people. Therefore, I offer a critical defence not of the entirety of DIY music as we find it now, but of the broader notion of the alternative – the idea that musical activity outside of the commercial popular music industries might bring us closer to experiences of culture that work towards and sometimes embody social justice. I suggest that DIY music has characteristics that can make it a valuable form of 'cultural resistance'. That's a term that has fallen out of favour somewhat in academic literature, and I attempt to justify my use of it in Chapter 2.

All of this doesn't say much about whether the music produced in DIY scenes is, in itself, at all superior or preferable to other kinds of music. That isn't really the focus of this book, which is more concerned with how DIY is organized, and how it communicates political values within and outside of its borders. DIY can sometimes be a space for music that seems to be commercially unviable, as in the kind of 'abrasive sonic tinkering' that Stephen Graham locates in his study of 'underground' music (2016:3); sometimes it is home to music that sounds quite similar to pop music found elsewhere. But regardless of the aesthetics that are favoured, I think the particular value of DIY is that it presents opportunities for a particularly close kind of 'articulation' (i.e. connection) between music and social life, which can (and sometimes does) have empowering, democratizing effects.

¹Riot grrrl, a feminist, women-led DIY scene which began in the 1990s, is the DIY music lineage with the largest body of literature on experiences of exclusion in relation to race and ethnicity (see Bess 2015, Dawes 2013, Nguyen 2012). This is not to say that other scenes have not had comparable dynamics, but fewer accounts addressing them have been published.

DIY as the new default

So, DIY music is a cultural form with a long history of distinguishing itself from 'mainstream' music by means of specific ethical precepts. I've suggested that these might be valuable, and worth retaining and building upon. But social media and the internet have clouded some of the central ethical precepts of DIY music. These technologies intersect with, and often exacerbate, the existential crises I've listed above – of relativism, populism and pragmatism – as well as blurring distinctions between DIY and the music and ICT industries in other ways.

Take the 'not-for-profit' ethos as an example. DIY practitioners have historically tended to see a broad rejection of profiting from music, or variants on this theme (e.g. paying musicians but not promoters), as central to a vision of fair and ethical musical activity. But the internet has massively complicated notions of how much music costs, how much it *ought* to cost and even precisely what the music commodity is (Morris 2015). Automated surveillance of online activity is an important new site of profit which serves to underwrite 'free' access to culture in new ways (Andrejevic 2007), especially via targeted advertising, and many musicians today seek a similar kind of 'free lunch' model to that employed by tech companies. Street and Phillips, writing on music and copyright, quote one musician outlining such an approach: 'My attitude is like a start-up [...] you build up a community and then you monetize it [...], give it away free, remove all the obstacles that would normally be there' (2016: 423). Clearly, this kind of approach to 'freeing' music is something quite distinct from a not-for-profit ethic. And there are concerns that the aspirational equation underpinning this activity - that free work now equals paid work later might be economically infeasible and therefore subjectively harmful (Duffy 2017; Kuehn and Corrigan 2013).

Another key tenet of DIY has been independence or 'self-sufficiency'. This has been understood as important not only in terms of artistic autonomy, but also in order to have control over economic and organizational decisions that might otherwise exploit others (e.g. avoiding extortionate ticket prices). As noted above, the internet has been seen as a substantial boon for independent artists; even the internet itself has at times felt 'independent', insofar as its disruption of old music industry business models was sometimes presented as a grassroots, people-powered phenomenon. But the music industries being a more 'DIY business' means new expectations of 'self-management' – a form of independence that does not hold the same political potential. Record labels have become more risk-averse, and increasingly seek to shift the costs of production onto artists. Music industry scholars Mazierska, Gillon and Rigg suggest that major record labels now offer contracts 'only to those musicians who can prove their potential by having a significant following on social media or winning amateur competitions' (2018: 7). Part of DIY's approach, at least historically, has been to critique this notion of non-professional music as primarily a 'talent pool' for industry to draw from. That sense of DIY and mainstream music as 'separate worlds' can be hard to maintain today, when musicians of all kinds and all levels are using the same platforms.

DIY has often aimed to blur, or eradicate, distinctions between artists and audiences, aiming to increase participation by demystifying the practice of 'doing' popular music (either as a music performer or in other roles). To this end, they have used formats such as zines (i.e. small, hand-made or photocopied magazine-style publications) to encourage participation and have sought to build social and physical spaces that put musicians and audiences in close proximity. Social media does blur artist-audience boundaries; Nancy Baym has shown that 'getting closer' to audiences is a new requirement even for established, well-known musicians (2018). But this is a commercial imperative that relates to the commodification of our everyday communication (Dean 2010). Rather than demystifying cultural production, it can instead insert a new kind of mystification into the apparently 'direct' connection between fans and artists. Today, supposedly 'intimate' communications on social media can be very difficult to disentangle from the marketing and branding efforts that are part of so many popular musicians' diversified careers (Meier 2017). DIY practitioners consequently struggle to find an appropriately 'authentic' communicative mode by which they might avoid seeming (or feeling) grubbily self-promotional.

What I'm suggesting is that some of the ethical precepts that have long been central to DIY are also at least partly compatible with an emerging form of 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek 2017a). This could be an unhappy accident. But it is important to recognize that the capitalist class who, amongst other things, oversees the activity of the biggest music and ICT corporations, has a specific ability to absorb cultural critique and to work this critique into an augmented and thus re-legitimated economic system.

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) represents an important attempt to theorize this relationship between capitalism and critique and, along with Hesmondhalgh and Meier's application of this material to the subject of independent music (2015), it is a key influence on the research I present here. Boltanski and Chiapello engage with Max Weber's concept of the 'spirit of capitalism' – that is, 'the ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism' (2005: 8) – in order to posit that this 'spirit' is often first presented, in a sense, by anti-capitalist critique. They show how the French radical politics of the 1960s offered up both an 'artistic critique' and a 'social critique' of labour conditions, and then outline how employers were able, in focusing on the artistic critique (which was about 'disenchantment' with a perceived spiritual paucity in

everyday life), to instil work with new meanings that effectively dissolved the social critique (which had focused on inequality and suffering). Thus, flexibility that characterizes some kinds of work today is not an external arrival that was 'willed by no one' (2005: 185), but is in fact evidence of critique as a 'motor' of capitalist development (2005: 27).

So, economic and institutional power needn't always be employed as a top-down stifling of dissent (although this does happen); it can be involved in shaping more subtle processes of elision. Boltanski and Chiapello make a useful distinction between 'physical neutralization' (where critique 'does not succeed in being heard') and 'ideological neutralization' (where 'critique no longer knows what to say') (2005: 41). Symbols, texts, even whole domains of practice, can be 'hollowed out' and co-opted, whilst still carrying strong reverberations of their previous meanings. Since I'm suggesting that DIY still has the capacity to contribute to social justice, I'm also suggesting we need to be very careful of the consequences of these subtle elisions, and of the surface-level compatibility between DIY ethics and social media logics. And hopefully the overlaps outlined above also indicate why DIY music might be a specifically germane lens through which to consider social media's impact on society and culture more broadly.

As such, this book is just as much a study of social media as it is of popular music, but one that suggests social media research might fruitfully be carried out with a thorough understanding of the specific ethical precepts that people bring to social media platforms - in this case, the precepts of DIY music - and how they attempt to carry those ideas and behaviours with them when encountering these still new technologies. That doesn't mean that the normative perspective of the research has to come from the specific user-group under investigation. I have already suggested that I do have some affinity with DIY music's politics, but that isn't quite what I'm referring to here. I think that the ways that platforms constrain and enable behaviours can be best understood through a nuanced engagement with the social, political and cultural characteristics of a specific group of actually existing users. All of us arrive on social media with our own aims and intentions, however loosely or strictly defined, and with already-formed social groups that determine, at least in part, the social and cultural norms that will attempt to take root in those environments.

Nancy Baym, in her work on musicians, audiences and social media, uses the polysemy of the term 'platform' (i.e. its capacity to carry multiple meanings) as a starting point for considering links between online and offline communication environments, and the ways that both these spaces might carry some kind of 'architectural' power. 'Like concert halls', she writes, 'social media sites are built environments, designed to foster some social practices and discourage others' (2018: 155).

In this context, it is notable that DIY scenes have often placed emphasis on re-organizing spaces of musical activity. Some of the key calls to action in historical scenes have been broadly 'environmental' in this sense. Notable examples include the 'all ages' movement to allow under-21s into licensed venues in the United States in the 1980s, and riot grrrl's emphasis on 'girls to the front', which aimed to invert gendered audience norms in which women had often literally been at the periphery. In a slightly different, but related tradition of DIY music, we might also think about the environmental reorganization involved in the UK's outdoor rave scene of the 1990s, and how the movement of urban musics to rural settings related to desires for an anti-commercial musical space. In these ways and others, DIY scenes have highlighted the malleability of the relationship between built environments and the politics that operate in and around them. It's also important to note the sheer variety of platforms available online today, and the range of communication modes which even a single platform can offer. If you want to send private messages to a friend, or to video-chat with a group of colleagues, or to vent lengthy diatribes into the void, you can find and use online tools and platforms that are more likely to enable those kinds of communication.

So, we should be careful about assigning too much power to environments in themselves, whether mediated or physical. The issue, perhaps, is who has the power to alter them. As Baym notes, online 'built environments' are changing all the time. For better and for worse, Facebook and Twitter alter their design in response to how people are using them. I have written elsewhere that social media's 'affordances' – that is, the actions that they seem to enable and allow – should be considered critically as 'sites of contestation', where user intention and platform architecture meet (Jones 2019). In this book I try to focus on these moments and places where friction between the aims of users and platforms is evident, and to theorize outwards from there to reflect on broader tensions between DIY ethics and platform logics.

But is also important to understand that this 'architectural' approach to platforms only gets us so far. If we look at social media only as an environment that 'affords' certain things rather than others, then regardless of how we understand the power balance between users and platforms, we risk losing sight of social media as a broader societal force. Platforms have an influence on our life that goes beyond the observable decisions we make when interacting with and on the platform. Even your smarmy friend who is so quick to tell you that they've never had a Facebook account has nonetheless had their life substantially altered by the ways in which that platform has shaped contemporary life. Our relationships to friends and family, to local businesses, to politics, to culture and even to ourselves have all been changed, in indirect as well as direct ways. Therefore, social media's impact on a particular area of life – in this case, DIY music – may not be fully observable through studying usage in terms of the buttons that we do or don't press. It requires investigation into how social media practices fit, neatly or awkwardly, with the rest of life, and a consideration of online and offline activity as mutually constitutive.

Researching the Leeds DIY scene

Most of the material for this book comes from my study of a single DIY scene, undertaken in the city of Leeds between September 2015 and January 2018. Comparisons with other scenes and music cultures are made throughout. But a key premise, in the tradition of many other such studies of local music cultures (Cohen 1991, Finnegan 1988, Shank 1994), is that paying close attention to a single area of activity can reveal the operation of social mechanisms that would not be discoverable through widerranging surveys. The key advantage in this context is that studying a single scene, through a range of online and offline methods, permits a thorough assessment of the multiple roles that social media platforms play across different scales and kinds of communication. The findings outlined here relate not only to the ways in which the scene is outwardly communicative, but also to the 'everyday' individual and group interactions that construct and maintain it.

'Scene' is, of course, a term in popular usage, but it has also been employed as an academic concept in cultural studies (Straw 1990, 2001). Whilst the term can mask some quite different sociological approaches (Hesmondhalgh 2005: 28), there are some useful consistencies across its uses in popular music studies. Studying 'scenes' tends to involve paying particular attention to their 'overlapping' nature, and thus to a certain mobility of membership, whilst also pointing to the existence of something more stable than the posited hyper-flexibility of postmodern identity (i.e. the notion that we can 'make' ourselves into whoever we want to be). It also highlights that my interest in music-making here is not only in the final 'product', but in the routines and rituals that maintain and re-produce a music culture. Simon Frith notes that the concept of scene might usefully emphasize 'banality' whilst still celebrating 'some kind of opposition to dominant ideology' (2004: 174); Keith Kahn-Harris's account of extreme metal fandom similarly considers the way in which scenic 'mundanity' is a necessary ballast that allows for experiences of 'transgression' (2004). Even the most aesthetically uncompromising scenes tend to be characterized by repetition and stability: the same sets of people doing the roughly same things in roughly the same places.

Choosing Leeds was partly a matter of convenience, based on my location and my existing position in this community (outlined below). But Leeds also offered access to a wider range of people, activities and venues than in other nearby cities. Leeds also has an active and longstanding connection to DIY, most famously in its hosting of a highly political post-punk scene in the 1970s and 1980s (O'Brien 2012).

Speaking in terms of genre, I label my research population as broadly 'indie-punk' in a concession to its two clearest ideological lineages and to distinguish it from other local and trans-local DIY scenes centred around hardcore punk, electronic music, grime, folk and so on. There is a general tendency towards guitars and away from electronic instruments, and a construction of authenticity that tends to rely on some tropes drawn from rock music but which also reflects an increasing enthusiasm for popular music. So, while 'DIY' (rather than 'indie' or punk') is a label which captures this scene's valorization of particular methods of production and circulation, this doesn't mean genre is negated entirely. Indeed, we might even understand the term 'DIY' as problematic insofar as it makes an excessive claim to genre-indifference, which obscures the role of aesthetic discrimination in forming scene boundaries.²

Practitioners involved in this 'indie-punk' scene were mostly white and middle class, fairly mixed in terms of gender and sex (with a strong interest in feminist and queer politics), mostly vegetarian and vegan, politically leftleaning but not necessarily vocal or radical, and were mostly aged between eighteen and forty. In terms of social and cultural capital, then, there are commonalities that bind this scene together beyond generic affiliation.

However, above genre and status, I stress the role of place, and specifically venues. There are a number of venues that help constitute and maintain the scene, and one in particular serves to help define my research population. Wharf Chambers is a worker's cooperative and members' club with a bar and multi-use venue, which is open every day, and hosts several music events each week. Located in the city centre, near the so-called Freedom Quarter that denotes a cluster of LGBT-oriented venues, it emerged from a previous venue, Common Place, which was formed in the same location in 2005. Temple of Boom is another important city-centre venue (without a real 'bar' space outside of the gig room) which tends towards heavier punk and metal; Chunk is a practice space and gig venue in Meanwood operated by a collective of bands and artists, with an emphasis on art-rock and esoteric electronic music.

There are larger venues, too, which play a role in the scene's construction. Brudenell Social Club is a multi-room venue in Hyde Park which has received national recognition within the live music industry (Live Music Awards 2015), and which tends to host bigger indie, pop and rock acts in its 300 capacity main room. DIY music practitioners, however, had played a key role in its gradual transformation from working men's

²A sense of shared, politicized identity can also help practitioners to see beyond genre – in many DIY scenes it is primarily queer identity that plays this role. Pearce and Lohman's research on trans music scenes finds a similar kind of leniency towards genre in operation (2019).

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club to student-facing venue, and so retained some sense of attachment, alongside some disappointment that the Brudenell had 'outgrown' the DIY scene. Local pubs like the Fox and Newt in Burley, and The Fenton and The Packhorse in the university area of Woodhouse, still hosted occasional shows. Belgrave Music Hall and Headrow House, two city-centre venues operated by one local company, overlapped with the DIY scene insofar as practitioners would attend (and play as opening acts at) bigger shows there but, for the most part, these two venues were seen to embody a different set of values, reflected in more self-conscious, faux-industrial interior design, as well as expensive beer and ticket prices.

Wharf Chambers in particular, though, was central. In particular, its status as a cooperatively run, queer-friendly venue, with a safer spaces policy, vegan food and relatively affordable prices, allowed it to stand in for and symbolize the values held by the scene. The understanding was, broadly: *if it happens at Wharf, it's DIY*. Even as different nights brought in overlapping but distinct crowds, the sense of a coherent scene hinged on a shared affinity with and attachment to place. This also demonstrates how local and trans-local notions of the DIY scene might relate – through similar experiences of attachment to DIY venues across the country (and beyond), members of the UK-wide scene felt as though they 'belonged' at Wharf, even though they may only visit once a year when touring. Indeed, Wharf often served as a model for those seeking a stable 'home' for DIY in their own city or town.

This broad veneration of Wharf Chambers gave way to a more complex relationship during the course of my research. A specific accusation of abuse against a Wharf staff member led to broader concerns about the venue's accountability processes, especially in relation to racism and discrimination. This led to, amongst other things, an informal boycott of Wharf by some members, the formation of an action group (Wharf Members against Racism) and the venue drawing up an anti-racism action plan (which, as of November 2019, readily admits 'previous failings'). During this period several members' meetings took place which I did not attend, since I felt my presence as a researcher might well inhibit participants' willingness to speak on these sensitive topics. So, whilst those events aren't fully documented here, a generalized concern with regards to the 'whiteness' of the scene provides an important context for this research on DIY's relationship to social media. Such concerns reinforce the need to engage seriously with the historical and contemporary dimensions of racism in DIY (as well as problematic histories regarding ableism and heterosexism), and particularly in punk rock (see Duncombe 2011). We certainly cannot take any association between DIY and social justice as inherent - it is for that reason that I attempt a critical engagement with the notion of 'cultural resistance' in Chapter 2.

In tracing this DIY scene online, I followed other digital culture researchers in thinking that the boundary of online study ought to reflect the usage pattern of the research population in question, where possible (Stirling 2016: 63). Nancy Baym uses the metaphor of the 'pub crawl' to consider how the most appropriate object of study is not one single online institution amongst many, but the meanings created by a set of actors who traverse across these spaces (2007).

The most commonly used site was Facebook and Facebook Pages (which has a standalone app but is within the Facebook ecosystem). All of my research participants had some degree of administrative control over a Facebook Page – for their band, solo music project, gig promotion, record label, venue, studio, practice space and in many cases several of the above – and the majority also maintained a personal Facebook profile. Twitter was the next most popular general-purpose social media platform, although usage here was more varied and several interviewees claimed to not really 'get' its purpose.

The most commonly used music-hosting site was Bandcamp. Bandcamp is a privately owned music hosting and sales platform founded in 2007, which fulfils digital music sales and mediates sales of physical goods, and almost all my participants had access to at least one artist or label page on the site. Whilst Bandcamp has links to Silicon Valley through its CEO and early investors, it has a reputation for being 'indie' and artist-friendly and is, unlike other comparable music streaming services, regularly turning a profit. SoundCloud offers similar services (although emphasizes streaming and embedding capabilities, rather than sales), but was used by fewer Leeds DIY practitioners, had more 'industry' associations and was considered primarily to be a home for electronic music genres.

Music streaming platforms, such as Spotify, iTunes (now Apple Music), Google Play and so on, were less central to the scene, since they generally do not allow the kind of free, instant account-creation and music-uploading that characterizes Bandcamp and SoundCloud. Rather, these platforms have aimed to get bigger labels and publishers on board in an attempt to create a music catalogue that will appeal to a broad consumer base (Hesmondhalgh, Jones and Rauh 2019); independent artists are required to go through third-party distributors (such as Record Union or Tunecore), most of which charge annual music registration fees, and to then wait for their music to be approved and uploaded. This is changing fast, as Spotify playlists become an increasingly powerful form of 'exposure', and the process of dealing with these third-party distributors becomes easier (i.e. more automated) and cheaper.

YouTube offers, like Bandcamp and SoundCloud, the ability to upload material quickly and without cost, and potentially to a far greater audience than these specialist independent music sites. It was generally used by practitioners for hosting music videos for 'singles' (i.e. lead tracks from releases), or other one-off videos, and wasn't home to much intra-scene communication. The notion of being a 'YouTuber' carried connotations of brand-building and self-absorption that my interviewees sometimes saw as contradictory to DIY ethics. YouTube's parent company, Alphabet, was part of the everyday online experience for practitioners in various forms, including email, file sharing, scheduling and in the prevalence of Google Search as a means of information retrieval. Of particular importance to the scene was the understanding of urban space enabled by Google Maps, and the associated information provided by Google Places.

Photo and video-centric platforms Instagram and Snapchat do not feature heavily here, since they were used by only a few practitioners, but they are becoming central for everyday communication and also gathering audiences for circulating music. Private chat applications like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp were widely used but difficult to observe. Ticket sales sites, merchandize ordering and fulfilment sites, and file-hosting sites are also part of the online infrastructure that supports and shapes the scene.

Whilst we seem to be in a period of relative stability, there is no guarantee that the current key online platforms will stick around – a similar research project undertaken ten or fifteen years earlier may have noted the seemingly unbreakable dominance of MySpace and the prevalence of local music forums in organizing and maintaining scenes. Those platforms that do last tend to meddle with site architecture incessantly and also adapt their business models in order to keep up with competitors. I have tried to keep this in mind when writing, with the aim of sustaining the value of this research in the longer term by focusing not on specific platform functionalities, but on the relatively stable relationships that form between platforms' textual and architectural characteristics, and practitioners' aims and perspectives (Hesmondhalgh, Jones and Rauh 2019).

Interviews and observations are the two primary sources of data utilized in this project. I conducted twenty-four semi-structured interviews with twenty-eight Leeds-based DIY music practitioners³ between August 2015 and August 2016. Material from these interviews is included throughout

³I use the term 'practitioner' throughout the book, rather than 'musician', because it is characteristic of DIY scenes that people hold more than one role. These practitioners included musicians, promoters, producers, sound engineers, visual artists and venue staff, with most holding at least two of these roles. Leeds-based music writer Rob Hayler, although writing about a slightly different, more experimental scene in the city, introduces the useful notion of the 'no-audience underground': 'There is no "audience" as such, in the sense of "passive receivers", because almost everyone with an interest in the scene is involved somehow in the scene. The roles one might have – musician, promoter, label "boss," distributor, writer, "critic," paying punter and so on – are fluid, non-hierarchical and can be exchanged or adopted as needed' (Hayler 2015).

Chapters 3–8, and all interviewees have been anonymized.⁴ I attended a large number of gigs in Leeds during my research period, and was also given access to some rehearsals, recordings and meetings (although that 'behind the scenes' material did not prove hugely relevant). I also observed scene members' online practice, paying specific attention to prominent Leeds-specific Facebook Groups and Pages. This online observation fed back into offline interviews, where discussion would often turn to a specific event or interaction that had taken place online.

Alongside interviews and observations, the other key source of material has been my own involvement in DIY music. DIY has played a more formative role in my life than almost anything else I can think of. It is a place where I have learned about politics and ethics, founded and re-enforced numerous lasting friendships, and had my most profound experiences of music, provoking both personal reflection and collective exuberance. In Bristol, the city where I grew up, to discover a local musical world apart from the charmless, extortionate pubs we had been playing in as teenagers was to discover a culture that felt valuable and powerful in a way that nothing had previously, with connections to other local and national scenes that suggested a movement at once both globally visible and intimately secret. The Bristol scene had (and still has) a particularly strong identification with feminist and queer politics, as well as with veganism, and these particular integrations of political thought and action with musical culture rang true for me. They felt full and rich where previously posited connections with music and politics (in mainstream folk, punk, reggae and dance) had felt shallow. Whilst I would consider myself more open to other musical and political worlds now, and more aware of DIY's own particular foibles and flaws, the connection has nonetheless been a lasting one. Much of the last ten years has been spent, to the detriment of any other interests, playing in bands and putting on gigs, and meeting people with similar shared passions.

When my doctoral research brought me to Leeds in 2014, I co-founded a non-profit DIY promotion collective with the few friends I already halfknew. It was a fantastic way to divide up the sometimes-formidable labour of

⁴Julia Downes, Maddie Breeze and Naomi Griffin have written thought-provokingly on the specific ethical considerations of conducting research with DIY cultures. In their work, the issue of anonymizing or pseudonymizing data is examined as a power relation between researcher and participant, particularly on those occasions where participants might *want* to be named and recognized as 'critical agents of social change' rather than 'objects' to be observed (Downes, Breeze and Griffin 2013: 106–7). However, in this book I have opted to anonymize the DIY practitioners I spoke with, since much of the material contains opinions and perspectives on other local institutions and practitioners. This material is important to the research, but also has the potential to cause ill-feeling, and therefore I consider anonymity to be the best means of ensuring that the trust placed in me by those people is not used recklessly. Participants are instead numbered randomly (P1, P2, P3 etc.).

organizing shows – booking bands to play, promoting the show online and off, cooking dinner for the performers (and baking cakes for the audience), running the zine stall, occasionally doing the sound (badly) and providing somewhere for the bands to sleep. That collective lasted for two years, and there was some other DIY music activity too, playing music in my own band as well as other people's projects, and attending countless shows. For the final ten months or so of my research I was living in Sheffield – an hour's train journey from Leeds – and becoming involved in that city's DIY music scene, although in more peripheral roles.

As well as my participation in various DIY scenes, I also had a rather different set of engagements with music culture over the same period. During the same month I started my research, I signed a recording contract with an independent label who were, unbeknownst to me at the time, in partnership with Caroline International - a subsidiary of Universal Music Group, and very much part of the 'industry'. My musical venture, which sat somewhere between indie rock band and solo recording project, released two albums through that label in 2015, supported by frequent touring and other promotional activity. We had some press coverage in the sort of publications that even my parents had heard of - Pitchfork, Rolling Stone, NME, Guardian - and got to meet and play with musicians that remain heroes and role models to me (although I have local, DIY heroes too). Whilst the band and I found this to be a level of 'success' that both surprised and, at times, perturbed us, our record sales (and assorted income streams) weren't as strong as the label had anticipated, and the option to extend my contract wasn't taken up. Our most recent albums were self-released on cassette and vinyl, and all our touring returned to being self-organized.

Running alongside this academic research on DIY, then, was a strange parallel journey through the industry. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were numerous times when it felt like the boundaries between research and practice were hard to define (as well as boundaries between work and leisure). This project then has been informed by my own experiences in ways that would be difficult to document fully. The imposition of third parties into our working practice as a band - PR companies, booking agents, tour managers - gave me an understanding of how artists' autonomy is 'negotiated' within music industry management structures (Banks 2007: 7). Touring with musicians (as well as meeting other industry workers) from the UK and the United States who manage to make a living from music gave me insight into their positive experiences as cultural workers, as well as the sacrifices involved, and the extent to which selfmanagement has become a defining characteristic of work in this specific corner of the cultural industries (again, Banks 2007). And during this time, I found my relationship to the DIY scene felt increasingly problematic my band was still referred to frequently in interviews and features as a

'DIY' project and yet we were really anything but, having 'sold out' at least by the standard measure of signing a record contract and taking accompanying steps towards professionalization. At times I felt partially responsible for (or at least compatible with) some of the harmful kinds of individualist aspiration which I identify and examine in this book. So, although this book offers an 'insider' perspective on DIY music, it also reflects my experience 'outside' of DIY – as musician and researcher – and hopefully this allows for sensible consideration of the value offered by DIY's specific political project.

This book is a work of social science, and it therefore carries the peculiar reflexivity characteristic of that discipline: in attempting to study some existing social phenomenon, it can change the object of study itself. That is a sufficiently daunting notion so as to inspire a cautious, considered approach towards research and the presentation of new knowledge. But, in evaluating the relationship between social media platforms and DIY music, I do hope that my research will have some impact on the ways in which practitioners engage with platforms, with each other and with the wider world. I think that DIY music continues to offer, at its best, a strong form of resistance to some forms of social injustice. The critical examination offered here is intended to bolster that strength. I follow Rebecca Solnit in thinking that 'authentic hope requires clarity' (2006: 20), and therefore this critical examination of DIY is not intended to be a fault-finding inquisition, but rather a consideration of the ways in which it is threatened by new forms of capitalist accumulation, put forward in the belief that these threats can and should be countered.

Chapter outlines

In this opening chapter, I have shown that a certain kind of 'DIY' activity is increasingly proposed as a means of successfully operating around and within the contemporary music and ICT industries. This discourse has much in common with a longer-standing conception of DIY music, especially in the emphasis placed on autonomy, participation and independence. But it also differs in some substantial ways from this older DIY lineage, which has often emphasized its distinction from and incompatibility with the 'mainstream' music industries on ethical and economic grounds. I have suggested that social media is a key site where the differences between these discourses of DIY might be elided, and where a previously 'resistant' cultural approach might be made compatible with increasingly normalized expectations of entrepreneurial self-government.

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Chapter 2 engages with the history of DIY music, in order to give context to the present-day scene in Leeds and to further elucidate how and why DIY has been differentiated from other popular musics. It outlines DIY's historical relationships both to popular music and to communication technologies, drawing on examples from notable past DIY scenes – including UK postpunk, US indie and riot grrrl. It also engages with 'cultural resistance' – an often-maligned concept that I argue retains some power to explain DIY's specific political orientation.

The rest of the book is structured around findings drawn from fieldwork and theoretical interpretations of those findings. The chapters are ordered so as to approximate an 'outward' progression in terms of the social units considered, starting from the personal dimensions of online communication and moving towards 'larger' objects of study: the DIY scene; its relationship to local publics and other scenes; its relationship to commercial popular musics; and finally its relationship to the economic specificities of online platforms.⁵

So, Chapter 3 deals with DIY practitioners' approach to personal communication and identity construction online. It highlights that the communicative intimacy that was previously a distinctive characteristic of DIY is today increasingly compelled as part of 'doing' social media. Social media's tendency towards 'self-branding' and 'relatability' is partly mitigated by DIY's aversion to commercialization, but nonetheless means practitioners are faced with a complex set of norms to navigate. Affective engagement at this individual level is characterized by feelings of social anxiety.

Chapter 4 considers the role of social media in mediating relationships within the DIY scene. Offline, DIY scenes do have hierarchies and gatekeepers, but there also tends to be a high degree of collective ownership over various organizations. Online, a brief moment of devolved ownership (forums and stand-alone sites) was replaced with a move to Facebook and the like. Forms of collectivism demonstrated offline can prove difficult to apply within the frameworks of major platforms. In general, network structures serve to reinforce Romantic (i.e. anti-social) notions of creativity and authorship.

Chapter 5 considers 'the public' – that is, how DIY music might relate to the 'outside world' and particularly to other local music scenes. This is an area in which the DIY scene remains quite distinct. A discourse of 'safe spaces' is central to the scene's efforts to create an insular, protective environment and social media's 'echo chamber' can assist in extending this approach online. The consequences of this insularity are considered, both as

^sThis book structure owes a substantial debt to David Hesmondhalgh's *Why Music Matters* (2013).

valuable in some cases and as potentially restrictive in others. I also show, through a case study of an argument on social media, how interactions with other music scenes are shaped by platform design as well as by user intention.

Chapter 6 considers the role that online platforms play in mediating the relationship between DIY scenes and commercial popular music. Platforms place DIY musicians in the same space as global pop superstars, and metrics (the quantitative measurements of Followers, Friends and Likes that are abundant on social media) offer new capacities of direct comparison between these entities. In showing this vast gulf in scale, social media mitigates the capacity of DIY practitioners to imagine their scene as 'alternative' in a sense other than 'niche'. Nonetheless, metrics do continue to provide some ambivalent value by re-presenting local, material practice in a way that offers a sense of security and self-affirmation.

Chapter 7 outlines DIY's relationship to the platform economy and expands on the themes covered in this introductory chapter. DIY and other music scenes are increasingly making use of the same online platforms and digital tools. Whilst this brings new opportunities for self-organization and creative autonomy, these strategies of resourcefulness are also in keeping with an individualized and neoliberal 'enterprise discourse', wherein doing it 'yourself' loses much of its radical alterity. I also demonstrate, using Harry Braverman's work in the field of labour process theory, that reliance on automated tools provided by monopolistic platforms constitutes a relative 'deskilling' of DIY culture. I introduce 'optimization' as an important platform logic: a means by which consumer autonomy is employed to justify the use of marketing strategies by producers.

Finally, in Chapter 8 I offer some thoughts on how DIY music scenes might engage with social media platforms in order to best enable cultural resistance. I suggest that this might include utilizing free and/or open-source software, building cooperative platforms and networks, and moving away from future-oriented brand-building.

SUGGESTED LISTENING

A ll the following chapters are interspersed with 'suggested **A**listening' boxes, which act a bit like epigrams. They put forward songs that, during the writing of this book, seemed to be speaking abstractly or concretely - about themes I was trying to engage with. They aren't DIY songs necessarily, and they aren't all by artists whose politics I would align with. I could have quoted the lyrics in the text, but that would defy the point, which is that music is a distinct form of communication which relates to academic research in strange ways that can feel at once tangential and vital. Paul Simon's 'When Numbers Get Serious' (1983) is a goofy reggae song with an even goofier triple-time ending, and a silly, dad-joke lyric full of arithmetic wordplay. But then he sings: 'I will love you innumerably/you can count on my word,' and it's heart-breaking, and suddenly I feel like I understand more about the ethical distinctions between qualitative and quantitative epistemologies. I've made Spotify and YouTube playlists compiling the songs mentioned here, which you can find by searching for the title of this book, but both of these are incomplete (and likely impermanent) in different ways because of rights restrictions on those platforms. It has been argued that this kind of fragmentation of the media landscape motivates users to illegally access music (Bode 2019); maybe this fragmentation could also encourage other kinds of ethical engagements with music consumption.

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