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Legitimising Strategies in the Field of Independent Cultural Production: the Case of Reissue Record Labels in the USA

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Abstract: This article examines the cultural practice of effecting an independent marketplace for reissued music in the United States, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Austin, Texas with independent record labels and consumers. As the music industry is not a homogenous entity (Williamson and Cloonan, 2007), I argue that the practice of legitimising an independent marketplace requires the formulation of a ‘mainstream’ market to which the independent is opposed, and the erecting of marketplace myths (Arsel and Thompson, 2010) to substantiate the independent marketplace’s claims to differ from the mainstream. Legitimising strategies (Strachan, 2007) protect the investments made by producers and consumers of goods in their marketplace. To overcome the anxiety that commodified culture is inauthentic culture, the independent marketplace for reissued music is idealised as a realm of soft capitalism that enables the commodification of cultural goods without the stigmatisation of profiteering, exploitation and ‘inorganic’ music associated with the mainstream (Negus, 1992).

Keywords: Music industry; popular music; creative industries; independent production

Introduction

Many producers, retailers and consumers of music utilise music marketplaces existing apart from the mainstream major labels and their corresponding sites of retail and

performance. These independent retail environments cater for a variety of consumers constructing and sharing fields of knowledge and capital in opposition to the mainstream, thereby effecting scenes (cf. Straw, 1991) that define themselves through their marketplaces. I interrogate the conflicts between the quest for authenticity (by both producers and consumers) and the realities of the marketplace (commodification, capitalism and monetary transaction) as a means to uncover how independence and commerce cohabit in an independent music marketplace for reissued recordings in the USA. It is argued that actors position themselves relative to the mainstream, and utilise several legitimising strategies (Strachan, 2007) in order to safeguard their investments in the independent marketplace (Arsel and Thompson, 2010). This debate is introduced by situating independent producers in the music marketplace. I then use fieldwork in Austin, Texas with independent reissue labels to detail their overarching quest to pose independent music retail in opposition to the negatively perceived orthodoxies of the mainstream. Finally, I offer critical reflection on the intricacies and conflicts in how this separation from the mainstream is effected.

Situating the independent marketplace

Williamson and Cloonan (2007) have influentially argued that the commercial music world is not a homogenous industry. They argue for the existence of music *industries* rather than for a single, monolithic and hegemonic music industry. That should not be taken to assume that different elements of commercial music practice are isolated from one another, are not affected by each other’s practices or are stable homogenous entities in their own right. Musical commerce involves many simultaneously operating economic and cultural spheres, and these practices both react to and influence each other. The

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following examination of how independent record labels have operated and defined themselves in the marketplace illuminates the consequences of these suggestions.

Independent record labels¹ have been a part of the American musical landscape since the advent of commercially-released sound recordings. In the early twentieth century, such labels primarily released recordings by local recording artists for regionalised consumer groups, as well as recordings by (and largely for) minority populations whose musical interests were not reflected in the releases of other labels, such as poor rural populations outside the urban centres of the United States, or those migrating from the South to industrial hubs such as Chicago (Kenney, 1999; Millard, 1995: 65-111; and Kennedy and McNutt, 1999 provide histories of such early independent American record labels). Independent labels have been associated with nascent genres outside the mainstream up to the present day, including blues (Black Patti, Paramount), rhythm-and-blues (Atlantic, Vee-Jay), reggae (Island, Trojan), rock 'n' roll (Sun, Chess), rap (Death Row) and electronica (Warp). As such, they have often been associated with local music scenes of roughly homogeneous or localised communities of consumers. The global reach of the mainstream is the antithetical marketplace against which such independent cultural production has traditionally been defined.

The multiplicity of independent labels and a diffuse core of major labels in the first half of the twentieth century meant that independent labels constituted a far larger proportion of sales relative to the major labels than they do today. Independent labels had operated on a large scale in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s, accounting for roughly half of the songs on the Billboard Hot 100 from 1962-9² and largely enjoying autonomy from major labels. By the early 1970s they were being bought out and brought under the auspices of major-label media empires. This concentration is currently under the 'Big Three' major labels that operate since EMI's dissolution in 2012 – Universal, Warners and Sony – that have assimilated many previously independent labels into their portfolios.

Whilst many independent labels forewent their autonomy under the expanding major labels, the punk backlash sought to re-establish label autonomy outside the major-label system, with D-I-Y enterprises catering for musics alien from 'Top 40' pop music. Dance music labels have similarly attempted to resist mainstream assimilation in terms of the music they release, the formatting of their releases and their marketing of artists (Hesmondhalgh, 1998). Such independent labels largely attempt to sate the desire for music that contrasts with mainstream preferences. This has led to major label products being type-cast as 'synthetic' and independents as 'organic' (Negus, 1992: 54-5) – in essence, a corollary for assuming 'inauthentic' cultural production versus 'authentic' cultural production. The inauthenticity of mainstream cultural production is associated with a bureaucratic corporate structure, exploitative profiteering by made-to-measure manufactured artists and the association between such big money and corporate excesses whereby music industry bureaucrats make fortunes at the expense of under-recompensed artists (Negus, 1999; Knopper, 2009; Dunn, 2012).

The concentration of high-profile research upon the major labels (Negus, 1992, 1999; Burnett, 1996) versus independents is certainly reflective of the influence and market share of the former – Nielsen Soundscan figures for 2012 suggest that independent labels accounted for a mere 12.1 per cent of US market share, the rest taken up by the major labels with Universal Music Group alone taking up a 32.8 per cent share of the market³. This perceived hegemony influences the form and scope of cultural production outside the mainstream.

As Shuker has noted, the 'repertoire and release strategies of major record companies are usually more focussed on the mainstream market, and historically they have at times been slow to recognise the commercial potential of niche/collector markets' (Shuker, 2010: 81). Whilst mainstream labels are increasingly savvy about re-packaging classic albums and releasing archive materials by major artists, it is the independent record labels that have long served collector markets, often issuing small runs of anywhere from fifty to a few thousand copies as a limited edition. The history of the independent reissue market for releases collecting together rare, out-of-print or unreleased materials stretches from the 1950s to the present day, from Folkways Records and the

¹ The Association of Independent Music (AIM), a trade body established in 1998 to represent independent record labels in the UK, states in its constitution (<http://www.musicindie.com/resources/document-library/131> - accessed 03.09.2014) that a major label is a "multinational company which (together with the companies in its group) has more than 5% of the world market(s) for the sale of records and/or music videos... If a major owns 50% or more of the total shares in your company, you would (usually) be owned or controlled by that major".

² <http://musicbusinessresearch.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/majors-and-indie-share-1960s.jpg> (accessed 07.09.2013)

³ <http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1510504/universal-music-still-market-top-dog-in-2012> (accessed 16.08.2013)

Original Jazz Classics label through to Yazoo and Ace⁴, with a parallel illicit marketplace emerging for bootleg recordings in the 1960s (Heylin, 1994). Reissued music still remains a vital part of independent label activity in the contemporary marketplace, and it is a selection of such labels that are the subject of the present research.

The fieldsite

This article draws upon interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with reissue producers and music consumers primarily in Austin, Texas, but also elsewhere around the United States from 2008-10. This involved participant observation entailing multiple visits with over a dozen collectors, the employees and customers at Austin's ten or so record stores and interviews with approximately twenty-five record label employees.

I gained access to employees in the independent music business by contacting local labels through their websites and promotional materials, and via information proffered by record stores and other industry contacts. Access could then be negotiated to other people through recommendations from previous participants in the research. Aligning my project and fieldwork with multiple record labels and companies, rather than sticking solely to the one record label, enabled me to better understand and utilise the interconnected, networked nature of independent music retail. Attending panel discussions at 2009's South by Southwest festival, and networking amongst those at the industry conference, further helped in gaining access to persons working in the music industry, running the whole gamut of independent professionals including sound engineers, archivists, restorers, distributors, designers and label heads. Most of these participants had spent the majority of their working lives in the creative industries, with some working freelance for multiple labels or running their labels in parallel with their other careers (such as Revenant's Dean Blackwood, who was a commercial lawyer in addition to being the label's CEO).

The sociological makeup of my informants was predominantly white, college-educated and middle-class. No informants were aged less than eighteen years old, with the oldest in their mid-sixties. The participants in record-collecting, music production and music consumption that I encountered were overwhelmingly male, although it should be noted that several research participants were

female (a total of nine making the gender ratio roughly one-in-ten women-to-men). These women were involved not only in the production of products, but also in the consumption of the goods described. The age, gender and ethnic make-up of my informants corroborates those suggested by other research into music consumption, independent music production and collecting (Keightley, 1996; Belk, 2001: 99; Straw, 1991: 278, 1997; Negus, 1992: 86-7; Cohen, 1997: 17).

Austin, the self-proclaimed 'live music capital of America' (Porcello, 2002), prides itself as a liberal Mecca in the conservative heartland of the American south. Its music scene is world-renowned for its innovation and independent credentials, highlighted by Barry Shank's ethnography of its indie-rock scene (1994). Austin's position as an industry hub and taste-making testing ground are evidenced by the annual South by Southwest music festival and conference, dozens of live venues, the many artists who have either emerged from the Austin music scenes or have come to use the city as a base, and the many record stores surviving the international trends of weakened physical music retail.

The record labels that I worked with (including Revenant Records, Dust-to-Digital, Light in the Attic, Unseen Worlds and Tompkins Square) have primarily focused upon non-mainstream musics – Revenant proclaims to deal with 'Raw musics unfettered by commercial meddling'. They are aimed at informed consumers, knowledgeable about music history and production, aware of label identities, designers, producers, music critics and the musicians included on the recordings. Exemplary releases include a 10CD package of free jazz saxophonist Albert Ayler's unreleased music in a 'spirit box' accompanied by a hardback book and replicated ephemera on Revenant; a hardback book containing 2CDs of 78rpm records, with the book illustrating record ephemera from around the world, and 6CDs of early 20th Century North American Christian folk musics contained in a wooden box stuffed with raw cotton on Dust-to-Digital; and a collection of the complete works of Delta bluesman Charley Patton in a replica 78rpm record album replete with 10" card discs upon which the CDs are individually spindle-mounted on Revenant. The cachet that consumers attach to buying such products that reproduce the music from their original source materials (tapes or 78rpm records), that bolster their releases with reliable scholarship in the form of liner notes, and heighten the physical experience of music by reproducing appropriate ephemera and images as part of the packaging is a crucial tenet of these labels' success in the independent marketplace.

⁴ See Stubbs and Young (2006) for an overview of the Ace record label and their re-issue programmes; for more on Folkways, see Skinner (2006) and Weissman (2006).

The cultural practices of reissue-based independent record labels

Austin-based Revenant Records' Dean Blackwood (a corporate lawyer in addition to being a label owner in his late 30s⁵) had been a music fan and collector since his youth. He started collecting shellac 78rpm records in his early 20s, and began releasing newly-recorded 78rpm records on his own private label in the mid-1990s. His major coup in this venture was enlisting the legendary late guitarist John Fahey to produce two 78s. In the late 1950s, Fahey had instigated Takoma Records, among the first truly artist-run labels, to release his own recordings, contemporary guitarists and blues musicians that Fahey re-discovered after their slide into obscurity following the recording boom of the 20s and early 30s⁶.

Dean recalled that he and Fahey had discussed, 'What was wrong with the state of "labeldom" – why weren't people paying attention to these unreleased or unavailable recordings?' Fahey had inherited a small fortune after his father died in the mid-1990s, and 'rather than invest it wisely', as Dean recalls, they started Revenant. The label aimed to resurrect musics that had fallen out-of-print, had never been consummately anthologised, or that had never been issued and were in danger of languishing unreleased in private archives. The relevance of these musics would be highlighted by a parallel run of releases on Revenant by contemporary musicians such as Jim O'Rourke and Sir Richard Bishop who espoused a similar aesthetic.

Revenant issued its first releases in 1997. 'Raw musics' became the label's tagline, 'the work of great, uncompromising artists, undiluted by commercial meddling'. The need to appeal to audiences with music that had not been pre-conditioned by mainstream orthodoxies of cultural production was important from the outset – it was up to independent labels such as Revenant to mobilise the music into the marketplace in lieu of mainstream attention. Blackwood recalls his convictions at the label's inception that there must be people who would form an audience for these musics given that he and his friends had long indulged in these diverse genres. The label's mission was also wedded to providing substantial and unprecedented packaging forms to bring the music to the marketplace. Part of this strategy was, in Dean's words, to 'bring the mountain to Muhammad' via

the physical object, leading to the label's reputation for lavish packages full of attention-to-detail.

Similarly, Tommy McCutcheon, who runs Austin-based reissue label Unseen Worlds, admits that running a label was 'the product of serious amounts of collecting', and a passionate urge to do something in the music business. He collated a list of albums and recordings that he felt needed current editions to bring them 'up with the times' and fill in the gaps with current digital reissues. His enthusiasm as a 25-year-old consumer of music searching for an outlet for his passion led him to start his label:

'Most of my time was... [spent] reading interviews and gathering names and reading discographies, and picking up time periods that I thought were interesting, and the records that looked good or had good titles. I'd just want to hear everything by a certain artist because I love their stuff so much. And then finding that some of the best stuff is not the most popular, and being really curious to try and reintroduce that and see if people were willing to take it more seriously this time around.'

When deciding what to release, Tommy uses his own tastes as a guide. Via his record label, Tommy extends his fandom into a market presence, taking pride in sourcing his materials (liner notes, recordings, artwork) directly from the artists and ensuring that they are aptly compensated for licensing their materials to Unseen Worlds.

Establishing an independent label that involves the consent and input of artists or their estates by properly licensing materials from them often carries the reward of sales and customer loyalty. Such practice also aids the likelihood of obtaining other music and materials for release in the future. Interest from labels in their material encourages artists to participate and lends credence to projects – 'Most of the time', Tommy McCutcheon chuckles, 'it seems like they [the artists] have just been waiting for someone who gives a shit'. For example, Dean Blackwood of Revenant chimed to readers at fansite The Radar Station (www.beefheart.com) that their release of the Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band box set *Grow Fins* would see band members properly compensated by a record label for the first time in decades. This involvement from ex-Magic Band members carried over to their supplying their own tapes for the project, as well as contributing to the sets' liner notes to create a package unprecedented in the band's history. Reviews by fans on the Radar Station website identify their involvement as a key component of the set's success⁷. Reviewing the 2014 Rhino release *Sun Zoom Spark*, the website lambasted Rhino by painting Revenant in a very favourable light:

⁵ All ages stated in this article refer to research participants at the time of interaction during fieldwork (2008-10).

⁶ Fahey was instrumental in re-locating two influential 1930s bluesmen: Mississippi-based Skip James and Memphis-based Bukka White.

⁷ <http://www.beefheart.com/grow-fins-rarities-1965-1982/> (accessed 03.09.2014)

'It's a pity that Rhino haven't gone down the same moral and ethical route taken by Revenant whose 'Grow Fins' was a superb boxset and an example of how to present outtakes. Revenant were able to pay all the Magic Band members involved some money from the proceeds of the sales. But then they're not a corporate business exploiting their assets for shareholder profit are they?'⁸

Many founders of independent labels have come from listening to what Lance Ledbetter of Atlanta-based Dust-to-Digital Records called 'outsider musics'. Lance immersed himself in college radio, eventually becoming a DJ and thereby discovering the pre-war American and world musics that typify his label's output. Producers such as Lance have invested in music heavily as youths and young adults, and in finding music 'from outside the box' that they could share with those few friends with similar tastes. They forged their listening tastes through explorations of the market for which they have ultimately come to cater. Prior to becoming producers of commodities, they experienced the marketplace as independent-orientated consumers. Dean Blackwood of Revenant posits a unifying characteristic of this audience as being the use of music listening 'as a primary activity rather than a background to something else'. Many other independent producers nominated this studious participation in listening to music as a hallmark of their consumer base. Unseen Worlds wishes to expose out-of-print avant-garde music to more people, and Tommy also wishes to encourage a studious approach from its listeners: '...the hardest thing about [avant-garde music is that] you do generally have to sit down and *listen* to this stuff. I think that maybe the hardest thing to get across to people is music-dedicated listening experiences...'

There exist a host of contradictions inherent in the sphere of 'outsider musics' of relevance to the creation and sustaining of this marketplace niche. As Atton's (2012) analysis of avant-garde classic rock albums and their reception by listeners shows, it is not just consumers outside the mainstream who listen to 'difficult' music or that analyse music media texts thoroughly and treat them as something other than merely peripheral or background textures. Many consumers of mainstream pop listen intently and seriously to the music for aesthetic enjoyment. This has been shown to be similarly true for mainstream television shows that act as platforms for the performance of identification with others that comes from an intense engagement with the media to hand (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002). It is

therefore somewhat self-consciously that people choose to designate their musical tastes as being 'outsider' – supposedly impervious to mainstream cultural norms and somehow involving a more scholarly approach than mainstream media texts.

As Tommy's comments regarding listening to avant-garde music evidence, a seemingly impermeable barrier of insider knowledge and cultural capital serves to exclude many neophytes from penetrating independent marketplaces. It also establishes an anorak stereotyping of the independent music market (interrogated by Shuker 2004 on popular perceptions caused by the film and book *High Fidelity*), a 'marketplace myth' (Arsel and Thompson, 2010) that is combated to protect the investments in field-specific cultural capital made by producers and consumers. The paradox of trying to be all-inclusive and to listen to music without boundaries, whilst doing so in a community of conversant insiders privy to specialist knowledge, language and schemes of value/taste judgement, is a source of ideological friction, in independent music marketplaces. Consumers regularly feel they have to defend *outré* listening choices such as disco and stress that they are not listening to obscure music for obscurity's sake. For example, one informant was enthusing about a new record of industrial ambient music he was listening to, and then became increasingly defensive when it transpired that the record was playing at the wrong speed. His inattentiveness to this detail potentially acts to undermine his investment as a 'specialist' consumer.

Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital Records concedes that barriers of distinction exist, but can be overcome by conceptualising the interaction between independent labels and their potential audiences as being a form of community, sharing and active engagement.

'I love everything that we put out. I consider myself to be this adventurous listener going back to when I was in high school with my friends, always looking for things and sharing with each other things we hadn't heard before, and I think there's a certain fan base for us that's sorta like that.'

Tommy McCutcheon of Unseen Worlds also sees the interaction between producers and consumers in the independent marketplace as

'...more of a community thing, a community feeling. Some people do really get on the message boards and do their market research that way, I think for us it's more about listening to the music and seeing what people were liking, what we were liking, and finding a medium between that. I think it makes for a more unique experience with it all.'

⁸ <http://www.beefheart.com/sun-zoom-spark-1970-to-1972/> (accessed 22.11.2014)

A similar compunction exists for Matt Sullivan of Light in the Attic. He states emphatically that he loves running his label – ‘I can’t think of anything else I’d rather be doing with my life’ – and feels that independent record labels, stores and consumers represent a common community. It represents a safe haven for cultural practice apart from those who would denigrate these practices.

Whilst there is a sharing of skills between labels, as graphic designers and audio engineers work on projects for many different labels, there exist more explicit examples of independent label collusions. For example, Revenant and Dust-to-Digital joined forces for a 2011 release of Revenant founder John Fahey’s entire Fonotone Records recordings. Furthermore, Matt Sullivan of Light in the Attic proudly recalled how his label conspired with others to create a special package for Record Store Day, a recently established annual event aimed at bolstering independent record stores. The vinyl-only release involved nine other labels, including Finders Keepers from Manchester, Jazzmen from London, Sublime Frequencies from Seattle, Newbroker from Chicago, Daftone from Brooklyn, Timmion from Finland, and Honest Jon’s from London, submitting one track apiece.

‘That was cool, I gotta say, as far as feeling there’s a community out there and having something in common with people, that was like the first time I guess it hit home... I knew there were a lot of reissues out there and I’d connected with a lot of people over the years, but that was kind of the first time when we all came together where I was involved, and it was a really bonding experience, and we’re hoping to do another one next year. That was a good time.’

Matt furthered the sense of community and reciprocity amongst these labels by offering them all free advertising in his label’s fanzine, produced and distributed exclusively for Record Store Day 2009. As he claims,

‘We’re not all competing – when you have ten or fifteen of these labels out there and they’re all meticulous about what they do, and they do a good job at it, it’s all legally licensed stuff, paying the appropriate parties and promoting it... we’re helping to push everything forward.’

Whilst he ideally would like to run larger advertising campaigns with in-store posters or more frequent press advertisements, Tommy of Unseen Worlds is aware that this is not financially feasible. Tommy acknowledged that the only time he has paid for advertising for his label has been when small publications have run reviews of his work, as a gesture towards their help in featuring his label’s releases and as an expression of independent

solidarity:

‘It’s community in the fact that you understand each other. Some of the people are a lot closer and meet at, like, festivals and that sort of thing. I just don’t have the money to do that. We don’t lose money, but we don’t make money either.’

Discussing advertising agencies delivering services to large Japanese corporations, Moeran speaks of an ‘unformulated “code of honour” among agencies who are otherwise in direct competition with one another for advertising business’ (Moeran, 2006: 48). There is a similarly contingent ‘code of honour’ in the independent music market as referred to by Tommy and Matt, where otherwise prohibitively costly advertising can be used as a vote of thanks to those who have made some contribution to your work’s exposure.

There exists a further feeling that independent production involves closer ties between producers and consumers as part of the aesthetic of ‘soft’ capitalism being espoused compared with what people get from the mainstream. For example, Lance Ledbetter of Dust-to-Digital and his wife April operate a stock room in their basement and send mail orders out themselves. They know their most dedicated customers by name, including some who order everything the label puts out. Tommy at Unseen Worlds gets feedback from customers too, ‘from all over the world, including radio programmes writing in and doing specials on people we’ve put out, and people writing saying that they’re following our things, lots of repeat customers. People who see what we’re doing and are following it. That’s encouraging even if it’s not 1000 people doing it.’

Legitimising soft capitalism and creative independent commerce

In light of the above observations, I argue that the independent reissue marketplace highlights some key facets of how cultural practices are mapped onto capitalist marketplaces. Principally, operating within the parameters of independent production whilst opposing supposed mainstream hegemony (one of the ‘myths of the mainstream’ – Strachan, 2007: 246) is a legitimising strategy (*ibid.*: 247) aimed at fostering an ideologically distinct political economy of progressive cultural capital (Dunn, 2012) in the independent reissue market. In the following discussion I highlight the key elements of this proposal with recourse to the relevant literature.

i) Marketplace Myths and Legitimising Strategies

The notion of ‘marketplace myths’ articulated by Arsel and Thompson (2010) emerged from their investigation of the protectionism of subscribers to ‘indie’ music and fashion in Madison, Wisconsin. Their protection of their marketplace identity is founded upon a negotiation of *marketplace myth*,

‘a threat to the value of their identity investments in a field of consumption (i.e. a network of interrelated consumption activities, brand and product constellations, an embedded social network). They use demythologising practices to protect these investments from devaluation and to distance and distinguish their field of consumption, and corresponding consumer identities, from these undesirable associations’ (Arsel and Thompson, 2010: 792).

Constructions of opposition to undesirable cultural categories are not just partaken by *consumers*, but also by *producers* of commodities in order to facilitate appropriate consumer relations and to achieve their aesthetic and capital goals. Producers pursue identities that navigate away from harmful stereotyped associations in a manner similar to consumers seeking to ‘disentangle and distinguish their investments in a field of consumption from a devaluing marketplace myth’ (Arsel and Thompson, 2010: 798).

Bourdieu (1990) stipulates that field-dependent cultural capital has to be exercised according to the rules of the field (whilst allowing for a small degree of improvisation within a given field). By conceptualising the field of cultural production as a game governed by such rules, individuals make legitimate claims to status (and adopt new statuses within the relative field) according to their appropriate assimilation and usage of the field’s requisite materials of cultural capital. This cultural capital is conceived as being field-specific – dynamic and applicable in the context on one field, yet of limited or no use in another. This suggests that independent marketplace identities are constructed actively and in opposition to other marketplace identities, for engaging with distinct notions of cultural capital unintelligible to others is inherently exclusional (Bourdieu, 1984). This acts as a suitable framing of independent music marketplaces where the aesthetic investments of actors are set apart from the mainstream, which is in turn stigmatised according to the mythologising practices of those safeguarding their investments in independent cultural production.

Robert Strachan has argued that the DIY micro-independent record labels of the United Kingdom have

created ‘images and myths of the mainstream music industry’, which are ‘used by DIY micro-labels to justify and make sense of their own identities’ (2007: 246). Small-scale cultural producers in this field ‘cannot be seen as autonomous from either the dominance of large-scale institutions or the larger field of power... because of the historical dominance of major labels, small-scale cultural production related to popular music is dialectically bound up with the aesthetics and discourses of large-scale cultural organisations’ (*ibid.*: 247). This dialectic suggests a mainstream capitalism in relation to which small producers can self-consciously create their identities via a number of what Strachan calls “‘legitimising theories’ for commercial and creative action’. Posing one’s own cultural creativity as being opposed to a global corporate media has the function of actively redefining the scale and scope of the ambitions of small-scale cultural production. Failure is safeguarded against by a redefinition of marketplace success according to the parameters of this novel political economy. As Bourdieu noted with regard to authors, ‘the relationship of mutual exclusion between material gratification and the sole legitimate profit (i.e. recognition by one’s peers) is increasingly asserted as the exclusive principle of evaluation as one moves down the hierarchy of economic gratifications’ (1993: 50). The authenticity of being in the business for the passion of making music available, for the love of art over the love of money, is also sought after by consumers in the music and products that they consume. For example, record collector Chris W. (a 34 year-old office worker in Austin) thinks deeply about the hard work that goes into the records and CDs that he buys, and the slim financial rewards of those working in the independent marketplace:

‘...a lot of the labels that I support, they may have two people who make a moderately comfortable living, but they’re not going to be rich and they don’t give a shit about it. They’re doing what they want to do, and that’s really honourable.’

Legitimising theories to justify small-scale cultural production are ‘most clearly illustrated by the way in which they position and identify themselves, commonly justify their involvement in popular music production, and judge success and failure’ (Strachan, 2007: 250). Therefore, their engagement in music production often takes the form of a moral or political stance against hegemonic capitalist forces; an identification with competing labels as part of a collective trans-global scene of music production that eschews the goals of mainstream corporate production; and as producers who also identify as fans, thereby gaining reward not solely from financial recompense but

also from a personal sense of achievement and of having well served the music they admire. The success of a release here ‘is rationalised primarily through its value as a successful artistic artefact and how well it is received by the label owner’s peer group rather than how financially successful it may be. Hence there is a heavy onus on the symbolic value of the text rather than its economic value’ (*ibid.*: 257). The comments of record label owners that they represent a ‘community’, and that they are ‘not competing’ with each other even to the extent of offering each other free advertising would seem to suggest such a mode of assessment is important to the independent music marketplace’s ability to erect its own legitimising theories.

Nevertheless, despite the legitimising strategies of DIY labels, there is evidence of strategic professionalisation and entrepreneurialism latent in the wishes many small-label owners have to make their labels profitable enough to be full-time enterprises. ‘Even in an era in the recording industry when major and independents were seen by fans, musicians and critics as polar opposites, in truth they were often linked in licensing, financing and distribution deals’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 176). The capitulation of many independent labels to become ‘sublabels’ as part of major label portfolios is evidence that there is more interplay between the two than is usually acknowledged, as is the perception of independent labels as ‘proving grounds’ for artists that are then cherry-picked for upward mobility into mainstream promotion and distribution networks. The parables of mainstream music industry excess and corporate narrow-sightedness are part of the very mythology of popular music (Knopper, 2009; Negus, 1999: 63-82) that contributes to the us-and-them mentality of the independents, placing one as noble outlaw and the other as corrupt corporate ogre. Negus recognises that when ‘naïve acts [have] signed exploitative contracts’ (1992: 43) this adds to the perception of the major labels being less artistically sympathetic than independent labels.

DIY-punk labels of the USA distance themselves from such mainstream contracting by frequently eschewing formal contracts and operating informal business procedures that would be anathema to the mainstream major labels (Dunn, 2012, and Negus, 1999: 63-4 highlight these contrasts between DIY independents and major labels). In the reissue market, attenuation to the particulars of legal licensing of music and ensuring that surviving artists or the estates of the deceased are both a) rightly compensated and b) involved in creative decision-making is evidently of key importance. It firstly assuages the accusation of acting as a pirate or bootlegger, and secondly distances label practice from

charges of exploitation associated with the mainstream. The ethical ramifications of receiving the endorsement and cooperation of artists in the reissue of their work is of fundamental importance to the legitimisation of their products and their claim to status within the field of cultural production (c.f. Bourdieu, 1990).

ii) Money and legitimate cultural capitalism

The creation of the independent record labels and their products requires there to be a system of distribution, and a context or methodology for articulation of difference from the mainstream market available for consumers and producers alike. Nevertheless, monetary transactions are necessary to keep such enterprises tenable. Hesmondhalgh’s research into the 1990s Brit-pop and ‘indie’-rock scenes led him to conclude that independent labels’ collusion with major labels and making larger sums of money were no longer wrong-footings in terms of credibility in the indie scene: ‘Indie, then, represents the end of the post-punk vision of transforming the social relations of musical production via the medium of the small record company’ (1999: 57). However, the litmus test for credibility amongst the independent labels in this research entails resisting populist cash-cows and the retention of autonomy from major labels, thereby ensuring artistic control over the products that are issued. I detail below how this is deemed possible in the independent marketplace – to command a viable marketplace presence in a cultural field inherently sceptical of capitalism and the accumulation of wealth.

That the creation of goods in the independent marketplace cannot be accounted for solely in terms of economic factors echoes Toynbee’s proposal that there exist ‘proto-markets’ (2000: 27), wherein there is a relatively partial commodification of musical activity. What these suggestions most clearly lead to is the slipperiness of identifying ‘the music industry’ (Williamson and Cloonan, 2007), and the uncertain claim upon independent status that actors have in commercial music culture. The latter is a constant performance that actors need to engage with in order to distance and distinguish themselves from the hard capitalism of the mainstream – indeed the creation of a ‘proto-market’ versus a ‘real market’ is a legitimising strategy *par excellence*. The reason to do so is to legitimate themselves for their own satisfaction as well as to maintain enough commercial viability amongst the audience that is self-consciously seeking an alternative to the mainstream culture industries.

The hard work and slim financial rewards of the independent reissue market are known to have their

corollaries in other creative industries. Garnham suggested that creative labour in the culture industries, where independent ‘freelance’ workers proliferate, is typified by long hours of work for minimal financial reward: ‘workers themselves willingly don this yoke in the name of freedom’ (1987: 33). Rather than subsuming this observation under a Marxist rhetoric of capitalist triumph over the worker through industries’ unburdening of responsibility to their workers, Angela McRobbie’s investigation of the British fashion industry suggests that such particular vocations in the culture industries are symbolically-charged life choices. It expresses a sort of ‘*cultural capitalism*’ wherein workers ‘by and large express little, if any, real interest in the dynamics of wealth creation and business’ (McRobbie, 1998: 177). McRobbie portrays workers in the fashion industry as working ‘according to a different set of principles which are about artistic integrity, creative success, recognition, approval by the art establishment, and then, also almost as an afterthought, sales and markets’ (*ibid.*). Likewise, journalists (Mort, 1996: 34) and retailers in the world of retro-fashion (Crewe *et al.*, 2003: 69) perceive themselves as being in their trade not for large financial gain, but rather because they enjoy what they do. As evidenced by the opinion of record collector Chris W. quoted above, this ‘honourable’ commitment to their work adds value to the labels and the products that they produce, and is partly responsible for getting consumers to spend their money on their goods.

The spending of money is not a standard, homogenised and homogenising practice. Just as consumption is an active and dialectic process (Miller, 1987; Jenkins, 1992), the spending of money is a ‘dynamic, complex social and cultural activity’ (Zelizer, 1994: 200). Rather than indicating greed and exploitation, money and commercial success can serve to indicate fair reward for dutiful and noble enterprising. Where money is earned via practices ordained by the consumer audience as creative, or devoid of deception and greed, the transaction of money from consumer to producer is not the disembodiment of the relationship as one of cultural producer on the one hand and the exploited consumer on the other. ‘The forms of monetary transfers mark the equality or inequality of the parties just as they mark their degree of intimacy and the durability of their relationship’ (Zelizer, 1994: 210). It is not only money that is *gifted* that might act as a marker of intimacy between transactors, enabling commodified areas of cultural and social life to act as forms of intimacy in the social relationship between the producer and the consumer. This chimes with an observation on the private publication of poetry chapbooks, where ‘To buy the poetry is to affirm either that one wants to read the poems again,

or is to lend support to the efforts of the poet or *poetry in general* through the acknowledgment of purchase’ (Craig, 2011: 59).

By spending money on independent products via independent outlets, consumers and producers alike can collectively sustain the solvency of independent music production and the legitimising mythologies of an alternative to inauthentic, alienating globalised major-label capitalism. They also sustain access to music and products that are unavailable in the mainstream, thus fulfilling an additional aesthetic goal. As authentic attributes are changeable and context driven, it is valid to argue that ‘the challenges of modernity also offer avenues for creation of a different kind of authentic reality’ (Lindholm, 2002: 37), evidenced by the economic and cultural rationale of independent music marketplaces. If it is correct to suggest that ‘because culture is knowingly forged with a sense of struggle and fragility, a sense that it could be otherwise and a constant fear that it is otherwise, that makes it a modern culture’ (Miller, 1994: 321-2), the independent market becomes a site of struggle to maintain its economic viability, authenticity, and the validity of its cultural capital investments by forging its own legitimising strategies (Strachan, 2007) according to which its brand of capitalism becomes acceptable as ‘less commodified’ than other modes of exchange (cf. ‘the proto-market’ – Toynbee, 2000).

Conclusions

Capitalism and commercial intent are key aspects of the field of cultural production that need to be dealt with by actors safeguarding their cultural investments in independent music marketplaces. The quest for authenticity is problematised wherever it is situated in the context of monetised transactions and commercial interests. These are related to practices in the mainstream industry to which independent marketplaces place themselves in opposition, and by which they construct their notions of the authentic. The task is to consolidate the aesthetics of independent music and commerce given this schism between the ideal and the reality of independent music marketplaces.

Parry and Bloch suggest that ‘It seems to be that *for us* [i.e. developed Western economies] money signifies a sphere of “economic” relationships, which are inherently impersonal, transitory, amoral and calculating’ (1989: 9). The economic transactions in the independent music marketplace are reasoned to escape this pitfall on the basis of the ethical authenticity inherent in the producers

and products purveyed. This authenticity involves a territorialisation of independent music marketplaces away from an ideologically antagonised mainstream marketplace. The challenge to this argument is that ideological discourses often obfuscate lived practices wherein the desired authenticity of experiences is often compromised by the realities of the inequalities of markets (Wilk, 2006; Friedberg, 2003). My ethnography asserts that the independent reissue music marketplace acts as a proto-market due to a lesser degree of commodification (or a 'soft capitalism') operating within the marketplace. This lesser degree of commodification is itself an authentic expression as assessed by consumers who wish to buy into the cachet of authenticity and display savvy musical and cultural taste by choosing to spend their money on its products. Those unable to enact this discretion are deemed to be spoon-fed the 'synthetic' product of the mainstream major labels (Negus, 1992: 54-5), spending money in different oppositional contexts and are thus considered outside the scene of independent consumption.

The denigration of commodity capitalism is pervasive amongst those striving to align with authentic musical expression unsullied by corporate interests. When discussing any culture industry the role of money is a key concern, and how 'the enormous cultural variation in the way in which money is symbolised and in which this symbolism relates to culturally constructed notions of production, consumption, circulation and exchange' (Parry and Bloch, 1989: 1). The dualities of financial solvency and greed, provision and exploitation, authenticity and inauthenticity are inherent to the morality of transactions in the independent reissue music marketplace. The desire for 'soft' capitalism and the promulgation of 'legitimising strategies' (Strachan, 2007) are brought to the fore by actors in the independent marketplace's 'proto-market' (Toynbee, 2000: 27) to authenticate their practices and the necessary commodification entailed.

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Bionotes

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