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DIY and popular music: mapping an ambivalent relationship across three historical case studies

"DIY" (as in "do-it-yourself") describes a music culture wherein emphasis is placed on forming and maintaining spaces for production and distribution which exist outside of, and are positioned as oppositional to, the commercial music industries. These spaces tend to be relatively small-scale — "bedroom" record labels, "lo-fi" home recordings, and makeshift live venues — emphasizing frugality and self-sufficiency, but can combine to form larger "alternative" networks of music circulation. Whilst longer lineages of DIY culture might highlight notable progenitors such as the home-made instruments of 1950s skiffle, the emergence of amateur sci-fi "fanzines" in the 1930s, or even the 19th-century arts-and-crafts philosophy of William Morris, it is in the late 1970s, as part of the first wave of punk, that DIY gains its contemporary meaning as a specifically politicized approach to organizing popular music culture.[1] Even going by this conservative dating, then, DIY music is now entering its second half-century as a going concern. Indeed, DIY music seems to be resurgent thanks to new online distribution tools, although internet platforms also threaten to substantially change aspects of DIY music (Tessler & Flynn 2016; Hesmondhalgh et al. 2019).

Given DIY's lengthy history and its significant impact on wider popular music culture, its specificity as a musical culture has been under-theorized. Existing work on DIY has often overstated its "resistant" political status at the expense of analytical precision. This article seeks to offer that degree of precision and, in so doing, makes an original contribution to scholarly understanding of DIY musical cultures both past and present. What, if anything, underpins DIY music across its history? How might one meaningfully account for diversity and variety across DIY scenes whilst also identifying a continuity of practice?

I argue that what is consistent across different DIY scenes is an *ambivalent* relationship to popular music culture, and that what is changeable across scenes are practitioners' approaches to managing that ambivalence. Although DIY music is often construed as "grassroots", I argue that its rituals and forms originate from *within* mainstream popular culture, and that DIY remains enthralled by music industries phenomena even as it attempts to bypass and reconfigure them. This results in specific tensions which are not only irresolvable but are fundamental to,

and indeed *constitutive of*, DIY music. This insight forms the basis of my analytical framework. Then, in the remainder of the article, I apply this framework across three historical case studies: UK post-punk, US post-hardcore indie, and riot grrrl. I utilize primary and secondary sources along with academic literature in order to map how the "shape" of these scenes is formed by ambivalences that reflect negotiations with political, technological, and musical norms of the periods in question.

What is distinctive about DIY?

In attempts to define the nature of DIY musical culture, scholars have emphasized its *difference* to, rather than its similarities with, popular music culture in general. This difference is frequently identified in terms of "resistance" (Schilt 2003b; Duncombe 2008; Downes 2012; Guerra 2018), where the social and economic organization of the scenes in question is understood to constitute an "other" to a proposed hegemonic structure of cultural power. DIY is also presented as a kind of social movement; in these accounts it is defined by its close connections to extra-musical attempts to re-shape society, or to attempts to live in a "counter-cultural" or "oppositional" fashion (Dunn 2016; Radway 2016; Culton & Holtzman 2010). Relatedly, there is a notable tendency in the literature to theorize DIY music in terms of its success (or otherwise) as a form of radical political praxis: Paul Rosen considers DIY as "an example of anarchism in practice" (1997), and Pete Dale tracks the consequences of competing Marxist and anarchist tendencies in DIY (2012).

Resistance is not always presented as definitive of DIY. In recent work by Evangelos Chrysagis, the Glasgow DIY scene is not "predicated upon what is usually called 'resistance'", but upon positive practical action (2016, p.293); DIY feels like productive "doing" rather than "negating" some vaguely defined antagonist. Whilst approaching DIY as a site of "self-formation" undoubtedly captures something of the subjectivity of the individual practitioner, it leaves a disappointingly unspecific picture of DIY as a broader social formation, with little to distinguish it from other forms of amateur or semi-professional music-making.

Unlike Chrysagis, I have no significant issue with the labelling of DIY as "resistant" — indeed, I would agree with it. Some of the specific resistant virtues of DIY music in relation to "mainstream" music cultures may be understood to include greater creative autonomy, a wider range of participation (or a "flatter", less hierarchical scene), greater diversity of representation, and fairer economic arrangements. However, an over-emphasis on conceptualizing DIY as resistant, as social movement, or as political praxis, significantly neglects one of its defining features: namely, its close *emulation* of popular music culture and the organizational forms of the commercial music industries. The specific *character* of its resistance cannot be

understood without accounting for this *ambivalent* relationship to popular music, which is consistent throughout DIY's various manifestations.

DIY music has a close coherence with, and affinity to, popular music forms, texts, and infrastructures, and this is a critical part of its character. The key cultural units of pop and rock music — the live show, the record, the band, the label, the audience (as well as more modern additions: the music video and the playlist) — are similarly the key units of DIY, and whilst there have been attempts to deconstruct or subvert these concepts, they follow mainstream pop music inasmuch as they constitute a social movement which works not only *through* mass media, but *as* mass media. DIY music is a response to the pitfalls of commodification and media power which deals primarily in *commodified, mediated communication*.

Strachan's study of DIY "micro-labels" follows Hesmondhalgh (2006) in arguing that small-scale cultural production need to be understood with reference to "the dominance of large-scale institutions" (2007, p.247) — a Bourdieusian approach also taken by O'Connor (2008). But here again the emphasis is on DIY as a highly distinct mode of practice, with its own approaches to negotiating tensions between art and commerce. I certainly agree that the activity of DIY micro-labels serves to "question the dominance of globalized media conglomerates" (Strachan 2007, p.261). But the question I wish to ask is: why have *labels* at all? Why have DIY practitioners, historically, been so willing to replicate the forms and structures of an industry which they position themselves in opposition to?

This point can be emphasized by noting DIY's substantial *differences* to other amateur musics which seem more clearly to have a participatory character. One particularly politicized example to this might be found in UK "street choirs" — a long and important history recently captured by the Campaign Choirs Writing Collective (2018) — but more generally in a wide array of participatory musics in which distinctions between performer and audience are dissolved or non-existent (Turino 2008). Recent work by David Verbuč, drawing on Turino, shows that DIY audiences do have specific modes of "affective participation", but these are broadly comparable to forms of participation found within pop and rock settings (2018). Given that DIY is purportedly deeply interested in increasing participation, and minimizing artist-audience distinctions, it is notable that it very rarely takes an approach which thoroughly emphasizes participation over and above adherence to the forms and units of popular music.

It should be clear that my argument here is distinct from literature that emphasizes DIY's close *proximity* to the music (and broader cultural) industries, and the potential for co-option and/or career-building that is a result of this proximity. My interest is in DIY's ambivalent *emulation* of the popular music industries, regardless of its

distance from them. Indeed, it is this emulation which *permits* an overlapping relationship between the two musical cultures in question; to use the counter-example above, a participatory street choir would be far less likely to face issues of "selling out" to a major label, or becoming caught up in a "star system" of any kind.

Authenticity, commodification, and the producer—consumer relationship

DIY's ambivalence must be seen as resulting from an acknowledgement and appreciation of the communicative power of popular music, and its particular political potency. Notions of authenticity, rebellion, social upheaval, and speaking truth to power have been encoded in popular music from at least the 1950s (Keightley 2001; Frith 1996), and when DIY identifies popular music as an instrument of social change it is drawing upon lineages that are very much "within" the mainstream music industries, as well as upon more radical political and cultural lineages. This means scholarly analysis of DIY would benefit from a closer engagement with literature on popular music authenticity than has been posited to date — here I follow Frith in understanding authenticity as the means by which music "sets up the idea of 'truth'"(2007 [1987], p.261); i.e. how a given musical culture stakes its claim to have a superior "truth content". In several instances DIY can be seen as *extending* constructs of authenticity found in parallel popular music genres, their additional degree of organizational and structural control giving them the liberty to take steps to affirm authenticity which would be impossible from within the popular music industries. In the three case studies below, that largely means developing upon constructs from rock music, which I take to be part of a broader popular music culture; other DIY scenes may vary in this regard. DIY also draws on an authenticity which derives from its status as alternative to commercial popular music — a derivation of what Taylor calls "authenticity of positionality" (1997, pp.22-23).

An approach which emphasizes constructions of authenticity sheds new light on DIY's highly complex relationship with commodification. Marxist readings of DIY tend to hinge on its capacity to in some way "de-commodify" music. However, framing the issue in terms of a "punk/commodity opposition" (Thompson 2004, p.81) is unhelpful; accounts which emphasise DIY's capacity to resist commodification often rely on a kind of special pleading, or a rather shallow definition of commodification[2]. As I have shown above, the commodity form of recorded music has proven itself to carry huge cultural and political potential, and that aspect of its exchangeability clearly holds an appeal for DIY practitioners which they are reluctant to lose. If practitioners were concerned about commodification *above all else* then, as I have mentioned, there are participatory forms of music on offer that would seem to be far less threatened by commodification.

What *does* cause specific tension, however, in DIY's utilisation of the musical commodity form, is the subsequent presentation of both production and consumption as modes of self-realisation. DIY holds, generally, that cultural production is a form of power, and that the existing structures of cultural production both represent and constitute an unequal and problematic power balance.[3] It therefore aims to encourage wider participation in the production of musical culture. However, since DIY *also* carries a strong belief in the power of the recorded music commodity — the seven-inch single as a life-changing phenomenon — the role of the *consumer* remains prominent in DIY, in a way that is not the case for more fully participatory musics.

So DIY is faced with the question: what is so very special about the producer-consumer relationship in this instance? In what ways are consumers of DIY music understood as similar or different to conventional music consumers? DIY practitioners respond to this tension by creating commodities that attempt (successfully or otherwise) to bypass or mitigate consumption's connotations of passivity, exploitation, and alienation. This might be attempted through a myriad of approaches including aesthetics, performance modes, organizational structures, or production and circulation strategies. But they all, as I have argued, retain a faith in the communicative capacity of popular music as an *authentic*, socio-culturally appropriate means by which to perform resistance. DIY practitioners do not "de-commodify", but rather, aim to use their relative freedom from commercialism to create commodities that mitigate tensions in the mediated producer—consumer relationship; DIY's discourse of authenticity places a high emphasis on this capacity to mitigate these tensions.

DIY is best understood, then, not as a form which attempts to radically overhaul the organizational and cultural units of popular music, but which attempts to "fix" perceived problems with popular music's role and position in society. The aim is to shift the terrain in some way, without seeking to argue with the fact of pop music's communicative power: "pop music… *but better*" — where "better" might stand in for any number of specific adjustments required to create a popular music which is in keeping with the aims of a given scene.

In the remainder of this article I use this "pop music *but...*" form to consider the nature of DIY ambivalence across three historical case studies. In each study I offer two key ways in which the scene's ambivalence towards popular music was registered, and conclude each study by suggesting how these ambivalences shaped their eventual interactions with the commercial music industries. In identifying these examples of ambivalence the purpose is not to call out hypocrisy or fruitlessness, but rather to show how DIY scenes are defined by their responses as, when asked repeatedly to reconcile the irreconcilable, they lean one way or the

other, and thus leave some shape which constitutes their identity, a map of their surrounding situation as much as their own action. A focus on these consequent "shapes" offers an original analytical framework for assessing continuity and change across DIY scenes.

Case study 1: UK post-punk 1978-83

Andy Gill (the journalist, not the Gang of Four guitarist), writing in 1978, describes punk as "a kind of musical laxative". "Music cannot live on laxative alone", he continues, "and the problem now seems to be one of what diet to pursue" (1978). In this context, post-punk music did not just mount an economic challenge to the major labels, but also questioned ideas of what pop music ought to be, of what bands *were*, and what they were for. DIY emerges in this context as one amongst many new models of music-making being trialed by practitioners hungry for new ideas. DIY in this period was perhaps closer to the mainstream than at any other time (particularly in the UK), but also harder to separate out from other musical worlds. This period, lasting until around 1981, was replaced by one in which a clearer distinction emerged between DIY and other approaches (primarily indie and New Pop), becoming more stable and more separate at the expense of its broader cultural relevance.

Pop music… but transparent

Where punk had highlighted much of contemporary pop culture as boring and hypocritical, post-punk attempts to critique consumerism in this period are closely tied to Lukacs' conception of "false consciousness" and Gramscian notions of hegemony, explicitly locating themselves in a Marxist critique of the culture industry as playing a fundamental role in maintaining societal passivity. This critique did not always come from bands with a DIY approach; gestures of deconstruction and consumerism critique are a stylistic feature of post-punk in this period (e.g. XTC's smarmy, all-text album cover for 1978's *Go 2*, which declares that album covers are "TRICKS and this is the worst TRICK of all since it's describing the TRICK whilst trying to TRICK you"), and Gang of Four offer a particularly bleak vision of "Entertainment!" released on EMI. However, DIY bands were better able to tie their DIY releases (including by Desperate Bicycles and Scritti Politti) often came with pamphlets documenting itemized production and recording costs. For example, The Door and the Window's 1979 "Subculture" EP includes a flyer entitled "How We Did It", showing costs including photo development and printing, recording, mastering, and also including the areas where they avoided paying through their own activity ("collated sleeves ourselves"), or favors ("recording equipment loaned by friend") (Ogg 2009, pp.131–2). The focus here is on transparency, particularly in an economic sense, as a means of breaking the commodity back into its component

parts, *demystifying* a product that is generally presented as springing into being fully formed.

In doing so, DIY post-punk practitioners aimed to create a consumer product that might double as a self-help guide for the would-be producer. The Desperate Bicycles' second single contained an insert with the names of all the people who had contacted them about how to make a record, with the instruction "now it's your turn" acting as a kind of "calling out" of their audience to rise to the challenge and follow through on their initial enthusiasm (Selzer 2012). This positions consumers as producers by reversing the conventional temporality of cultural production, with the audience being in some sense "credited" on a record on the basis of a future record they would hopefully go on to make. Attempts to offer transparency and demystification also took place at the organizational level. Rough Trade operated, initially, as a workers' co-operative, in an "unprecedented attempt to create internal record company democracy" (Hesmondhalgh 1997, p.266); its founder Geoff Travis spoke of the label's desire to "get rid of the idea that it's important to be a star, and to make the funnel wider, so as to include as many people and ideas as possible" (Birch 1979).

Pop music… but experimental

Post-punk DIY also attempted to negate apparent consumerist stupor through the discarding of some conventional elements of the pop song — the band Wire's manifesto includes rules such as "no chorusing out" and "when the words run out, it [i.e. the song] stops". Post-punk experimentation that tended towards a freer-form expressionism, although notably this still was mostly constrained within 3–5 minute tracks which are recognizably *songs*. Gracyk notes that practitioners were working towards new styles of music, but moving in highly different directions, and "until others imitated particular cases and, through copying, established a pattern of rules, no one could yet tell what those styles were" (2012, p.83). A live review of Scritti Politti from 1979 argues that their performance represents

> demystification in action; praxis. [...] There were songs spilling over, splitting apart, lots of subtle resonances, invention and courage. [...] What's being taken apart is rock 'n' roll's daft trad codes [...] A reconstituted audience/performance relation is being aimed for. There are problems and contradictions — but they're important ones, decisive ones, decisions, conversations. (Gill & Penman 1979)

Part of the reason for this boom in experimentation might be that punk and post-punk arrived during an extraordinary period for record-buying — vinyl sales reached their worldwide peak around 1978; five of the top ten best-selling singles of

all-time in the UK were released between 1975-78 (and *two* were by Boney M). Paul Rosen posits 1981 as the point at which the market became so "flooded" with DIY releases that an edition of one thousand singles was no longer "guaranteed" to sell out (1997, p.8). Before then, however, the economic feasibility of releasing a DIY record in this formative period was massively boosted by a substantial audience, particularly attentive to new rock trends in the wake of punk, who would buy, it seems, virtually anything pressed onto vinyl. Indie label owners were therefore freer to share the artistic concerns of their artists; Robin Dallaway of The Cravats recalls of Small Wonder label boss Pete Stennett: "he knows we'd never write a blatantly commercial song, and he'd never want us to" (Ogg 2009, p.140). Particularly if the only aim was to recoup costs rather than make profit then, in this forgiving economic environment, there was little pressure to curb experimentation in order to find an audience. It must also be seen as a consequence of a relatively generous UK welfare state at this time, since in many cases this start-up cash for small labels came from student grants and other government-sanctioned benefits (Ogg 2009, p.127).

This experimentalism links to an anti-populist, modernist tendency, but it also links to the participatory mode of production that is critical to DIY. If there is no "right" way to play the music, then a lack of formal training need not constrain participation. Punk notoriously only required learning three chords before starting a band; post-punk experimentalism suggested you needn't learn any at all. But again, it is notable that the vast majority of this experimentation took place within the remit of the popular song — the desire to function as mass communication remains evident even as the components of the form were questioned and deconstructed.

From experimentalism to niche music

For those who had been enthralled by punk's radical disruption of mainstream culture, post-punk's move towards anti-populist insularity seemed akin to defeat. Music journalist Garry Bushell was a harsh critique of what he called the "safe little games" of experimental post-punk, instead arguing for the visceral populism of Oi! as the true continuation of punk and its radical expression of working-class anger. He asks derisively:

> Can anyone actually show us what great breakthroughs the Fall have made? Or Scritti Politti? […] Oh golly, I say chaps, let's start playing cotton reels, soup cans, bits of broken brick – that'll really screw up the system (not to mention the stylus). What's the answer, saps? Suicide? Seminars on Vegetarian Lesbians. Against Neo-Nazi Marketing Devices! Aw, go play with yer toys. (Bushell 1980)

The public-school language ("golly [...] chaps") suggests that post-punkers were the equivalent of laconic nineteenth-century amateurs, dabbling in music for fun because they could afford to, with nothing really at stake, the imagery of "toys" implying that post-punk was functionally useless — fine for *play*, but no use for the real thing. The distasteful, side-swiping tone aside (managing to decry academia, animal welfare, gay rights, anti-fascism and anti-consumerism all within eight words is, regardless of its accuracy, an impressive feat of economy), Bushell successfully identifies communication, and specifically mass communication, as a key function of pop music, and one which punk had achieved in part through an accessible and identifiable sound. Post-punk, for all of its aspirations to radicalize music, never successfully spoke to as broad an audience.

It was around this time, 1980-81, that "indie" — that is, the now relatively stable set of independent labels and the expansive national and international distribution networks they had created — *did* attempt to achieve successful communication with a mass audience. Indie and DIY approaches began to branch apart, as the difference in cost and method between the two became greater. Nonetheless, for the period 1978-81, a DIY release stood a high chance of being featured in the weekly music press (then reaching an audience of two million (Reynolds 2005, p.xxvii)), played on BBC Radio 1 by a John Peel show at the height of its powers (Peel identifies the late seventies as "the only time the programme was fashionable" (Perrone 2014)), and stocked in a rapidly proliferating network of independent and specialist record shops across the UK (Hesmondhalgh 1997). This period of openness arguably came to an end with the advent, circa 1981, of specific columns in the music press dedicated to reviewing tape releases, demos, and unsigned bands ("Garageland" in the *NME*, and "Cassette Pets" in *Sounds*) (Rosen 1997). Here, DIY releases became distinguished as a different type of music, to be evaluated in their own specific context, rather than being measured against the big, *actual* records that formed music culture proper. DIY aspirations were scaled down; by 1984, Simon Reynolds writes in the fanzine *Monitor* of a scene that had "ceased to make assaults on the outside world" (Reynolds, 1984).

Case study 2: U.S. post-hardcore indie (1983-88)

Two excellent histories of U.S. indie music, Michael Azerrad's *Our Band Could Be Your Life* (2001) and Gina Arnold's *Route 666: The Road to Nirvana* (1993), identify a mid-period between punk and grunge (the two opposing ends of Arnold's titular "road") as a golden age in which indie music flourished largely under the radar. Gina Arnold calls this scene "Amerindie" (denoting a shift away from Anglocentric punk and new-wave), and Azerrad simply calls it "the underground". In primary sources, especially zines, "punk" and "hardcore" (or "HC") is still used to describe

music which in genre terms is far from it; the term "college rock" becomes common towards the late eighties.

I use the term "post-hardcore indie" to highlight how all its key practitioners "passed through" hardcore punk, even as many ended up far beyond its restrictive genre boundaries. As a very young scene, many of its participants being under eighteen, hardcore practitioners grew up, grew apart, took the "do-it-yourself" ethos and applied it within new genres. Black Flag, a California hardcore band formed in 1976, are credited as having "built" the DIY touring network in the early eighties through their willingness to break new ground, taking chances in new towns and building relationships across the country. Labels like SST and Dischord, founded as local hardcore labels, became prominent indies within a scene that was stylistically much broader than punk; zines like *Flipside* and *Maximum Rock'n'Roll* (*MRR*) began with a focus on hardcore before likewise branching out. My analysis begins in 1983, the year in which hardcore punk, having emerged in Washington D.C. and California circa 1980, appeared to many to be "played out" (Andersen & Jenkins 2001, p.166; Azerrad 2001, p.312). Musicians and audiences began to question the more dogmatic elements of hardcore's style and sound, and there was a rapid acknowledgement and acceptance of other musical influences, looking back beyond 1976 (punk's year zero) to country, psychedelia, and classic rock. This led to a period of relative stability ending around 1988, the year Sonic Youth and R.E.M. signed to major labels (although the latter were previously on I.R.S, an indie with major label distribution), and also the year that Sub Pop became an incorporated company, as hype began to build around a "Seattle sound" centered on future superstars Nirvana.

Pop music… but live (and documented)

In post-hardcore indie the live show generally had primacy over recorded output. Seminal act The Minutemen referred to all activity outside of the live show, including their recorded material, as "flyers"; scene totem Ian MacKaye similarly refers to his band Fugazi's records as the "menu" and their live shows as the "meal". Physical recordings were often positioned as "documents" of a band's current live sound, seeking to impart a cultural status more akin to historical archive (or perhaps Lomax's folksong collection) than ephemeral entertainment commodity. Ian MacKaye's first band Teen Idles had already broken up when in 1980 they recorded a single, meaning they had very little chance of recouping their costs through selling copies at shows, but their intent is summarized by MacKaye as: "let's document ourselves" (Azerrad 2001, p.132).

This documentational approach was extended to the recording studio. Bands recorded with very few overdubs, and minimal studio effects, a "clean" sound

produced partly to reduce costs, but also to ensure that records were an accurate representation of the performers' ability rather than an opportunity for technological experimentation. This positioned them in opposition to the apparent dishonesty of studio trickery which might raise a band above their "natural" ability; it is notable that this scene co-existed alongside, and largely rejected, the growth in digital music technology in both professional and amateur contexts (Théberge 1997). In this way the distance between producer and consumer was purportedly minimized. DIY authenticity here is close to rock's emphasis on a "no-nonsense" recording style, but the relative lack of financial pressure within DIY allowed for this commitment to documentation to be taken further.

Pop music… but responsible

As the young hardcore movement matured, and its key practitioners entered their twenties, many punks sought to distance themselves from the more destructive aspects of their scene. This meant not only a move away from physically violent behavior, but also from the philosophy of refusal that characterizes what Moore (2004) calls "deconstructive" punk. Mike Watt, bassist for The Minutemen, in a video interview from 1985, identifies the destructive elements of hardcore culture as inimical to his own understanding of punk, based upon class politics:

> [Hardcore] is supposed to be kinda revolutionary you know, but in a lot of ways it works against the people it's supposed to support. [...] We used it for music, for freedom, to do what we wanted, but I couldn't believe it, they come down here into this poor neighborhood and they wreck these people's Teen Post they just fixed up?" (Watt, quoted in Irwin 2005).

The title and cover art of The Minutemen's seminal double-album, *Double Nickels on the Dime*, also questions the real impact of apparently rebellious gestures. In contrast to a contemporary pop-rock hit, "I Can't Drive 55" by Sammy Hagar, in which the protagonist displays rebellion through a refusal to adhere to the national speed limit, The Minutemen's album cover shows them sticking to the limit ("double nickels" — five five) precisely ("on the dime"). Their version of punk suggests that certain *signs* of resistance are in fact insignificant, and that compliance can lead to more substantial forms of resistance. Frugality and stability allows for the continuation of what they see as their *real* resistance — DIY cultural production. Ian MacKaye's initial conception of straight edge (abstaining from alcohol, drugs and, in some definitions, from sex as a "pursuit"), first expounded in his lyrics in 1981, was similarly intended to subvert accepted notions of what it meant to be punk. Again, the awareness of the derailing of the hippie counterculture led to a vigilance against lapsing into stylistic performances of rebellion, against self-interested "dropping out", and focusing on using one's resources to resist effectively.

Several of the key figures in hardcore and post-hardcore came from military families, many participants were self-confessed "nerds" who had a thorough understanding of electronics, and traits of rigor and attention-to-detail were highly valued. This is summarized by Faris (2004), writing on Steve Albini, as a "workingman persona", which draws on American ideas of honesty and hard graft, reinforced by the everyman dress code of flannel shirt and jeans. Stability was highly valorized: Albini proudly identifies several indie labels as being among the most reliable and long-standing even in comparison to majors (Sinker 2001, p.141). Mike Watt recalls making an extravagant display of setting up one's own gear, "especially if you were playing with a mersh [commercial] band that had a crew and stuff" (Azerrad 2001, p.74). The aim was to show that an ethos of personal responsibility and artistic integrity was not only an *alternative* to a system of contractual obligation and financial incentives, but that it might actually work *better*.

The growth of "alternative" music

The refusal of many promoters to book hardcore bands in the early 1980s had necessitated the creation of an alternative touring network, which expanded over time with minimal involvement from mainstream promoters, labels and the mainstream music press. Bob Mould claims that, at that time, "it wasn't so much about 'smash the system' but 'make our *own* system'" (Azerrad 2001, p.160). Cynthia Connolly, a D.C. photographer and historian, recalls: "it's not like they wanted to be rock stars. They wanted to just be there. Nobody thought in 1981 they were going to be a rock star. Nobody gave a flying fuck what you were doing with your friends, so that's a huge difference" (Kenney 2015). This alternative "system" became ever larger over the course of the decade — the product of nearly a decade's worth of building and maintenance enabled by the "workingman"-like approach documented above. However, eventually this stable, gradual growth resulted in the creation substantial "alternative" institutions which began to draw interest from the popular music industries.

A particularly notable example of this can be found in the rise of college radio, which between 1983 and 1988 developed from being an enclave for indie nerds to a music industry proving ground, replete with a cottage industry of pluggers and an increasingly influential trade magazine, *CMJ*. This new market also meant a new audience of "urban aesthetes" (Azerrad 2001, p.233). Bands were, if successful, faced with the question of whether their entry into mainstream rock culture would constitute a politically meaningful act. Guy Picciotto, of Rites of Spring and Fugazi, reflects: "I can see there's a point to getting good ideas into Rolling Stone, but when you're sandwiched between a thousand bad ideas, I don't think it translates"

For bigger acts, avoiding a mainstream audience changed from being something that was an accidental result of U.S. indie's isolation, to something that had to be consciously maintained. Fugazi identified that "big bands that stay independent lend weight to the indie movement" and therefore their commitment to their Dischord label was part of their band's politics, with MacKaye arguing that the effect would be "a mentality that will be beneficial to everybody else later on" (Azerrad 2001, p.134). Both Arnold and Azerrad identify the importance of hippies as a lingering countercultural specter haunting the US post-hardcore indie scene, and a desire to avoid that movement's co-option and reduction to stylistic touchstones as motivating a continued insistence on insularity. The often-forceful rhetoric against "selling out" was grounded in a complex understanding of their position in history, and a conscious attempt to provide a new approach to an old problem. Arnold notes that "for all that time, we were too ashamed of the fate of hippie idealism to recognize our actual allegiance to it" (1993, p.125).

Case study 3: Riot grrrl (1989-96)

Riot grrrl was a movement, indeed a self-defined "revolution", that began in Washington D.C. in 1990, with a small group of young women keen to reshape an alternative music scene in which they were marginalized and oppressed. In their records, shows, and especially through zines, riot grrrls attempted to open up new opportunities for women and girls to express themselves and to communicate with each other, calling for a "revolution girl-style now". Riot grrrl became globally popular, and particularly in the UK, with local autonomous "chapters" forming worldwide in order to co-ordinate local action. Their loud, fast punk music and confrontational performance style resulted in mainstream media coverage that emphasized their take-no-prisoners hostility, but alongside this anger was an emphasis on community-building ("girl-love") and tolerance towards difference. As well as being a specific way of doing music, it was also a specific way of theorizing and practicing (third wave) feminism. I focus here on the period from 1989-1996, covering the initial meetings in Olympia, the seminal "Girls Night" at the International Pop Underground festival in 1991, the Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear UK tour in 1993, an increase in mainstream media coverage which was then met with a media blackout by several key figures, and the closure in 1996 of the last remaining riot grrrl "chapters" in New York and Washington D.C.

Pop music… but urgent

One key way in which riot grrrl attempted to separate their own media from commodified mainstream culture was through positioning girl-to- girl communication as *vital* and *urgent*, an outcome achieved in part by using language that highlighted the dramatic dimension, or the "event-ness" of this process. Riot

grrrl "zines" and records are full of slogans, manifestos, and calls-to-arms which emphasise the need for immediate action, creating an aesthetic of total urgency:

> BECAUSE every time we pick up a pen, or an instrument, or get anything done, we are creating the revolution. We ARE the revolution.
> (Reinstein, quoted in Dunn & Farnsworth 2012; p.141)

This spectacular rhetoric was shaped in part by the contemporaneous, D.C.-based, post-hardcore band The Nation of Ulysses, whose discourse both on record and in print was a blend of Cold War-era "Red Scare" paranoia, high camp, and fifties rock'n'roll slang. The overall effect is of far-left counterculture over-egged to the point of absurdity (their 1991 debut album was entitled *13-Point Program To Destroy America*), and their devout belief in the political power of pop music was at once both slyly postmodern and anachronistically over-sincere, blending Gen X media-cynicism and youthful naivety in a combination that made it difficult to pin down or deconstruct. Riot grrrl originator Kathleen Hanna summarises their impact on her as "life-changing" (Bell 2011), and riot grrrl made frequent use of this bombastic style, as in their calls for "revolution girl style now" (Bikini Kill 1991), discursively positioning consumption as a kind of revolutionary consciousness-raising (Sowards & Renegar 2004).

The framing of riot grrrl as a means of giving voice meant there was a political value ascribed to action and production of any kind, encouraging others to be loud, to take up space, and to communicate. The call-to-arms in the *Bikini Kill #2* zine suggests a near-uncontrollable refusal of hesitation: "the undeniable genius of this generation has surfaced and it's all about ACTION, no time to decide what's right what's right what's right what's right" (Darms et al 2013, p.123). Gottlieb and Wald find evidence of this within riot grrrl music, arguing for a reading of riot grrrls' screams as a rejection of the societal demand that "women remain patient" (1994, p.170). Riot grrrls consistently encouraged each other to produce, "to take the initiative to create art and knowledge, to change their cultural and political landscape, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for them" (Garrison 2000, p.154). The rhetoric of sharing also encouraged the extension of distribution networks through informal duplication using cassettes and photocopiers (*Riot Girl #1*, 1991, reproduced in Darms et al 2013, p.31).

Pop music… but intimate

As Nguyen notes, displays of emotional intimacy were key to riot grrrl's musical and social character: the highly personal nature of riot grrrl zines is related to the aim of feminist consciousness-raising, and the idea that "from inside the oppressed classes themselves come political knowledges based on experience, which might

then be translated into expertise" (2012, p.179). As much as mainstream media texts are an inspiration for the form of these zines, there is also an attempt to bypass their status as mass communication. The "perzines" (personal zines) that were a key feature of riot grrrl make very few concessions to echoing traditional magazine content and style, and are often closer to private forms of communication such as letters, or even diaries, attempting to create a mode of communication that is both one-to-one and one-to-many. Riot grrl texts have an *epistolary* nature that renders them both mediated and unmediated; typified by zine-maker Nomy Lamm's assertion that "I'm creating this kind of media that's literally from my most sacred place to somebody else's most sacred place" (quoted in Nguyen 2012, p.177).

One of Bikini Kill's mantras compels girls to "struggle against the J-word [jealousy], killer of girl love", as part of a critique that identifies the individualistic pressures of the free market, as well as patriarchal tactics that seek to set women into competition against one another (quoted in White 1992). Riot grrrl made considerable effort to deconstruct a pop hierarchy of "star" artist and passive audience, and in the live setting bands would frequently offer the microphone to audience members in order to share information about upcoming shows and meetings, and to share experiences of sexism and abuse (Schilt 2003a). Hanna claimed that "with this whole Riot Grrrl thing, we are not trying to make money or get famous; we're trying to do something important, to network with grrrls all over, to make changes in our lives and the lives of other grrrls" (Hanna, quoted in Dunn & Farnsworth 2012, p.140).

Riot grrrl was formed from within a scene in which women were often present, but frequently undervalued and disrespected — referred to as "coathangers" by the men who would leave their jackets with them whilst they entered the pit, leaving the women "literally marginalized" around the edge of the room (Koch 2006). Therefore, riot grrrl was initially required to make changes within its own scene, rather than outside. Julia Downes describes riot grrrl as where "young women attempted to disrupt the spatial and sonic norms of the indie gig to incite feminist community and provoke change in their subcultural situations" (2012, p.205). They sought to reorganize spatial dynamics of the live show by distributing flyers encouraging "girls to the front" (Downes 2012, p.225), and imposing restrictions on attendance designed to filter out those who would be less amenable to these new dynamics — "men can come but they'll have to wear dresses" (White 1992). Additionally, the limited distribution of zines, often hand-posted by the author, meant that riot grrrls were able to "control their audience" (Schilt 2003b, p.79)

This kind of control over one's audience was important in a culture that often required some degree of privacy, or some ability to be "privately public" (Darms, in Darms et al 2013, p.3). This minimized the danger of being misread by an audience that is on a different wavelength in terms of expectations and norms; Dave Laing

notes how subversions of erotic performance by women in punk "may simply miss [the] mark and be read by the omnivorous male gaze as the 'real thing'" (1985, p.117). For some practitioners, there was value in those moments of friction in which they came face-to-face with those who were opposed to or nonplussed by riot grrrl; Julia Downes summarizes practitioner Liz Naylor as seeing "physical fallout" — i.e. conflict between riot grrrls and antagonistic male audience members — as "evidence of the authentic challenge riot grrrl represented to the social order" (Downes 2012, p.230). But for the most part riot grrrls aimed to create a context in which they could support each other in self-actualization without interference, by creating zine distribution networks and through filtering the audience of live shows in order to create a space where the presence of outsiders was minimized.

Third-wave feminism in 1990s pop music

Riot grrrl had to respond to significant mainstream press coverage circa 1993, including a spate of articles that often contained inaccuracies, cynicism, and which in general were seen as trivializing riot grrrl's aims and activities (Dunn & Farnsworth 2012). Following this flurry of coverage, several prominent riot grrrl figures called for a media blackout (Zobl 2004; Jacques 2001). The Riot Grrrl Press — a not-for-profit zine distributor based in Washington D.C. — was founded in 1993 in part as a response to the misrepresentation of riot grrrl in the mainstream media. One of the reasons given for its foundation was the need for "self-representation", in order to combat media coverage that "distorted our views of each other and created hostility, tension, and jealousy in a movement supposedly about girl support and girl love" (quoted in Dunn & Farnsworth 2012).

Given riot grrrl's tendency to close ranks in the face of media exposure, its co-option by the popular music industries was arguably slower and more limited. The issue of female under-representation in popular rock was brought to the fore by Lilith Fair, a concert featuring female and female-led acts which toured the US in 1996 and 1998 (Westmoreland 2001), although this industry-backed venture did not feature the kinds of spatial reorganizations of the concert space attempted by riot grrrl. Acts such as Alanis Morrissette and Meredith Brooks found commercial success with a riot grrrl-influenced, confessional lyrical style; however, the media's tendency to group a diverse selection of female artists together as "angry-women-in-rock" was precisely the kind of misogynist misrepresentation of which riot grrrl had been so wary (Schilt 2003a). The riot grrrl message of female empowerment as *urgent* and *vibrant* was popularized globally by UK pop act The Spice Girls, whose "girl power" slogan was taken directly (though perhaps unknowingly) from a zine by riot grrrl Kathleen Hanna (Spiers 2015, p.14, note 17). Whilst The Spice Girls' endorsement of beauty products, clothing lines, and a range of dolls may have identified their brand of empowerment as problematically consumerist for many (Spiers 2015), their

encouragement to girls and young women to be visible and "loud" was, at least tonally, in keeping with riot grrrl's aims (Jacques 2001; Schilt 2003a).

Conclusion

In three case studies of historical DIY scenes, I have shown that their navigations of an ambivalent relationship to popular music are highly diverse: post-punk championed the new and the difficult as part of an anti-consumerist strategy; U.S. hardcore's valorized 'workingman' frugality in order to demonstrate the long-term viability of DIY culture; riot grrrl celebrated hand-made, epistolary intimacy as a means of countering misrepresentation in the mainstream media. These are scenes that have interpreted the call to 'do-it-yourself' in substantially different ways, whilst utilizing broadly the same base materials of guitars, records, tapes, and zines. These differences might be usefully understood as collective responses to their respective sociohistorical experiences: the experimental atmosphere of U.K. art schools; the anger and frustration of disaffected U.S. military kids; and the sisterly environs of U.S liberal arts colleges. I have also shown that, contrary to some accounts, DIY is not anti-commodification, but tends to present its own commodities as *especially* valuable; these three scenes re-constitute the recorded music commodity as, respectively, an experimental example to be followed (post-punk), an historically-minded document (post-hardcore indie), and a form of intimate social connection (riot grrrl).

It is important to understand these scenes' different forms of resistance as resulting from their very different aims, which saw them positioned 'against' different institutions and norms — the purported vacuity of popular music; the neoliberal policies of Reagan and Thatcher; aggressive macho norms within the punk scene. Responses to these key tensions, then, are not just the result of historical circumstance, but of practitioners' attempts to engage with and affect change upon the situation at hand. These three scenes each maintained a close affinity with popular music, echoing many of its forms and rituals whilst also seeking to counter, adjust, or dismantle certain aspects of its character. I have also pointed towards the ways in which aspects of these scenes were co-opted by the established music industries: post-punk established its own star system, as "indie" became a hugely successful genre rather than a set of organizational practices; post-hardcore inspired and in some sense 'trained' the eventual superstars of grunge and "alternative rock"; riot grrrl's positive feminist message fed into the Spice Girls' declaration of "girl power". Whilst these co-options were not inevitable, and in each case the DIY scene in question continued on (sometimes vibrantly and powerfully so), the tensions I have outlined above shed light on how and why they were possible. DIY is a highly ambivalent musical culture, productively yet precariously caught between emulation and repudiation of the popular music industries.

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[1] In a similar vein, independent record labels pre-date the arrival of punk, but were imbued with new political and cultural meaning in the late 1970s (Hesmondhalgh 1999).

[2] Thompson, for example, argues that Crass' musical output is anti-commodification because it avoids radio-friendly song structures, but the same is not said of the avant-garde music (e.g. progressive rock, early electronic music) being made at the same time in other realms (2004, p.84); record collections are fetishistic except when owned by a punk modelled on Benjamin's "true collector", who can re- individualise through their ability to recount a "life history" (p.124).

[3] In this regard DIY shows an affinity with the concerns raised by prominent mid-20th century critics of the "culture industry" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002 [1944]; Marcuse 1991 [1964]; Packard 1957), as well as with macro-historical understandings of consumption as passive and/or wasteful (Miller 2001, pp.2–6).