

## INDIE ROCK SUBCULTURE: HAMILTON AS MICROCOSM

**INDIE ROCK SUBCULTURE: HAMILTON AS MICROCOSM**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, interest in the indie rock subculture has exploded, both in the popular press and among popular music scholars and culture theorists.

This is an ethnographic study of the indie rock scene in Hamilton, Ontario. Hamilton represents a microcosm of what is happening in other local indie scenes. The geographical, historical and cultural locality of Hamilton creates a sense of shared identity among individuals connected by the common interest in indie rock.

This study focuses on how independent rock's network of social practices and economic institutions works to locate subjects within Hamilton's local network while connecting them to the larger framework of interlocal scenes. Aspects of the local and interlocal are explored through narratives of indie aesthetics, style, fashion, institutions, cultural practices, authenticity and investment. Cultural practices, including the production and consumption of indie rock are examined through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which exposes constructions and configurations of class, generation, ethnicity, and gender.

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## **Dare To Be Surprised: INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

No one ran against me. I was the only candidate and won by default. My duties consist of extracting the strange melodic and lyric bits of myself that wake me up at night. The ones that make me shiver and sweat with fear. As President, I am obligated to polish these words, tunes and thoughts into glorious gems of absurd truth, brimming with dangerous significance and thrust them outward, for the betterment of everything. I must execute performances where indescribable things happen. I wear my uniform, sweat and make everyone lose their minds. I do these things the best I possibly can, forever. I am navigating uncharted territory here. I collect bits of guidance only from the brutal road. I learn and change. I have met difficulties and will meet more. I will grow and change forever. I won't stop. People dance and celebrate when I rock. They celebrate change, suffering, glory and excitement. Every day, I get more certain. Every day, I meet new friends and work harder. I have taken these troubled bits of self and fashioned them into the most entertaining, witty and engaging one-man rock-spectacle imaginable. As President of Indie Rock I intend to incite and spearhead a focused cultural revolution that will transform this country, and ultimately the entire world, into a glowing ball of pure, blissful, creative strawberry juice. Rock And Roll Armageddon is approaching. I will continue to work, to refine my vision and my craft. I will become more entertaining and more profoundly relevant to our age with every breath that I take and sound that I utter.<sup>2</sup>

Wax Mannequin

- “Are you going to the show tonight?”
- \* “Who’s playing?”
- “Wax Mannequin, that one-man-band guy. He’s got a drum machine...he opened up for the Riderless in London at the Courtyard, Remember?”
- \* “Yeah, he played a great set - The self elected President of indie rock right?”

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<sup>1</sup> The Folk Implosion, *Dare To Be Surprised*, The Communion Label compact disc COMM45, 1997; and Chapter titles and section headings consist of song and album titles by indie rock bands that relate to their topic. This was done to inject an indie rock aesthetic within the thesis.

<sup>2</sup> John Bruhm. “Wax Mannequin: ‘Chad Kroeger Stalks Me,’” *Chartattack* (17 December 2003) (accessed 18 March 2006) <<http://www.chartattack.com/damn/2003/12/1705.cfm>>.

- “Yeah.”
- \* “Who’s opening up tonight?”
- “Hibakusha and B.A. Johnston. Eight bucks. I’ve never seen them before, but B.A. toured with Mayor McCa.”
- \* “We should check that out. Why don’t you come by my place at nine? We can have a few drinks and be at the club in time to see both bands.”

While these people are deciding whether to attend the show, the bands are already at the venue preparing for the show. The bands arrived to the club at 7 p.m. for sound check. Wax checked first, followed by the second band, and finally the opening band. The bartenders were busy loading fridges full of beer while the bands hung out and talked until the doors opened at 9 p.m. The girl at the door took eight dollars from each person and stamped their hands. “Enjoy the show.” Audience members walked in the club, saying “hi” to familiar faces and finding a comfortable place to stand for the show. B.A. took the stage at about 10 p.m., played to an attentive audience for forty-five minutes or so, and then watched Hibakusha’s set. The audience chatted and went outside to smoke during the break while the bands tore down and set up their gear. B.A. and members of Hibakusha joined the audience during Wax’s set. After Wax finished, people bought CD’s and mingled. The next day, people talked about the show on local message boards.

I have been fortunate to see Wax Mannequin perform numerous times. Regardless of whether the audience is fewer than ten people or numbering in the hundreds, Wax consistently performs his best. Like Wax, most indie rock bands would agree that they have “met difficulties and will meet more.” As bands “meet new friends and work harder”



they aim to refine their vision and craft - much like Wax. Hamilton-based Wax has toured Canada, coast to coast, for years. He generally performs solo with an electronic drum machine and electric guitar, although lately he has been playing shows with a bassist and drummer, aligning with his mission to “become more entertaining and more profoundly relevant to our age.” The indie rock president persona was based on ironic humour - a reverse mirror effect.<sup>3</sup> As much of independent rock is wrapped in ironic humour, indie audiences generally appreciated his finger pointing at indie cultural practices. (Wax has since moved away from the persona, avoiding the threat of it becoming passé.) It is difficult to determine if ironic humour is a product of the music or the music is a product of ironic humour. Indie bands spend hours in a vehicle, load gear, play a show, load gear again, and sleep on someone’s floor or in a bed with a band member in a cheap motel, only to wake up and do it all over again. That’s without the vehicle problems and the “we’ll-only-be-able-to-pay-you-in-beer” promoters, whom bands often face.

Like Wax’s persona, my role in the scene has shifted over the years. I am currently active as an audience member but also play in a band. My past involvement in the scene includes attending countless shows, playing locally and touring in a handful of bands, and working in two of Hamilton’s primary indie rock clubs as a door person. My academic study of music and cultural studies, combined with these personal experiences, led me to become interested in studying indie rock as a music subculture. It was people like Wax, whose involvement in the scene proved how important it was to document the Hamilton indie rock music scene, depicting its position as a local scene within a constellation of

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<sup>3</sup> Interviewee J, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 February 2005.

interlocal scenes, but more importantly, how its people function locally and in interlocal scenes. This approach contributes to a new understanding of indie music by placing the focus on the people involved in the subculture. Not only did I observe things about the people involved in the subculture, but also I asked them about it. This approach of making subcultural observations and gathering responses from subcultural members led to a deeper understanding of the subculture: who is involved, what they do, how they do it, where they do it, why they do it, and why it is relevant.

My thesis presents findings attained through the accumulation of years of personal experience in the scene, combined with months of observations and interviews. Throughout the proceeding four chapters, I explore different aspects of the local and interlocal scene. Chapter 1 presents background information pertaining to indie music aesthetics, style, musical characteristics, and theoretical history as well as providing an outline of the methodology used to conduct this study. This examination of the indie aesthetic through the words of indie participants, presents indie rock music culture as a diverse collection of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) cultural producers. These groups of individuals participate in a culture rooted in accountability as the DIY cultural participants privilege control of their creative and business pursuits. Chapter 2 highlights the primary indie rock institutions in Hamilton, including performance venues, record stores and labels. These institutions provide physical spaces for members of the scene to interact and thus hold an important position in the local network of scene participants. The personal narratives of scene members combine with characteristics of Hamilton music to create and identity for Hamilton indie rockers linked to the cities geographical location. The

Hamilton scene is also positioned in relation and contrast to other localities, identifying the similarities and differences between scenes and the relevance of this in terms of local and interlocal networks. Chapter 3 discusses the sharing practices common to the scene, along with cultural practices and fashion, through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. The approach of this study involved observing common practices but also asking participants about them; it yielded particularly fruitful results with respect to cultural practices. This chapter emphasizes the narrative of process over product and examines such cultural practices as wearing band tee-shirts as a signifier of one's membership to the subculture, taste, and participation in subcultural social practices, which position the wearer in resistance to mass cultural production. Chapter 4 examines the commitment and investments of participants involved in the scene and their perspectives on the corporate industry (i.e. indie vs. major labels), authenticity, and the function of media within the indie community. The social, cultural, political, and economic reasons why indie rock bands operate within a DIY structure are explored and lead to a discussion of why people get involved, stay involved, and often become deeply invested in this subculture.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Gimme Indie Rock: Indie music aesthetics, style, history<sup>1</sup>**

There are those who want nothing of it, there are those that are visiting, and then there are those that just like music; there are those people who like chocolate and want to eat chocolate bars all the time.<sup>2</sup>

The man who said this uses chocolate for a metaphor for independent music. He doesn't read *Rolling Stone*, go to stadium shows, or buy CD's at HMV. He is a fan of music who operates within an entirely different world: the world of independent rock music. Independent music fans write and publish their own magazines, put on their own shows, and buy music directly from the performers. [For the people involved, the independent music community becomes more than just a pastime or entertainment; it often becomes their lifestyle and ultimately a part of their identity, both within their local community as well as the interlocal network of indie rock music scenes.]

The term independent or indie is often used to refer to unsigned bands or bands that are on small independent record labels. [Indie acts generally produce their own albums (production and distribution) and rely on touring, word-of-mouth, and airplay on independent or college radio stations for promotion.] According to the participants interviewed for this project, indie is now an umbrella term composed of disparate music genres. Despite being musically diverse, indie rock bands are connected through a common aesthetic and set of practices. Social involvement in a scene often leads

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<sup>1</sup> Sebadoh, *Rocking the Forest*, Domino compact disc WIGCD2 (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Interviewee V, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 14 March 2005.

participants to become involved in the production and consumption of indie culture and often leads to lifestyle changes and considerable investments.

[The ethnomusicologist Leslie Gay states that music “provides context for their [people’s] lives, an interest so strong that its activities become central to their existence.”<sup>3</sup>]

In her study of rock musicians in New York City, Gay explores how the local lives of these musicians functioned within a globally interconnected world. Using Hamilton, Ontario, as a case study, I overlay the notion of local and interlocal community onto the positioning of music in the lives of participants in the independent (indie) rock music scene, within an interlocal network. The geographical, historical and cultural locality of Hamilton creates a sense of shared identity among individuals connected by the common interest in indie rock. Cultural practices, including the production and consumption of indie rock, are linked to constructions and configurations of class, generation, ethnicity, and gender. The research discussed herein consists of an ethnographic case study of the local indie music scene in Hamilton as a microcosm of what is happening in general and explores the notion of locality and interlocality. Thus, participation in this culture leads to a sense of identity for people within their local scene, but also as part of a network of interlocal scenes sharing similarities and celebrating difference.

Social networks are one of the defining features of local music scenes, and contribute to the larger interlocal social network of independent rock music scenes.<sup>4</sup> For the owner of an independent singles label based in Champaign, Illinois, business

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<sup>3</sup> Leslie Gay “Rockin’ the Imagined Local: New York Rock in A Reterritorialized World,” in *Popular Music - Style and Identity*, edited by Will Straw, et al. (Montreal: Dufferin Press, 1995), 123.

connections are largely responsible for his awareness of being part of a broader network of people with shared knowledge and interests:

If I were to go to San Francisco, I've got a bunch of people I could call that would go, "Oh, you're Geoff from Parasol, and I would know who they are and I would know what kind of music they listen to...But you have to find the right people...there are people all over the place who know who we are...We could go anywhere and find somebody who knew who we were, but we couldn't just randomly pick people."<sup>5</sup>

Will Straw's claim that points of musical reference are likely to remain stable from one community to another; is supported by Leslie Gay's finding that "interactions and connections made through mediated forms often suggest that individual musicians are indeed closer 'neighbours' to those miles away than to those who live on the same street."<sup>6</sup> This is because interlocal networks bring institutions and people in disparate local scenes together in broader systems of cultural production and dissemination. Straw argues that interlocality makes alternative music scenes somewhat paradoxical; they are part of a "musical cosmopolitanism" that allows the localism that marks their characteristic "small-scale infrastructures of production and dissemination" to be "reproduced, in relatively uniform ways, on a continental and international level."<sup>7</sup> I argue, however, that independent rock music's social and economic structures are overlapping networks that locate subjects within a specific local social network as well as connected them within a larger interlocal network.

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<sup>4</sup> Holly Kruse, *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing: 2003), 134.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 137 and Leslie Gay "Rockin' the Imagined Local," 126.

<sup>7</sup> Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music," *Cultural Studies* 5,3 (1991): 378.

### Homemade: Indie Music Aesthetics<sup>8</sup>

[The majority of interview subjects described indie rock as “music that is not meant for the mainstream”; and explained that it is “something you kind of have to work at, it doesn’t tend to be immediately something that catches your ear as a listener...[It is] music that musicians really tend to appreciate.”<sup>9</sup> Others articulated a more specific aesthetic:

They’re taking, arguably, a commercial style, a popular style of music and they’re twisting it in their own way so that it’s not as catchy and as accessible to mainstream culture. Specifically what that might mean is things like, lo-fi recording quality, less melodic song structure, more experimental ideas of what kind of instruments to use to make the sounds, than just typical bass, drum, guitar combination. A particular band that comes to mind, as an example of that is a regional band from Guelph called Barmitzvah Brothers; I’m a pretty big fan of this group because they make rock sounds with un-rock instrumentation. That’s indie rock.<sup>10</sup>

Holly Kruse, in *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*, states, “For many fans and music scene participants... ‘indie’ described a sound and a point of origin more than it describes a specific economic relationship.”<sup>11</sup>

Since live music occupies the central role in the community of indie rock, one would assume that promoters would book bands carefully to include music of the same genre on a bill together. Interestingly, though, promoters often showcase unexpected combinations of bands on the same bill. Opening bands that play similar music may not be available; thus, a promoter has to find an alternative. Bills that include a variety of genres display that indie audiences are generally open-minded.

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<sup>8</sup> Sebadoh, *Bubble & Scrape*, Sub Pop Records compact disc SP192b (1993).

<sup>9</sup> Interviewee O, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 February 2005; and Interviewee F, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 February 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewee L, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 February 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 8.

The diversity of musical styles that function within the circuit of indie rock music production represents the open-mindedness of the community of music makers. The disparate genres that share the indie circuit position themselves in connection with each other and in contrast to mass music. Indie music resists generalization and easy categorization: this is a function of its resistance to corporate ways of marketing music by linking audiences and music preferences.

Recently, the term indie rock has become so broad that literally hundreds of other genres can fall under its umbrella. Because of the weaknesses of traditional sources on pop music in this area, I consulted the online resource, *Wikipedia*. Established in 2001, this free encyclopedia, has rapidly grown into the largest reference website on the Internet. Written collaboratively by people from all around the world, *Wikipedia* demonstrates the diversity of the field of indie rock with its description:

New folk...(See: Sufjan Stevens, Iron and Wine)  
 Freak-folk...(See: Devendra Banhart, Joanna Newsom, Animal Collective, Six Organs of Admittance)  
 New Weird America...(See: No-Neck Blues Band, Tower Recordings, Wooden Wand and the Vanishing Voice)  
 Dance-punk...(See: LCD Soundsystem, hellogoodbye, The Rapture, !!!, Out Hud, Radio 4)  
 Garage rock revival...(See: The White Stripes, The Strokes, The Fiery Furnaces, The Von Bondies, The Ionics)  
 Nu-gaze...(See: Sigur Ros, Scarling, Ulrich Schnauss, M83, Serena Maneesh)  
 Indietronic...(See: The Postal Service, The Notwist, Manitoba, Dntel, Lali Puna)<sup>12</sup>

The resource also lists the sub-genres of Jangle pop, Lo-fi, Math rock, Noise pop, Noise rock, Paisley Underground, Post-rock, Post-punk revival, Psychobilly, Sadcore,

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<sup>12</sup> *Wikipedia.com*, s.v. "Indie Rock" (accessed March.19 2006)



Shoegazing, Space rock, and Twee pop.<sup>13</sup> One cannot begin to draw unitary musical traits in such a plethora of music.

By exploring instrumentation, we can place more emphasis on what some indie musicians do. The contrast in band construction and, in effect, instrumentation creates difficulty in drawing conclusions as to common musical traits. Singer-songwriter Julie Doiron plays electric guitar. The dance-rockers Shy Child employ electric guitar and drums, while the alt-country band The Silver Hearts involves up to a dozen musicians, including a trombonist, a sousaphone player, and a violinist. These three examples of indie rock employ a diverse range of instrumentation, again highlighting the challenge in making generalizations about the genre of indie rock.

One important factor of indie music is the quality of the packaging and the lyrics. Indie bands often create their own handmade or hand designed artwork. Crudely made cover art heightens the distinction between substance and production – again the idea of process enters here. For example, Pavement's *Slanted and Enchanted* album features a red cover with the band name and album title scrawled in capital letters in what looks to have been a bottle of white-out; while the Microphone's *Song Islands* includes a reproduction of a hand written song list and cover artwork consisting of rough, gray paintings of figures and faces.<sup>14</sup>

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<en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indie-rock>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Pavement, *Slanted and Enchanted: Luxe & Reduxe*, Matador Records compact disc OLE 557-2, (2002); and The Microphones, *Song Islands*, K Records compact disc KLP125, (2002).

Although instrumental bands exist, such as Rachel's, many indie fans place value on lyrics.<sup>15</sup> This emphasis on lyrics connects with a narrative of education among participants in the indie rock scene, as the participants said they enjoyed "thoughtful" lyrics, highlighting the intellectual appreciation of indie music over bodily appreciation such as dancing.<sup>16</sup> The indie interest in lyrics, contrasts with the catchy hook construction of most commercial pop music. For example, in his song "The Price," Wax Mannequin sings:

Somebody's raised the price since you last paid the price  
The price is not the same and I blame  
All of the price that's left to go  
All of the price that's left to pay  
Someone has raised the price since you last paid the price  
The price was raised today and I say  
You take the price with all your violent might  
You crash price into the  
Earth<sup>17</sup>

In "Legendary," Lou Barlow sings:

I know I wanted more than you could give to me  
I know there'll come a day I'll understand  
Until then I'll be trying to solve a mystery  
Wonder why I couldn't make you stay  
Smiling through denial my specialty  
I thought that was a good thing for a while  
You gave me all your secrets were you testing me?  
How could I do anything but smile<sup>18</sup>

Although lyrics are valued among many indie listeners, generalizations cannot be drawn as to common themes, constructions, or language usage, for again the diversity is too great.

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<sup>15</sup> Interviewee A, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 1 February 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Wax Mannequin, *The Price*, Coqi Records, compact disc (2004).

<sup>18</sup> Lou Barlow, *Emoh*, Merge Records compact disc MRG254 (2005).

Song length also positions indie rock in contrast to mainstream popular music. Indie rock songs generally do not conform to the standard for radio edits. Depending on the sub-genre, songs can run much shorter or much longer than three minutes. A high-energy shout-rock band like Sailboats are White can pound out some songs in just one to two minutes whereas a post-rock band like Godspeed You Black Emperor! can take up to twenty minutes to gradually build up instrumentation and rhythmic drive involved in their compositions. This contrast in song length again points out the impossibility of drawing generalities between the many genres of indie rock.

As shown by Wax Mannequin, sometimes an understanding of indie rock culture is presented as an ironic construction, a presentation often adopted by indie artists. David-Ivar Herman Düne is an indie musician from Paris. In his song “Time of Glory/NYC,” he sings self-referentially about being an indie musician: “At the end of the night I got well rewarded with a ticket for a free drink, the choice is Red Stripe or Pabst. It was my time of glory in New York City.”<sup>19</sup> He continues

I almost lied when my mother asked me if I was making any money. I almost lied but I knew I sucked at it and confessed that I was broke and couldn't afford a coffee, and was getting skinny. Holes in my three-day shirt, well I guess I smell now.<sup>20</sup>

The lyrical content is complemented by the simple instrumentation. Guitar, and sparse percussion accompany David's singing. Again, it is substance over production.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this discussion is that indie music situates itself closer to art-music than mass music production. Many scene participants expressed

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<sup>19</sup> David-Ivar Herman Düne, *Yaya*, Shrimper Records compact disc SHR145CD (2004).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

an interest in, and a respect for, music of the past. Indie scene participants were generally appreciative of and knowledgeable about a variety of musical genres from classic rock to punk and blues. Participants had their own explanation for such musical experience. Some grew up listening to their parents' vinyl collections, others worked in record stores, and others explored whatever "leads" they were given. For example, if a band they liked had a link on their website to other bands, the indie fan would explore the referred bands' sites. One can follow leads about indie bands influences all the way back to bands like the Velvet Underground and Talking Heads.

Indie rock can be traced back though DIY punk and early grunge bands. The message of punk was that anyone could make their own music, which carried through in the grunge movement and is now present in indie rock cultural practices. Tom Carson, critic for the *Village Voice* and *Rolling Stone* in the late 1970s, explains

For most of the audiences and a good many of the bands, punk was the first thing they'd created on their own. Where mass culture inevitably seeks to homogenize, they were diverse...it was also a revolt of the outsiders-oddball smart kids...but their songs rarely stressed that; instead, they exalted the ordinary.<sup>21</sup>

The participants/fans of punk, grunge and indie see themselves as an alternative to the aesthetic models of mass musics such as pop music.<sup>22</sup> For them, it is less about defining what indie *is*, (a DIY subculture), and more about defining what indie *is not* (music for the masses).

In the late 1980s, underground "punk" music was re-labelled "college" music, as it was played by student deejays and generally listened to by students at college radio

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<sup>21</sup> Tom Carson "Stop 'N' Rock," *The Village Voice* (3-9 December 1980): 46.

stations. College music became associated with particular geographic sites, or “scenes”; the first recognized scene being Athens, Georgia, from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s. As college bands from this area such as the B-52’s, REM, and Love Tractor, started to receive attention from commercial radio, “college” music was dubbed, “alternative.” The early 1990s release of Nirvana’s *Nevermind* heralded the grunge explosion. Alongside fellow Seattle-area bands like Pearl Jam, Mudhoney, and Soundgarden, “alternative” was established as its own commercially viable radio format and paradoxically became “mainstream,” – music that was played on top-40 FM radio.

In response, subcultural audiences took a tighter grip on the music that they deemed “authentic” and turned their focus to marginal forms of independent rock including bands, and musicians such as Sebadoh, Pavement, and Calvin Johnson. This trajectory has led to the current state of indie rock as a collection of people involved in local scenes connected by a web of interlocality, evidenced most recently by the rise of the Montreal indie bands Stars, The Stills, The Dears, and the Arcade Fire. With its own trade paper, *College Music Journal* (CMJ), its own chart in *Rolling Stone*, annual seminars, and most importantly, the web of communication provided by the Internet, the possibility exists for independent artists to earn a living (modest as it may be) by playing music without the support of a major record label.

With the development of indie rock music and its associated communities, have come a set of shared values, aesthetics and history related to the scene. An interest in studying indie rock has also developed among academic theorists.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 43.

### Wrapped up in Books: Overview of Theoretical Writings<sup>23</sup>

The subculture of indie rock as a youth subculture aligns with Roy Shuker's findings that members of youth subcultures rely on leisure and style as a "means of winning their own cultural space," and thus represent cultural oppositional politics at the symbolic level.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, theorists at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies agree with the commonly asserted thesis that youth cultures appropriate and innovate musical forms and styles as a basis for their identity, and in so doing, assert counter-cultural politics. This is related to the work of Hal Niedzviecki, *We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Reinvention of Mass Culture*, that uses the term "lifestyle culture pioneers" to describe people employing a DIY attitude:

Lifestyle Culture is simple: we make the stuff that isn't supposed to matter - movies, bands, fashion, toys, TV shows, and an endless world of possible products - matter. We give that stuff prominence in our lives. We elevate the meaningless because we have grown up believing, being taught, that through mass culture we can find meaning.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, one indie participant described the scene:

In terms of content and politics, it's just so diverse and colourful... It's more open in mind and spirit, more accepting of the alien and avant-garde. It strives to define a new vision of community, of the music industry.<sup>26</sup>

There is a sense of realness in the community within the Hamilton scene and scenes abroad. People do welcome "strangers" into their homes and show local hospitality to touring bands. This type of social practice is linked to the music, the scene and the overall

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<sup>23</sup> Belle & Sebastian, *Dear Catastrophe Waitress*, Rough Trade compact disc 83216 (2003).

<sup>24</sup> Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, (New York: Routledge, 1994). 229.

<sup>25</sup> Hal Niedzviecki, *We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Re-invention of Mass Culture*, Toronto: Penguin, 2000), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Interviewee X, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 March 2005.

DIY ethic of independent rock music production and consumption. Most importantly, these social practices come down to issues of identity and community.

The indie rock community is based on music - primarily live music performance. There is a certain anticipatory pleasure of attending a concert, especially if the band is obscure or travelled a great distance; the physical pleasure of handling vinyl records, tapes or CD's; the pleasure of finding a rare recording; and the intellectual and emotional pleasures associated with "knowing" about particular artists and genres valued by one's peers. These forms of pleasure and knowledge as cultural capital are central to the understanding of indie rock consumption as a factor in identity construction. The types of people who are inclined to take pleasure in such things are the people described in this paper: educated, band tee-shirt wearing, headphone wearing, show-going people. This study places indie rock in relation to subcultures and cultural capital while its methodology links it to other studies that have focused on local scenes in particular geographical locations.

Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural capital will be discussed throughout this thesis in relation to indie rock. In indie rock circles, music serves as "taste," which scene members use to differentiate and distance themselves from others, outlining social status positions. Bourdieu defines taste as follows:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 435.

Internally, the music scene, or “field,” works as a social arena in which people manoeuvre in pursuit of desirable resources or social positions. Social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital are recognized within the social space of indie rock scenes as markers of identity. Consumers of indie rock occupy a critical social space where knowledge, experience, and participation in the production and consumption of the culture are valued as capital and acquire meaning and significance within local scenes and interlocal scenes.

As the set of shared values, aesthetics, and history developed, an interest in studying indie rock also emerged. Most of the theoretical work that has been done on indie rock has focused on local scenes in particular places, and outside of Canada. This study brings in ideas of subculture, cultural capital, and social practices in a Canadian city.

Holly Kruse is one of the most important theorists writing about indie rock subculture today. Kruse’s articles, “Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture” (1993) and “Institutional Practices in Alternative Music Scenes” (1995), have ultimately led to her book *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes* (2000).<sup>28</sup> Kruse focuses on the subculture of college music scenes, examining how the social, cultural and economic formations allow members to define themselves as separate from mainstream culture. Specifically, Kruse looks at indie cultural practices as situated within specific spaces and places, through her research in Champaign, Illinois, which the fall 1991 issue of *Rolling Stone* called a “fledgling music Mecca.”<sup>29</sup> *Site and Sound* examines indie

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<sup>28</sup> Kruse, “Institutional Practices in Alternative Music Scenes.” In *Popular Music - Style and Identity*, edited by Will Straw, et al. (Montreal: Dufferin Press, 1995.); and Holly Kruse, *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing: 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Kruse. “Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture.” *Popular Music* 12, 1 (1993): 33.



music history, independent record labels, and sites of indie music distribution: radio, video, retail and live venues, and issues of social networks and identity.

Cotton Seiler and Tom Carson's preliminary writings based in Louisville, Kentucky, are also important documents of indie rock music. Tom Carson began investigating indie rock in 1980...in Louisville, Kentucky. He spent a few weeks with local bands at rehearsals, going to house parties/shows and described his findings in his article "Stop 'n' Rock." He observed that "it's arrival [regional music] now not only defines a central change in rock and roll, but also suggests - in however small a way - the beginnings of a radical realignment in the ways popular art is created and disseminated in this country."<sup>30</sup> In 2001, Cotton Seiler picked up Carson's line of inquiry in Louisville and attempted to sketch out how the Louisville scene developed as a nodal point in the subculture of indie rock in the late 1980s and 1990s. Seiler described the city's distinctive scene and "Louisville Sound," a "geographically and historically singular product of the subcultural impulse, [and] a site-specific example of the indie aesthetic expressed musically."<sup>31</sup>

Additional study of indie rock are Sara Cohen and Ruth Finnegan's ethnographies of British music communities. The bulk of Cohen's data is derived from her observation of and interviews with two Liverpool bands, in the mid to late 1980s. She looks at these Liverpool bands within their particular social, cultural and economic contexts by describing the production and performance of the music. Cohen explores "the interrelationships between art and society...the tension between creativity and

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<sup>30</sup> Carson, "Stop 'N' Rock": 43.

commerce.”<sup>32</sup> The focus for this study, like the work of Cohen and Finnegan, is situated in local music practices as a matter of active collective practice rather than passive mass-controlled consumption.<sup>33</sup>

In her study of Milton Keynes, *The Hidden Musicians*, Finnegan argues the importance of looking at processes rather than products, at informal grass-roots activities rather than formal structure.<sup>34</sup> Cohen supports this approach in the introduction to her 1991 book, *Rock Culture in Liverpool*; she describes the lack of ethnographic data detailing both the process of music-making and the means by which bands struggle to become successful at a local level.<sup>35</sup>

By focusing exclusively on local practices, both Finnegan and Cohen’s studies overlook an important way in which musicians and others involved in local scenes understand their own involvement: as something that both identifies them with and differentiates them from individuals and groups in other communities.<sup>36</sup> For example, involvement represents cultural capital for members of the music scene and serves as a marker of identity in relation to the scene.<sup>37</sup> Placing emphasis on these functions of identity and cultural capital privileges the personal and social uses of music in people’s lives, and supports the narratives of identity, locality and interlocality.

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<sup>31</sup> Cotton Seiler, “Indie Rock in Louisville,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13, 2 (2001): 190.

<sup>32</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 69.

<sup>36</sup> Kruse, “Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture”: 38.

<sup>37</sup> Shuker, 247.

Cohen's studies focus on local practices without much consideration of the relationship to practices in other localities. Finnegan acknowledges this fact, and Cohen, in her more recent work, has begun to address the issue of interlocality. I agree with Kruse that the relationship between the local and the trans-local in the construction of oppositional musical identities is an issue that should be addressed in detail in ethnographic research. This thesis attempts to explore the relationship between music consumers and producers and how this relationship in turn defines participants in scenes. Stuart Hall argues that identities are produced within an ideological field where signs "can be discursively re-articulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently."<sup>38</sup> This study outlines issues of identity rooted in participants' involvement in the scene, through a discussion of bands, labels and media. Narratives of cultural capital are present throughout this discussion of indie rock participants.

In terms of scenes, Kruse and I disagree with Straw's claim that "the relationship of different local or regional scenes to each other is no longer one in which specific communities emerge to create a forward movement to which others are drawn."<sup>39</sup> The emergence of bands in Champaign in the mid to late 1980s, which sought to duplicate the "Minneapolis sound," such as the Replacements; the prominence of the Seattle scene in the early 1990s; and the recent interest in the Montreal scene with bands like the Arcade Fire, confirm to the contrary to be true.

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<sup>38</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London: Verso Books, 1988), 9.

<sup>39</sup> Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change": 378.

**Steps into Miles: Methodology<sup>40</sup>**

This case study was designed to collect information leading to an understanding of practices in the Hamilton indie rock community, why and how these practices emerged and continue, who among the community members take part, the social forces that bind together members of this community, and what contributes to the development of interlocality. My research was tailored to Hamilton, as a particular geographical community, and the indie subculture that exists within it, but it was also framed in relation to other indie scenes.

I believe my “insider” position helped rather than hindered the research process. As a subculture, this community could have been critical of a researcher wanting to conduct interviews. However, the subjects trusted my objectives as a researcher and were willing to give of their time to be interviewed without remuneration. My personal experience in the scene as a musician, a fan of indie rock and a resident of the city helped me build a rapport with my interview subjects. Interviewing subjects from a distinct subcultural community upholding certain ideals, I made a conscious effort to wear clothes without brand or band names to avoid influence on subject’s responses.

Participant observation occurred in public settings where bands performed with other members of the indie scene in attendance. I did not disclose my role as a researcher at these shows; rather, I attended as a music “fan” and observed behaviours that provided background knowledge for the interview process. Over the course of the eighteen months during which this study was conducted, I went to approximately one indie rock show,

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<sup>40</sup> Hayden, *Moving Careful*, Sonic Unyon Records compact disc SUNCD032 (1996).

three to four bands per show, per week at local venues that book indie rock music, primarily the Underground and the Casbah. I used participant observation as a tool to gain an understanding of the key players in the scene, i.e. venue bookers, prominent bands, and “die-hard” music fans. Band members, audience members and bar staff were observed in terms of cultural practices, their interactions with others, styles of dress, and vocabularies used. I also participated in three east coast tours with my band, and the recording of two albums during the duration of this project, which gave me first hand experience with other localities, scene members and processes.

Conducting ethnographic research as part of this study has allowed me to explore subcultural issues that were not explored fully in previous studies, such as fashion practices like wearing band tee shirts and pins. In addition to participant observation, I sought out primary subjects with significant positions in the scene, including venue promoters, label owners, writers, and record store workers, bar staff and/or band members. Secondary subjects responded via email to an “Indie Rock Research Study” poster displayed inside and outside local venues, on information boards at local record stores and on information boards on the McMaster University campus. These posting areas were selected, because they are places frequented by members of the community under study. Subjects who responded to the poster self-identified themselves as appropriate research subjects for the study by answering “yes” to any or all three example questions on the poster: 1) Do you like independent music? 2) Do you see bands perform? 3) Do you play in a band? These questions were used to interest a scene participant into become involved in the study as well as differentiate people involved in the scene from people who were not. The subjects

ranged in involvement in the scene from band members to people who had only seen a few live shows. (The poster is included as Appendix A.)

Although it was not the intent of the research, “snowball sampling” ended up being an additional method of gaining subjects. After completing an interview, many subjects recommended someone they knew whom they thought would give a “good interview” and thus benefit the study. It was often the case that these recommended subjects were already part of the study, which revealed that the scene is small enough that people know each other, and that the interviewees agreed on who were the dominant figures in the scene.

I conducted twenty-four face-to-face, semi-structured, interviews. The interviews lasted one hour, on average, but they ranged from as little as forty minutes to as long as three hours, depending upon the subject’s involvement in the scene and interest in the study. I conducted the interviews either on the McMaster campus or at a location convenient for the subject, usually a coffee shop in downtown Hamilton. Efforts were made to optimize the level of participation, and quality of information provided by subjects by not conducting interviews at live music venues, which would have provided a loud and distracting interview setting.

The primary and secondary subjects were both male (sixteen) and female (eight) between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine. Ten subjects were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, six subjects were between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-six, three subjects were between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty years and five subjects were above thirty years of age. I also spoke to a supplementary group of informants while doing participant observation at live music venues. These informants ranged from people

in bands, either performing on that bill or in attendance, to people working at the venue as door people, bartenders, busboys/busgirls, and promoters.

Each interview participant received a Letter of Information outlining the objectives of the research study and written consent was obtained from each interview participant. (See Appendix B for the Letter of Information and Appendix C for the Consent Form.) Many subjects inquired as to why written consent was required to “talk about music,” but all obliged after a brief explanation of research ethics. This fits into the DIY ethic of the scene, as interviewees unanimously reported that the scene operates within the narrative of people doing what they do because they enjoy it and that it is based on social alliances and not formalities; thus, they found it peculiar that I would propose such a formal arrangement.

I agree with Holly Kruse when she states that the “relationship between music consumers and producers and how this relationship defines participants in scenes needs to be problematised.”<sup>41</sup> The meaning of indie rock practice for producers is analyzed in this study of the Hamilton indie rock scene, which supplies a new look at relationships and practices within local and interlocal scenes. My approach helps address the gaps in research on this subculture as it draws upon my experiential understanding of the subculture. My personal experience in the scene provided me with background knowledge that led to a casual style of conversation during the interview process rather than a formal question and answer process, because many of the interviewees were familiar musicians and scene members. This advantage produced exciting results with regard to what

information scene participants shared, how candidly they shared it, and how these findings address issues of identity, community, and cultural production and consumption.

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<sup>41</sup> Kruse. "Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture." *Popular Music* 12, 1 (1993): 39.



## CHAPTER 2

### **Home: Hamilton as Local Scene<sup>1</sup>**

One thing that everyone can agree on about Hamilton is that it is a pretty dirty town, it has a pretty raw sound...at least I don't see a lot of poppy artists coming out of Hamilton. There's a lot of screaming people, but I don't know if that's frustration or if that's what they enjoy, or if it's just what I see coming out of Hamilton...really honest Rock and Roll.<sup>2</sup>

The city of Hamilton is situated between Toronto and Niagara Falls along the shore of Lake Ontario. Residents and non-residents alike often refer to Hamilton as the "Hammer" or "Steel town." Steel remains the primary industry of the city and employs a substantial percentage of the population of Hamilton. The gritty nature of the steel industry is imbedded in the city's landscape, environment, history, culture and people. According to interview respondents, this gritty aesthetic can also be found in the music:

I would associate Hamilton with some sort of an aggressiveness, maybe a quirky or downtrodden aggressiveness...I just think of the culture of Hamilton and the environment of Hamilton, I think of that as represented by music, a downtrodden, suffering kind of thing.<sup>3</sup>

Despite Hamilton's gritty and working class character, most participants in its indie scene are relatively privileged in terms of education and other markers of social identity. It's not steel workers making this music: it's college kids choosing to be a part of the culture.

When asked to describe Hamilton's indie audience, people often began their description with a level of formal education. Nearly all of the interviewees were pursuing or already held post-secondary diplomas and/or degrees, and a few were taking part-time post-secondary courses at the time of interview. "I'd say that they're primarily educated,

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<sup>1</sup> Lou Barlow, *Emoh*, Merge Records compact disc MRG254 (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Interviewee T, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 March 2005.

young people under the age of thirty-five, I would say primarily white, primarily heterosexual, primarily male, and I guess artistic probably too.”<sup>4</sup>

This description is representative of what most interviewees cite as true and was reflected by my interview sample. All of the sixteen males interviewed for this study fit that description. Similarly, all of the females interviewed were white, heterosexual and artistic. One promoter who has booked indie rock bands for nearly a decade explained:

The kind of people that we’re talking about here are people that need to be stimulated intellectually, they’re too smart to be brainwashed by somebody. They’re able to get away from all that brainwashing entity that’s involved in commercial music.<sup>5</sup>

With this level of homogeneity, age - not gender, class or education - became the most significant factor in determining differing attitudes. Most questions received two contrasting responses. Subjects aged eighteen to twenty-one often responded differently from subjects over twenty-two. Age affects how interviewees experienced the scene differently as it affects their attendance at venues and the significance of other institutions differs for members of different age categories. For example, the older scene members often worked at record stores and clubs, whereas younger members were patrons of such institutions. Venues, record stores and labels are the primary institutions in indie rock social interaction. This chapter will outline the importance of each institution and how they relate to the local scene and scene participants in Hamilton. This is an important part of this study as it displays the multi-function of scene participants and how their interactions represent a communal interest in the development of the culture. An example

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<sup>3</sup> Interviewee J, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 February 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Interviewee L, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 February 2005.

of this is one scene participant who played in a band, attended shows as an audience member, and also worked as a bus boy at a local venue. These types of involvements represent different personal investments, such as creativity, time and money that attribute to scene members gaining a sense of identity from their involvements. This is important because such institutions exist in other localities and highlight issues of interlocality, making this look at a local indie music scene a microcosm of what is happening on a much larger scale.

Fifteen out of the twenty-four people interviewed for this project called Hamilton their hometown. Of the remaining participants, five interviewees lived in surrounding cities and four were pursuing post-secondary education in Hamilton. All of the interviewed subjects were involved in Hamilton's scene. The majority of the people interviewed for this project lived in the downtown neighbourhood, where the independent rock venues are located, along with the majority of independent record stores, vintage clothing shops, instrument stores, and tattoo shops - shops patronized, according to scene members, by the people involved in this culture. It is important to note that these venues and shops are within a small geographic area, because the majority of people in this subculture do not have vehicles and prefer walking or public transit to owning a vehicle.

Both age categories place an emphasis on the eclectic nature of the music being produced in Hamilton.

I think Hamilton allows for so much experimentation that every band ends up sounding quite distinct. I wouldn't say there's a characteristic Rock and Roll sound here, because the majority of people here don't care and it's a very

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

small unit of people that comes to support this music and those people are very open-minded. It's a very underground thing.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Fence Feels its Post: Institutions<sup>7</sup>**

In *Site and Sound*, Holly Kruse states, “Live musical performance is arguably the most immediate means available for disseminating college music, since it locates performer and audience within the same physical space.”<sup>8</sup> Cohen suggests that a physical space is also a social space, one in which audience members and musicians are united in common activity.<sup>9</sup> Through attending live performances, participants are aware of a shared musical knowledge and taste; furthermore, audience members and performers often know each other. Audience members at concerts are often musicians themselves, or are friends of the band on-stage, and consequently support a sense of equality and unity between audience and performers.<sup>10</sup>

Subjects relayed the excitement they felt in sharing new bands and music with their friends. “I try to bring people to shows because I think they’ll have a good time. Once you see it yourself, you just start coming back.”<sup>11</sup> As Tom Carson found in Louisville, the gig “was a celebration for both the band and the audience.” He claimed he “found what so many people had always looked for in rock and roll, and almost never found - the sense that where I was, right at that moment, was the center of the universe, the single most

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewee K, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 15 February 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Frog Eyes, *The Folded Palm*, Absolutely Kosher Records compact disc AK043 (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Holly Kruse, *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing: 2003). 102.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 102.

<sup>10</sup> Holly Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Interviewee F, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 February 2005.

important place in the world to be.”<sup>12</sup> This view of the live show, as a special and important experience, was confirmed in my research findings. In general, interviewees focused on attending shows as entertainment, yet always included something about learning. Here we see informal education also being celebrated. One interviewee claimed, “It’s about a good time, it’s about enjoying music and learning.”<sup>13</sup> Interviewees emphasized the importance of the live venue as a social space to learn about music. With most bills including three to four bands in a night, and with regulars cycling through a few clubs in a night, indie rock audiences tend to be exposed to a lot of new music at live music venues.

Interviewees spoke at length about shows they attended and sometimes about how a certain show was sadly unattended. Most shows in Hamilton do not sell out; the ones that do are often bills with headlining touring bands. The appeal of something that *shouldn’t be happening* such as a well-known indie band playing a small venue in a city like Hamilton is a dichotomy music fans valued. In her case study of the Liverpool rock scene, Sara Cohen notes that the majority of local acts drew only between fifteen to twenty patrons.<sup>14</sup> A similar trend could be observed in alternative music clubs in most United States’ college towns in the 1980s and 1990s and continues in independent rock shows in Hamilton, Ontario, in 2005.<sup>15</sup>

The function of the music venue as social space is emphasized by how often people attend shows. Most interviewees claimed that they “only go to bars that feature live

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<sup>12</sup> Tom Carson “Stop ‘N’ Rock,” *The Village Voice* (3-9 December 1980): 48.

<sup>13</sup> Interviewee G, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 February 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool*, 104.

music,” with most interviewees seeing live music “two to three times a week.”<sup>16</sup> The difference between the younger age category and the older age category was highlighted by a contrast in responses regarding how frequently they attended live shows.

Younger interviewees tended to go out often: “It’s sporadic, this week twice, sometimes seven nights a week,” and, “I go to probably, more shows than I should go to, ...in a month, I’d say five or six.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, many of the older scene members said they didn’t experiment as much as they had in the past. They no longer go out “just based on hearsay, ‘Oh this band’s supposed to be really good, check them out.’”<sup>18</sup> Others explained how their work affected the amount of shows they attend.

Not as often as I once did, not as often as I’d like. I think I probably peaked from 1990-1995, when I’d be at shows at least three nights a week, many of them out of town, while I was in university. I may check out three a month now, primarily because my job carries a lot of overtime.<sup>19</sup>

The participants’ financial situation also affected the frequency they were able to attend shows. Most of the younger audience members (aged eighteen to twenty-one) were still attending post-secondary education and living either with their parents or on their own with the assistance of a student loan. The older participants were living on their own and often working to pay off student loans. This, as well as a difference in experience and taste refinement affected their attendance. Younger fans attended more shows and older fans attended fewer. Patrons claimed that “touring bills are usually ten to twelve bucks,

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<sup>15</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Interviewee R, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 March 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Interviewee U, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 March 2005; and Interviewee M, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 February 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewee N, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 February 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee S, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 11 March 2005.

and a local bill is usually five to seven bucks.”<sup>20</sup> All interviewees agreed that these charges are fair; many of the audience members are musicians themselves and know how much it costs a band financially to acquire instruments, transportation, and time off work to play gigs.

Fans therefore respect bands for the sacrifices made to tour through cities, especially smaller cities. It is not uncommon for a fan of a band to try to convince other people to attend their show. According to respondents, word of mouth is the most important way of obtaining information about a band or a show. One might read about a band in a local weekly paper and/or hear their music on local college radio, but word of mouth is the chief method of promotion, for someone who enjoyed a live show might recommend the band to a friend the next time they play in town. The valuing of personal opinion has value and relates to the social ties that developed between participants in the independent music scene. Live music venues are the primary location for socialization amongst indie rock fans, and are important institutions within indie scenes.<sup>21</sup>

Interview subjects agreed unanimously that small venues are ideal for watching bands perform. Not only does a small venue place the audience and performers closer spatially, creating an intimate environment, but the capacity of smaller venues limits the experience to no more than a few hundred people (although most shows have a smaller turn-out than that).

What I know I like about it is I can go to a local bar and watch it with ten other people, twenty other people, *maybe* one hundred other people, but it’s such a small intimate environment, that I feel like ‘Wow, for seven dollars I just experienced something when they could be playing to 40,000 people’ and I wouldn’t bother to go, because I don’t like a big crowd.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interviewee U.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee T.

I like to sit, when I go to a bar or to see a band. I can't stand and be shoulder to shoulder with people in huge arenas just to see a half hour's worth of a crap set when I'd rather be in an intimate environment.<sup>23</sup>

Hamilton has two main clubs, the Underground and the Casbah, which hold a few hundred people each. Like most Canadian cities, it also has local pubs that act as music venues with smaller capacities and an almost makeshift feeling.

I think it has to do with the unavoidable intimacy of that situation, that the band and audience have a more visceral give and take happening. It works better for young, unproven acts and divergent or aberrant material. That can be the only way you actually get to see it performed.<sup>24</sup>

It's kind of like an anti-star type thing, because nobody's like, "This is the star, this is the audience." You have the opportunity to talk to whom you're seeing if you want to talk to them.<sup>25</sup>

When you go see an independent band...a band that you have some of their music at home and you really enjoy it and you go see them play to thirty people and you talk to them at the show, it's much more personal than an audience of 10,000. When it's shared with that many people you can't really take it personally, but when you're one of the few in the room it can be special.<sup>26</sup>

Over half of the people interviewed for this project played in bands at the time of interview, and those not in a band at the time of interview, even those who were not musicians, claimed to have wanted to play in a band. The fact that fifty percent of the scene members interviewed are musicians themselves demonstrates that active cultural production - performing music - is given privilege over consuming mass culture. This reduces the distance between performers and audiences, since other performers compose a

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<sup>23</sup> Interviewee R.

<sup>24</sup> Interviewee X, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 March 2005.; and interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 March 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Interviewee M.

<sup>26</sup> Interviewee A, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 1 February 2005.



portion of the audience. Further, as Sara Cohen observes, the gap between performers and audiences can be narrowed by interpersonal contact that takes place at venues during the off stage time, before and after sets and shows.<sup>27</sup> The DIY perspective is evident in the lack of distance between performer and audience; intimacy within the live performance environment is often heightened by shared practices, like music collecting, which serve as markers of knowledge of, and interest in, the music.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, a concert does not consist of skilled musicians on stage while unskilled audience members watch them perform; rather, it is a case of musicians playing to other musicians: a concert becomes a production for producers.

Touring bands play an important role in the production of this culture. Most major label touring bands stay in hotels, but the financial constraints of indie bands, adherence to indie ideals, and interest in community often lead touring bands to be housed by a local band on the bill. The courtesy is often re-paid when the local band in turn tours in the hometown of the visiting band; thus, the construction of community within the indie rock subculture extends from bands to other bands. Other people in the subculture also participate in the housing of touring bands, with some bands asking during their set whether anyone has space for them to sleep for the night. In the world of indie rock tours, every dollar counts: if a band can save the seventy-five dollars a hotel would cost, they often opt to sleep on someone's couch or floor. The hosts, whether band or scene members, often take their "visitors" to their local record shops, studios, music shops and vintage stores, reflecting a communal interest in such forms of shared culture. Although

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<sup>27</sup> Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool*, 40.

many are commercial venues, they are often of an underground nature. The people who work at such shops are often familiar faces or friends of the bands, and again, the sense of an underground community is strengthened.

The respect among indie participants for touring bands creates a co-operative atmosphere at venues: “I’d like to think that it is welcoming, that it is a place where people would like to go without being ridiculed or hassled or stared down or beat up.”<sup>29</sup> Participants see venues in Hamilton as welcoming social spaces - some interviewees contrasted the Hamilton scene to scenes in other cities, which to them often appear intimidating: “I think Hamilton is a lot more open and the scene is so diverse that you don’t have that edgy, kind of prickly, general feel and you’re not going to have anyone looking down at you.”<sup>30</sup> One female interviewee offered a different perspective, however. She said that live clubs were intimidating to her as a gender minority. “For younger people, it’s the same with girls, it’s the intimidation factor, like this is where all the older indie rocker people are hanging out and I’m intimidated.”<sup>31</sup> Here, a female scene member identifies with under-agers, who are both minorities in this tight and homogenous subculture, although it appears things are changing - for the under-agers.

Before June 1, 2004, when a by-law passed which banned smoking in public spaces, minors were not allowed into the city’s live music venues because patrons were permitted to smoke on the premises. Since the smoking by-law changed, more minors attend shows, play in bands and are present in the scene. One local club hosts early shows

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<sup>28</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 121.

<sup>29</sup> Interviewee O, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 February 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Interviewee U.

directed toward the under-age crowd, followed by late shows geared toward a nineteen-plus audience. Although minors are admitted to either show, the promoter books bands geared toward each group. Older interviewees were concerned at the beginning of the by-law change that they would essentially “lose their social turf” to an “all ages crowd” at the clubs they frequented. Older participants realized, however, how important getting involved in the music scene at a young age had been for them and were consequently willing to share their social space so that younger people can see shows and connect with people of similar interests and practices. This I would argue has reduced the intimidation factor that younger fans experienced when they were not permitted in venues as they now have the opportunity to attend shows and gain cultural knowledge and experience.

For promoters, having minors, as patrons can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. Bar sales are lower at all-ages shows, but the shows can be seen as investments in a future audience. Promoters book younger bands to open for more established bands: “The energy and enthusiasm of younger audiences is real, and it’s great to be able to allow younger bands the chance to play alongside more established bands or just enjoy them from the audience.”<sup>32</sup> The energy and creativity of younger bands led to their acceptance within the scene. Older participants and promoters have welcomed the new younger bands into the scene as opening bands and sometimes as headliners. This cross-generational atmosphere helps the younger generation of scene participants develop a body of experience surrounding indie cultural practice, and therefore helps the music scene thrive, by involving upcoming generations.

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<sup>31</sup> Interviewee D, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 4 February 2005.

Most older scene participants said they enjoy the financial benefits of having minors at shows, most of whom are high-school students, live at home, and have part-time jobs.

I think it's fantastic for bands, because right now I look at my life and the only access I have and the only time and energy I have to research new music is minimal compared to when I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. I had so much time to hang out and toss the word around so I think its fantastic that there is more underage people because they have more time to talk and form their own bands and form their own tastes and stuff.<sup>33</sup>

Minors pay the cover and purchase merchandise which helps performing bands financially, but also stands to help promote the future scene, "I started to go to shows young and I think if the city wants to support the independent music community they need to get people into it young, because for me it sort of became a lifestyle."<sup>34</sup>

If live venues are the heart of Hamilton's indie music scene, independent record stores are its daytime community centers, while the label Sonic Unyon has supported the coalescence of Hamilton's distinct musical aesthetic. Alternative music fans can purchase recorded music off the stage at live shows, but they can also obtain it from independent music shops. Holly Kruse finds independent record stores, along with clubs, to be the most visible sites of interaction within independent pop/rock music scenes. She states, "Within any given locality the stores that tend to have the greatest commitment to local alternative rock/pop, and to alternative rock/pop in general, are not the chain stores but are locally owned businesses."<sup>35</sup> The handful of independent record stores in downtown Hamilton reflects the number of indie music fans supporting such enterprises: Cheapies,

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<sup>32</sup> Interviewee X.

<sup>33</sup> Interviewee R.

<sup>34</sup> Interviewee A.

<sup>35</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 96.

Screamin' Mimi's, Dr. Disc, Sonic Unyon, and Reigning Sound. Five out of the twenty-four interviewees, four of whom played in local indie bands, worked in record stores. One band member explained that working in a record store helped him evolve into a "broad music listener."<sup>36</sup> Most of the independent record stores in Hamilton have hours of operation from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., or until "Whenever," in the case of the sign at Reigning Sound. As Barry Shank found in his study of popular music practice in Austin, Texas, this presence of active scene participants working behind the counter in Hamilton's local record stores creates a daytime community space for scene participants.<sup>37</sup>

For indie music scene participants, record stores are not merely retail outlets: they are spaces of social interaction and socialization. Kruse asserts that "customers often seek advice from, or seek to exchange knowledge with, store employees, and through this process learn not just about various artists, records, and genres, but also about the local music culture."<sup>38</sup> As the people working at local music stores are often musicians as well as scene members, they signify an informed position or authority on music. Employees in such stores often decide what music to stock and to play on the store's sound system; this reflects their taste, influences patrons, and, in some cases, helps shape the store's specialty in certain sub-genres. Unlike larger retail chain stores, independent record stores connect the local music to the local audience, often working in tandem with clubs: they often carry local bands' albums and EPs on consignment, provide handbills for local shows, sell tickets for shows as well as hold in-store performances by local and national acts. Record stores

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<sup>36</sup> Interviewee I, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 10 February 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 95.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

also provide poster boards for local bands and musicians to communicate: the postings generally include instruments for sale, and bands looking for new members. Like performance venues, record stores display upcoming show posters created and posted by band members and/or clubs and make available handbills, or pocket-size posters, on their counters.

### **Donut Rock City: The Hamilton Sound<sup>39</sup>**

Kruse defines regional sound as a particular geographical site of localized musical production involving particular common characteristics to the music. Although all of the subjects describe the current Hamilton scene as eclectic, they also agree upon unifying forces within the scene, particularly the presence of Sonic Unyon Records.

I think stepping back through the past decade or two there are currents or threads that come up in a lot of the Sonic Unyon bands. Bands like Gorp I think were really influential...and Golden Lake Diner, Sianspheric, Tristan Psionic. I would think that some of those threads might constitute a Hamilton Sound.<sup>40</sup>

Another interviewee supported this perspective,

I don't know that I feel that Hamilton has a scene per say, I think it did at one time with the emergence of Sonic Unyon [record company] and the bands that were on it. It felt like that was a scene because there was some common identifiers, some sort of ties between the bands.<sup>41</sup>

Both of these comments were made by members of the older age category and reflect commonalities between bands involved with Sonic Unyon, which helped constitute what they considered a Hamilton Sound. The bands mentioned above all shared similar

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<sup>39</sup> Tristan Psionic, *TPA Flight 028*, Sonic Unyon Records compact disc SUNCD028 (1996).

<sup>40</sup> Interviewee J.

production practices and established a national reputation for being hard working bands from a hard working city. Today, Sonic Unyon has a large distribution roster and does not have the same connection to local bands. The Sonic Unyon Record Company has been an important factor in the development of the Hamilton indie scene. It started in a spare room in 1992, “a glorified closet,” according to one of its partners.<sup>42</sup> The three young twenty-something men who started the company were university educated and playing in Tristan Psionic, a respected indie band from Hamilton. They “signed” friends’ bands and put out tapes, dropping them off at record stores on consignment on their tours across Canada and the United States. When they returned month’s later on subsequent tours, they visited these record stores again to deliver more new releases and pick up any money received from purchases. These kinds of personal connections between bands and record stores were the first threads that connected the now close web of musicians, record stores, venues and indie rock fans in different geographical locations. Many respondents viewed Sonic Unyon as a label that, by releasing music through a DIY approach and helping touring bands play shows in Hamilton, launched the Hamilton scene.<sup>43</sup> One label partner explained, “all the bands helped. Everybody helped put together cassettes and dubbing cassettes, everybody pitched in.” An older scene member expressed a similar perspective:

There were an umbrella of bands that were on the label that really were the nucleus of the indie rock scene in the ‘90s: bands like Sian, which later became Sianspheric, Shallow, which later became Shallow North Dakota, as well as Gorp and Golden Lake Diner (both defunct bands now). There was also, (what I feel was really important) was the high school music scene in the nineties. There was a lot of coffee house performances that were

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<sup>41</sup> Interviewee A.

<sup>42</sup> Interviewee P, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 20 February 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

organized at high schools, there was late night concerts in the gymnasiums, there was house shows, and...bands eventually got ballsy enough to propose to bars to have all-ages shows in the clubs and that was something that kind of happened at the same time that Sonic Unyon was developing, so you had this label and then you had these non-label bands that were kind of the opening bands for the bands on this label, so there was a relationship that was developed between it all. So, I think it was...the high school music scene that sort of established a realization that you could do this yourself and you didn't need to have some big venue company or big promotions company running something or for something to happen, they could do it themselves.<sup>44</sup>

When asked to describe the current Hamilton music scene, respondents unanimously described an eclectic scene involving a variety of bands, and often situated the bands historically within the development of the Hamilton music scene. Most respondents used the word “diverse” to describe the diversity of music being produced under the generic umbrella of indie rock. Their word choice does not reflect a diversity of race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender, as the overwhelming majority of scene participants are white, heterosexual males. Each interviewee spoke with respect about local artists and the scene, reflecting the personal value the scene provides them as well as their understanding of the music community. Describing the trajectory of Hamilton music and musicians, one interviewee pointed to the guitarist Ronnie Hawkins

I think it's that legacy that started with Ronnie and it just keeps getting passed on and on and on right down the line. There's a great respect in this city, and it doesn't always happen in other cities, for what has come before and it's because there is a community here. It's not like Vancouver or Toronto where the competition's huge, so musicians rely on each other a little bit. The way Tom Wilson and Dave Rave (both in their mid forties) look up to Jackie Washington, or Harrison Kennedy who is in his 60s, and Jackie's in his 80s. Then you got the Ride Theory kids and their folks who started out the folk scene thirty years ago. There's an intergenerational give and take here that you don't see in a lot of communities. You get Brad

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<sup>44</sup> Interviewee L.



[singer/guitarist] of the Marble Index watching bands like Junkhouse at Festival of Friends, and watching the way Tom Wilson does his stage thing even though Tom's twenty years older, that rubs off. That allows Brad to become a really good performer. Then you got the guys behind [bass and drums] doing really good guitar rock. And I don't know if that would have come out of a Queen West scene.<sup>45</sup>

This person describes the importance of local history and how the musical community functions in a different way from complementary scenes. This could be because Hamilton is large enough to have a decent music community, but small enough to maintain the sense of interconnectedness and history. Many respondents positioned the Hamilton indie scene in contrast to the Toronto scene, noting their choices to stay in Hamilton rather than moving to a bigger city. This is similar to what Tom Carson found in Louisville back in the 1980s, that for the bands and a good deal of the audience,

Staying in Louisville, doing what they do, is a matter of choice, as temporary or permanent as they want it to be, That the smart kids are now deciding to stay in their home town - assuming that they can say whatever they have to say right here, and drawing sustenance from the very culture, social hierarchy, and regional peculiarities they would normally be expected to flee - is, to me, among the most important things I found in Louisville.<sup>46</sup>

Most believe that because of the diversity of the music currently being produced in Hamilton, the only common characteristic is that the music is, "genuine because you can tell they're not jumping on trends, they're just doing what they want to do."<sup>47</sup> Reflecting on current bands in town, one interviewee explains:

I think Hamilton is pretty eclectic in its sound. I don't think that there's one particular sound that people call a Hamilton Sound ... Hamilton artists don't seem to get influenced too much by what the guy next door is doing. They do it themselves, the way they want to do it and if someone happens to like it

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<sup>45</sup> Interviewee W, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 15 March 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Carson, "Stop 'N' Rock": 44.

<sup>47</sup> Interviewee K.

that's great, but if they don't that's fine too. You don't see a certain sound develop like Toronto or Montreal or Buffalo even, and then that bleeds into Hamilton and the way the music is made here...because they're not influenced by larger markets, and a lot of the times it lacks commercial success because of it...I can name all kinds of bands that locally, in Hamilton are highly successful, there's no denying they're good, and the only reason they're not succeeding in Toronto is because their sound is not considered a hip thing in Toronto at the time.<sup>48</sup>

The Hamilton scene as a local community is rooted in its eclectic history and is contributes to the development of people's narratives of their identities within it.

### **Storytelling: Narrative Histories<sup>49</sup>**

The above discussion relates to the two important means by which subjects located themselves within the social space of independent pop/rock music scenes, according to Kruse: genre identification and personal narrative histories of involvement with the genre. This study, in congruence with Kruse, found subjects locating themselves within the physical spaces, social relationships, and history of Hamilton's music scene.<sup>50</sup> Subjects used their personal narrative histories to locate themselves within the social space of the scene: "I used to go to all the Sonic Unyon shows ages and ages ago, I used to be an X Club [now defunct all-ages club] guy, one of the regulars, who saw all the Hayden shows and sat on the floor."<sup>51</sup> Implicit in these personal narratives was the idea that they constituted a connection with a history and a set of practices, and situated these identities both locally and interlocally. This positioning of one's personal narrative history within a

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<sup>48</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>49</sup> Belle & Sebastian, *Storytelling*, Matador compact disc OLE-512 (2002).

<sup>50</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Interviewee I.

local history of practices helped individuals define themselves as more authentic, and more importantly, more marginal, and in essence more connected to related marginal scenes happening interlocally.

One of the common traits between the people interviewed for this project was that the majority of them became involved in the local music scene young, between roughly fourteen and fifteen years of age. Like the scene member who reflected on his personal narrative history as an “X-Club guy” who “saw all the Hayden shows,” the majority of scene members started going to all-ages venues, such as the X-Club or Transit Union Hall, to see local bands as well as touring bands perform. My younger interviewees did not have the opportunity to attend these venues; they attend all-ages shows at the Underground. The type of music featured at these venues does not appear on mainstream radio, but rather on local independent stations at colleges and universities, the types of stations that members of the scene were exposed to in their younger years and have continued to patronize.

The success of local bands depends upon communication among students in high school, college, and university.

At the local band level, it’s definitely because of the school being a communication system to keep their fans informed, I think at the non-local level, it still holds true, mostly because it’s young people that embrace this music. As I said, it’s an under-thirty-five-year-old-culture.<sup>52</sup>

Subjects repeatedly stressed the weight of “word of mouth” advertising through people involved in the culture.

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<sup>52</sup> Interviewee L.

I was lucky, like fourteen or fifteen, it was just hanging out with the right groups of people and everybody I knew was playing guitar, bass, drums, listening to all kinds of stuff I hadn't heard on the radio like old Eric's Trip, Tristan Psionic, all those guys.<sup>53</sup>

When asked what holds their interest in indie music, most subjects described the “excitement of the unknown.”<sup>54</sup> One subject aligned his first experience with indie music with his discovery of non-commercial radio in Hamilton,

I felt like I was learning about something that not too many people were learning about and I knew a secret that a lot of people didn't know about so I felt like I was truly getting into something. I knew that if I were to talk to people about what I've been listening to lately, most of the people wouldn't know what I was talking about.<sup>55</sup>

This underground knowledge made this scene member feel like a “specialist,” possessing knowledge and experience in a non-mainstream cultural practice. Subjects described the value of following a band's development and anticipating releases: “When you get into a band that you really like, you can't wait for the next thing to come out, because it's like ‘Oh it's going to be like this but even better, or have a little twist in it,’ so there's always something to look forward to.”<sup>56</sup>

Subjects were asked about what artists, indie and otherwise, are important. My assumptions were that the question would prompt people to describe artists, indie or otherwise, they considered important to the general history of the music. However, most subjects listed bands and albums that were important in their own personal narrative histories: “For me personally, Sebadoh's *Bake Sale*, Sonic Youth; *Dirty*, Dinosaur Jr.'s

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<sup>53</sup> Interviewee R.

<sup>54</sup> Interviewee X.

<sup>55</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>56</sup> Interviewee D.

*Without a Sound*, Eric's Trip's *Love Tara* were albums important in my youth.”<sup>57</sup>

Although each subject had a list of bands they considered important within their personal histories, there were certain musicians and bands that were common among the majority of subjects. The understanding of certain key bands in the canon of indie rock is central in locating oneself within the musical tradition of independent rock music. It aligns with Kruse's findings:

Indie pop stresses melody and song structure, and is largely defined historically by a knowledge and appreciation of certain (mainly non-local) bands and musicians; and while you might trace your “guitar pop” tastes back to the Beatles or the Beach Boys, most commonly cited as the mythic founder of this genre is Alex Chilton, and specifically his early 1970's Memphis band Big Star.<sup>58</sup>

Kruse found that subjects cited influences from obscure to mainstream (i.e. Beatles, Beach Boys); however, subjects involved in this study listed bands of a more obscure nature, and put more of an emphasis on the quantity and the constant newness of the music to which they listen: “The list could go on forever, and whatever I came up with I would only change it later.”<sup>59</sup>

Interviewees described how their listening tastes evolved: “It's a little like browsing in a record store. Something ignites an interest, and that travels out in forked patterns. It's happened that way again and again.”<sup>60</sup> One member explained, “As I get

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<sup>57</sup> Interviewee A.

<sup>58</sup> Kruse. “Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture.” *Popular Music* 12, 1 (1993): 36.

<sup>59</sup> Interviewee X.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

older, I listen to a lot more stuff that I wouldn't have listened to before."<sup>61</sup> With this exploration of music often comes a critical perspective:

When I was a kid I was the guy watching MuchMusic, so I don't think there's anything wrong with that intrinsically, it's just, when you become more critical, you start to find things you don't like in it anymore, and I think you kind of grow away from it.<sup>62</sup>

Just as most subjects agreed that there are advantages to getting into the scene at a young age, they also described how their listening taste changed or developed. One subject summed it up, ["Tastes get refined."<sup>63</sup>] Another described a position similar to that of the majority of subjects interviewed:

I'd like to think that now I just listen to good music, because there was a time when I first started going to shows where it seemed cool to like independent bands and that held value sort of in and of itself, that a band was independent and that made a band sort of cooler or acceptable...and you would maybe forgive poor song writing or recording quality because of that and...I know that it doesn't hold a lot of weight anymore. Because I have been going to shows for so long, I tend to find out about independent bands, but I don't need to impress anyone by liking to independent music anymore.<sup>64</sup>

One subject goes one step further to say the importance of getting into indie rock at a young age as, "Sometimes when you're younger, music that's not as good sounds better. So you kind of support those bands that aren't that great in the beginning."<sup>65</sup> Through the experience of attending shows and seeing numerous bands perform and existing in an indie rock scene, one develops a sense of what quality music and bands are about.

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<sup>61</sup> Interviewee U.

<sup>62</sup> Interviewee K.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Interviewee A.

<sup>65</sup> Interviewee H, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 9 February 2005.

I used to like music with a lot more energy in it, the louder and the more you could dance around and push people around the better, because we could mosh or whatever we did (we were stupid then). Now I appreciate softer stuff more and really good lyrics...I guess I have a lot more of an appreciation for artists now than I did. It was more about just having fun. It was more about ‘what can I listen to when I want to party?’ and now its more about “what am I really going to get something out of? What am I really going to enjoy? What’s going to make me feel all kinds of different emotions” and not just “Woo hoo.”<sup>66</sup>

This interviewee stated:

The thing about Hamilton’s music scene is...people tend to think of it as being very one-dimensional. People tend to have the opinion (and sometimes it’s justified) that Hamilton can’t do anything other than indie rock.<sup>67</sup>

This person explained how there is electronic music and hip hop music coming out of Hamilton, but was frustrated that outsiders tend to think of Hamilton as a one-dimensional, indie rock city because of Sonic Unyon and the string of indie rock bands to come out of Hamilton.

Institutions such as Sonic Unyon, record stores and venues create a sense of place within the local Hamilton scene. The existence of a local sound is related to the city’s institutions and history of indie rock. Participant’s personal narrative histories are a product of involvement in the scene and are related to issues of social practice, authenticity, investment and identity as discussed in chapter 3.

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<sup>66</sup> Interviewee D.

<sup>67</sup> Interviewee F.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **All Dressed Up: Practices and Identity<sup>1</sup>**

##### **I Smell a Rat: Authenticity<sup>2</sup>**

One of the most important findings of this project was around the sense of the authentic within this music scene. Many of the interviewees described authenticity, the notion of “honest Rock and Roll” as a positive quality in music: “I think the heart of it is, it’s genuine, it’s an authentic art form even if it’s not high art, it’s just genuine.”<sup>3</sup> Theorists have remarked for years that these people celebrate indie rock as authentic music – my question was why these participants view the music and the culture as genuine and how this culture celebrates it. Musicians, promoters, writers and fans alike, described indie music as authentic; genuine, honest, true, real. Indie music can be interpreted as authentic because of the apparent coherence between sound, style, performance, and production. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman outlines how when an individual presents him/herself before others, his/her performance tends to incorporate and exemplify the ascribed values of the society.<sup>4</sup> The expected consistency between appearance, manner and setting, assists in creating a sense of the authentic in indie rock practice.

This sense of the authentic could be interpreted in contrast to mainstream popular music, where the often slick production, marketing campaigns and music are not entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Thrush Hermit, *Smart Bomb*, Murderecoreds compact disc MURCD004 (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Sebadoh, *Harmacy*, Sub Pop Records compact disc SPCD370 (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Interviewee K, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 15 February 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959),



the creations of the artist him/herself. ] The fact that all of the subjects agreed that indie music is authentic relates to why they invest so much time, and energy, and money into this music culture – they believe in it. [ They believe in the music itself, they believe in the people making the music, they believe in the process by which this music is created, distributed and produced, and they believe in the system within which these people operate. ] These people function within a network of indie cultural production, which operates, by and large, outside of the mainstream music industry, which involves a division of labour, where the marketers do the marketing and the distributors do the distributing. In indie rock, the band's work encompasses all aspects of the work, from the creative to the business. DIY cultural practice therefore positions itself as rooted in issues of control and accountability. In an age of pre-packaged, American Idol stars, this type of grass roots culture and musical production and consumption are of increasing importance.

Cotton Seiler describes the indie subculture's cynicism about the commercial mainstream as incompletely concealing romanticism about its own home-grown product.<sup>5</sup> I agree, as participants celebrated this romanticism and described how DIY active music production and authenticity creates a sense of unity amongst indie rock scene participants. One musician explained, [ "I think the [indie] music is played for more honourable reasons, the artists don't yet have dollar signs in their eyes. They're playing for fun, hoping that someone likes it, at least one person. It just makes it more intimate; more honest music." ]<sup>6</sup>

This ideal of participants getting involved in the indie scene and making lifestyle changes was reflected in interviewees' responses. Many participants explained the reason

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<sup>5</sup> Cotton Seiler, "Indie Rock in Louisville," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13, 2 (2001): 191.

for continuing to attend shows was for both the music and the social connections with other people in attendance: “The people that you meet and associate with in going to those venues become your friends and you have that in common - indie music.”<sup>7</sup> This sense of shared musical interest is reflected in social interactions, “I think with the bands that I enjoy seeing, come the kind of people that I enjoy because we have that in common.”<sup>8</sup> Participants spoke of the sense of community that evolves from friends made from shared interests, “Working at the record store, I meet a lot of people that I have also seen at shows or people that might have seen me. It’s just getting to know people, getting to make friends.”<sup>9</sup> These responses align with the findings of Holly Kruse that this type of music offers participants a certain set of social practices - practices of consumption, of production, of interaction - that build a sense of community.<sup>10</sup> Respondents described how they placed value on this community of shared taste. Scene participants identified with the “outsider” status linked to indie culture, participated in social practices that foster a sense of “outsider” identity, leading to the recognition that being outsiders is as “valid a definition of community as anything else.”<sup>11</sup>

Interviewees unanimously responded that their lifestyle is influenced by the music they listen to. Most described music as their primary source of entertainment. One interviewee claimed, “Music is their [scene members] primary reason for entertainment and often so much so that all the non-entertainment things in their life are influenced or

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewee N.

<sup>7</sup> Interviewee K.

<sup>8</sup> Interviewee T, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 March 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Interviewee M, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 February 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Kruse. “Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture.” *Popular Music* 12, 1 (1993): 38.

affected by that interest in that music.”<sup>12</sup> He calls himself, and people who fall under this description, music “passioneers.” Each respondent had his or her own personal version of this story. Each respondent became interested once exposed to the music or the scene, and then got increasingly involved, whether in a band, working at a club, record store or just attending more shows. With increased involvement, a sense of community developed and was made visible by common practices connecting all of the interviewees. This finding is ultimately solidified by the common social codes and practices involved in the scene which assist members in forming a sense of identity in relation to the scene. Social practices, fashion, and lifestyle are all factors that contribute to the personal investment associated with participation in indie rock culture.

### **Round-n-round: Sharing Practices<sup>13</sup>**

All of the people that I interviewed said that they share the music they like with others, and enjoyed the feeling they got when sharing music they think is good. The modes of sharing included bringing a friend to see a live show, recommending a college radio station, making a mix tape or mix CD of a variety of artists for a friend, sending them a link to a website, and lending them CD’s from their personal collection. “I like when people share music with me so of course I’m going to share it with other people.”<sup>14</sup> “I think for a lot of people it’s inherent to the act of appreciation, wanting to share that

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Carson “Stop ‘N’ Rock,” *The Village Voice* (3-9 December 1980): 44.

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee L, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 February 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Barlow, Lou. *Emoh*. Merge Records compact disc MRG254, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee M, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 February 2005.

discovery, that indefinable buzz you get from a powerful piece of music.”<sup>15</sup> Interviewees spoke of these modes of sharing music as being part of a particular set of social practices.

Most respondents agreed that “shows are a good way to meet friends and you join groups of friends with similar interests.”<sup>16</sup> Emphasis was put on the shared experience between people at shows and the sense of camaraderie between people with similar taste. “If you’re wearing an obscure band tee [shirt], and someone cute comes up to you and is like, ‘you like that band?’ ...It helps.”<sup>17</sup> Here we see how social connections can develop because of shared subcultural knowledge, within a locality as well as between localities as well. One touring musician stated that he “could go to Vancouver and find people with really similar taste to someone in Halifax and their house has, not the same things, but sort of similar.”<sup>18</sup> A participant explained, “It’s an entire way of doing things, an entire way of dressing, an entire way of socializing.”<sup>19</sup>

These sharing practices are important to DIY culture as they serve as a DIY form of promotion for bands. This differs from music promoted in mainstream promotional campaigns with commercials, glossy posters and free stickers. These kinds of commercial music activity repel indie fans as they do not align with the DIY cultural practices. Many of the people interviewed discussed their thoughts on indie bands that had signed to major labels, usually leaving the indie fan with a sense of abandonment. It appears that for these people, part of the satisfaction of appreciating indie music is through helping the bands.

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<sup>15</sup> Interviewee S, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 11 March 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Interviewee U, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 March 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Interviewee F, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 February 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewee J, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 February 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee D, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 4 February 2005.

When a band gets signed, the fans help is no longer needed and the band is branded as a sell-out.

The practice of making mix CDs and giving them to friends is an important part of the scene. Interviewees spoke about the motivation for doing so, how often they made CD's for friends, and the process itself. One respondent called himself a "die-hard mixed-tape philanthropist."<sup>20</sup> Another described how he makes mixes for himself "all the time, almost daily, just to have stuff that I can listen to at school, in my office, when I'm driving."<sup>21</sup> The motivation for sharing is generally to expose someone to new things but also to promote bands. One respondent stated that people generally include "obscure stuff that you like that you think is underrated" on their CD's.<sup>22</sup> Generally, the process of selecting bands and songs highlights what they are listening to at the time. Respondents agreed that it is important to customize the selection of bands and songs according to the taste of the person receiving it. "You have to pick stuff that they'd like. My one friend is into a lot of hip hop stuff so I try to pick stuff with a lot of bass, and another friend might be into something a little slower so I pick stuff like that."<sup>23</sup>

This careful consideration of musical elements to suit the recipient reflects a sense of musical understanding and underlying motivation to satisfy the listener but also to promote bands. One respondent suggested:

You might want to include bands that you've gone to see together, and to remind you of fun times with your friends, you'll include songs from artists

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<sup>20</sup> Interviewee X, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 March 2005.; and interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 March 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Interviewee F.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Interviewee S.

you want to them to be introduced to, so there's a lot on introducing bands that are kind of similar to what you already listen to, the anchor of what they like, and then from there, if they like that then the next time you can stray a little further.<sup>24</sup>

Others described a more detailed process

Usually I start compiling songs in my head of songs I'd want to put on and then I use my computer (very rarely will I download things). It's usually from music that I own. I put the songs on my computer as wave files and then (lately I've been normalizing the volumes first so that all the songs are sort of at the same volume) I try to put them in some sort of sequence and then maybe edit it a little bit.<sup>25</sup>

The respondent puts substantial effort into creating a mix CD for a friend, much like the mix tape efforts of Rob Gordon in the indie cult film *High Fidelity*.<sup>26</sup> Another interviewee even used the movie in his description of his mix tape efforts. "You see *High Fidelity* and the process he gets into...I'm like 'I like this song and this song and this song and hopefully you like it too'...It's all sharing."<sup>27</sup>

Most respondents claimed to not expect a mix in return for all of this effort. I argue that the person who creates and gives a mix to someone else gains cultural capital as they are generally introducing at least some new music to the listener and providing a custom compilation tailored to the recipient's listening history, demonstrating mastery and knowledge. Others have had people request a mix: "Some people have asked me to make them tapes, people who aren't really as into music as I might be, and they just want to get into new stuff."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interviewee D.

<sup>25</sup> Interviewee A, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 1 February 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Dir. Stephen Frears, *High Fidelity*, Walt Disney DVD. (2000).

<sup>27</sup> Interviewee R, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 March 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Interviewee F.

Another common practice of indie music scene participants is wearing headphones in public. Most of the participants interviewed often wore headphones. The reason for this is two-fold: first, their fondness for music, and second, the advantage of blocking out “outside” sound. “I just like listening to music. It’s kind of the personal space of it, listening to music in public, you can kind of shut out everything.”<sup>29</sup> Another respondent explained, “I like being surrounded by music...sometimes people say hi to me and I don’t know what they are saying and I just sort of smile and nod.”<sup>30</sup> One student illustrated the social implications of such practice.

In school, I’d rather not have to talk to anybody. You can just walk through the halls...you’re so tired, you don’t want to talk to anybody. You just put your headphones on and walk through the school and you don’t have to get bugged. But at the same time, after class I like to take the bus home so I can listen to my music and sit there.<sup>31</sup>

Here we see the effects of being at a show the night before, staying up late and getting up early to attend classes. This interviewee illustrates how wearing headphones represents the choice of music over social interactions; presumably, this is because he considers his social group to consist of show-going scene participants and not members of the broader society. A few older scene participants claimed to listen to headphones less than they used to, or not at all. Wearing headphones was more unique to indie culture before the iPod, which brought portable music to mainstream music listeners in numbers that make it increasingly difficult to identify someone as an indie music fan by their listening to music on headphones in public.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Interviewee C, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 3 February 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Interviewee G, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 February 2005.

Interviewees agreed that there are no social codes or practices that are essential to participating in the scene, although certain practices tend to be common. One of the most common practices is pre-drinking. Participants often have a few drinks at home or at the home of a friend before going to shows. This is more economical than purchasing all of an evening's drinks at a venue, but it also serves a social function. People often spend time with their closer friends at someone's home before going to a club where they socialize with more scene members and see bands play. Although interviewees claimed that indie rock is about the music, not the beer you drink, one local promoter claimed, "Indie rock people will lean towards regional brewery beer."<sup>32</sup> Ironically though, the most popular beer at his shows is Labatt 50, a major corporate product - he assumes this is due to availability.

### **I Don't Think We Should Ever Meet: Labels<sup>33</sup>**

The scene involves a group of people who attend indie rock shows regularly and other people who attend infrequently. Interviewees described a relationship between one's involvement in the scene and involvement in certain social practices as reflecting "authentic" practice versus "inauthentic" fan labels.

Theorist Paul Willis first applied the term homology to subculture in his work *Profane Culture*. He used it to describe the symbolic fit between the values and life-styles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns. He explores the orderliness of subcultures and how each part is

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<sup>32</sup> Interviewee L, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 February 2005.



organically related to other parts, and through the connection between them the subcultural member makes sense of the world.<sup>34</sup> In indie music culture, a homology exists between an alternative value system and the social practice of wearing band tee-shirts. DIY culture participant's making/listening to lo-fi music cohere as a way of life for indie fans. All of the interviewees commented on how their musical preferences have influenced their lifestyle choices. One experienced scene member spoke of some common traits of scene participants as including malnutrition. "They don't eat well because they're taking the money they should be buying groceries with and using it to buy records or cover charges."<sup>35</sup>

The majority of interviewees described regular members of the scene, or "rounders," as being musicians themselves and gave examples of how they "all tend to be very heavily involved and invested."<sup>36</sup> Other interviewees gave detailed descriptions of the "types" of people that go to these shows including common fashion trends, common social practices, and education:

Poor people. Drinking, smoking, I guess fashion wise, Value Village shoppers (if that could be a classification), not because of anything else besides lifestyle choices. They're in school or they just really don't want to work very much or they just want to play a lot of music as well and then just don't get a full time job. Intelligent people, people that, if they had taken some other direction in life and never been to an indie rock show and never knew what music was, that they could be sitting in their own office, running a corporation or something, because they are really intelligent. I think it's those kind of people that make sacrifices to go out to these shows, whether

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<sup>33</sup> Hayden, *Live at Convocation Hall*, Universal Music compact disc 22292 (2002).

<sup>34</sup> Dick Hebdige, "Style as Homology and Signifying Practice; 1979," in *On Record; Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 65.

<sup>35</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewee F.

they can afford it or not, to support. I think that's why it still exists in Hamilton, and I think that's why it's sad when there's *one really big show* and there's like 3-400 people there and you wonder "Where were you every other night this week when there was also a good show?" So I think it's the common people, the rounders for the music scene that are the common denominator and that's generally what they're like. They're not too concerned with anything else besides music.<sup>37</sup>

One interviewee defined a rounder to be "somebody who is a regular at a lot of different bars...that even in one night will go to the Casbah and the Underground and the Corktown, and work it all out so that they see every band they want to see at every show."<sup>38</sup> One promoter described these rounders/regulars as a shifting audience with out-of-town students living in Hamilton for the length of their post-secondary programs at Mohawk College or McMaster University.

I know that from a show promoters point of view there are regulars at my shows but they move in and out because of the age that we're talking about. We are talking primarily about college/university students, so you may only have them as customers for three or four years and then they're gone and new people replace them so it's tough to keep an idea of a number of people we're talking about. I think at any given time, there are maybe about one hundred people in Hamilton that you could bank on seeing in one of my two clubs more than once a week, but no more than one hundred.<sup>39</sup>

The sense of fans' ownership of indie music was heavily present during interviews. A musician pointed out the irony that, "there's a camaraderie about having something not be signed and not selling out but yet that's everyone's goal right?"<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, two of the older scene participants expressed concern with the sense of hypocrisy within indie subculture and cynicism about the commercial mainstream. One pointed out that people

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<sup>37</sup> Interviewee T.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>40</sup> Interviewee R.

embracing independent culture do not automatically reflect independent thought. He claimed that “people still follow trends, get brainwashed, they’re just being brainwashed and train followed by less-corporate people. The same idea that happens in corporate culture happens at the alternative level.”<sup>41</sup>

Independent means not being corporate, it also means not being something to please somebody else or not being artificial in order to get something else. Independent means communicating art, thoughts, music and beauty on an authentic and real scale.<sup>42</sup>

Interviewees used terms such as “scenester” and “poseur” to describe “inauthentic” persons involved in the scene. The fact that terms such as these exist and were utilized by many subjects highlights the issue of authenticity within the subculture. One subject describes indie rock as

Rather than having it held up by some corporate structure, like a bouncer at a dance club, “*You, you’re pretty enough, you can come in,*” that’s what corporations did, and held back people from a Marxist standpoint. But Lou Barlow and everyone else in the indie rock revolution, and Black Flag before him, and Dinosaur Jr. before that was that you could just record it yourself and find the means to finance it yourself, put it out, get it on the radio, and...simply let people hear it, let people hear the message that you’re sending and communicating.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>42</sup> Interviewee V, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 14 March 2005. He continued, “That’s why I don’t like that ‘independent’ term, because...if you say there are aspects of independent rock in the beer you drink or the clothes you wear...it destroys the essence of what you are trying to say is independent rock which is doing something that’s totally about individuality, not about money, about expressing yourself and communicating with other people and somehow belonging to this, yourself feeling a belonging to this world, this cosmos, this universe on a grander scale. It’s about love, its about your place in the universe, its about communicating and sharing, its that legacy you leave when you’re dead and gone, but subscribing to rules about wearing toques in a club when its 150 degrees because ‘That’s cool’ and ‘That’s indie’ is as bad as nazi fascism and killing Jews. It’s the same “I do it because it’s cool” and its not asserting individuality it’s not being independent of outside sources.”

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

The terms authentic, Poseur, Scenester, or Hipster are to be part of the alternative/indie rock alternative lexicon.<sup>44</sup> One promoter explained that these terms have relevance to him in his job. He explained that being aware of the trends that develop within indie culture help him make money.

True, indie people - artistic, heavy-duty people - loathe what I'm saying right now. But there is money to be made from indie rock and one of the primary reasons there is money to be made is because there are such things as Hipsters, Scenesters, fashion trends within this culture we're talking about - certain rituals that need to be acknowledged. These are all things that make the machine roll...a miniature machine inside the bigger machine.<sup>45</sup>

This promoter's statements support Kruse's theory that the indie music industry is not separate from the mass music industry.

The notion of the inauthentic is frequently verbalized within alternative cultures, according to the theorist Dick Hebdige. He found that within different forms of alternative culture - Punk, Rasta, Hippie culture - there is a dismissal of inauthentic people. For punks there are the "plastic punks," for Rasta's there are the "Rasta bandwagon," for hippies there are the "weekend hippies" and for indie people there are the Poseurs.<sup>46</sup> The general illustration of a Poseur by indie scene participants was someone acting like they have an appreciation for something but are not genuinely into it:

When those people who aren't really into the music are there, they're very irritating and they take away from the show. I remember I went to see a band and these girls were just talking about the singer, and I was like why are you here? You paid ten dollars to see the show, just go away.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Interviewee J.

<sup>45</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>46</sup> Hebdige, "Style as Homology and Signifying Practice: 1979," 62.

<sup>47</sup> Interviewee H, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 9 February 2005.

Another interviewee claimed that the term relates to bands as well. “A band that sort of has that indie mentality, that indie attitude, but really isn’t, is signed to a major label didn’t really work themselves from the bottom up.”<sup>48</sup> From this participant’s perspective, it was okay to be signed to a major label – if you worked hard to get there. Interviewees mentioned the importance of maintaining one’s “integrity.”<sup>49</sup>

Discussion of the term Scenester got more of a response than I had anticipated from interviewees. Basically, the term represents a “type” of person involved in the scene who attends many shows. They can be band members or fans, but the term basically carried negative connotations. The respondents defined a Scenester as someone who attends many shows “to be seen, not for the scene.”<sup>50</sup> “They go to all the high profile shows. I think they’re supporting their ego a bit more [than the bands]. The people that will go shows and they hardly even watch the bands.”<sup>51</sup> Interviewees described a Scenester’s “dress code,” and basically depicted the term as a stereotype.<sup>52</sup>

One interviewee compared indie Scenesters to the Mods.<sup>53</sup> She portrayed Scenesters as fashion-conscious socialites. Another interviewee went as far as to describe Scenesters as being part of a game: “Some people tend to go by scene points...you get a point if you show up at a show, you lose a point if you don’t go. You don’t have to listen,

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<sup>48</sup> Interviewee F.

<sup>49</sup> Interviewee E, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 February 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Interviewee T.

<sup>51</sup> Interviewee F.

<sup>52</sup> Interviewee M.

<sup>53</sup> Interviewee D.

as long as you're there – as long as you're seen, hence the name.”<sup>54</sup> One interviewee explained why she thinks people get involved in the music scene:

It makes you feel cool like a rock star and that's why its so much fun, because you're with your friends and you get lots of alcohol and you get to dance but also being a Scenester makes you feel like a rock star. (I sound so silly, but I wanted to be honest).<sup>55</sup>

These findings obviously conflict with the sense of the authentic that is privileged in this scene. This conflict is related to the issue of Hipsters within indie culture. Most interviewees used the term Hipster and Scenester interchangeably, although the term Hipster did not seem to carry the same baggage. One musician described Hipsters as “Blindly independent fans.”<sup>56</sup> My assumption is that the term has taken on “Poseurish” connotations after the 2003 publication of the book, *The Hipster Handbook*. This book describes and pokes fun at the social codes of the Hipster/Scenester/indie music fan. According to *The Hipster Handbook*, a Hipster is

One who possesses tastes, social attitudes, and opinions deemed cool by the cool. (Note: it is no longer recommended that one use the term "cool"; a Hipster would instead say "deck.") The Hipster walks among the masses in daily life but is not a part of them and shuns or reduces to kitsch anything held dear by the mainstream. A Hipster ideally possesses no more than two percent body fat.<sup>57</sup>

This book identifies commonalities within Hipster culture that possibly hit too close to home for some indie folk. The fact that their style, language and cultural practices could be exposed and commodified in the form of a book, a handbook no less, put the label in a lower ranked position.

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<sup>54</sup> Interviewee U.

<sup>55</sup> Interviewee D.

<sup>56</sup> Interviewee I, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 10 February 2005.

The issue of Scenesters is linked to the narrative of status or indie cred (credentials) within the scene. The writer Hal Niedzviecki put it best with his summation, “You serve coffee in a uniform, you’re a loser; you ring up records in a ripped Tee-shirt, you’re cool.”<sup>58</sup> Most interviewees agreed that status is important in the scene and suggested that people who have either been in bands, the media, or promotions tend to get respect. One interviewee used the term “revered” to illustrate the level of respect shown to some local musicians and key scene participants.<sup>59</sup> As music ranks high in scene participants lives, musicians themselves are respected amongst scene participants. Among the most visibly quantified measures of status or indie cred is represented on the local message board. Each post, or message, sent from a user name is counted and, with increased posts, comes a higher-ranking title: one starts off as “roadie,” achieves “band member” status and finally becomes an “icon.”

[Interviewees explained that there was a tendency for musicians to do their specific thing to define themselves against each other, which further fragments creative communities.] They argued that these sorts of attitudes are counterproductive to moving forward as a community.<sup>60</sup> One musician signed to a major label explained how at first his band had catered to Hipsters but he now views a fan as a fan:

Elitism among indie fans...it’s insane, that’s why we have no interest in them, that’s what happened when everyone walked away when we signed, it just made us go “fuck these guys.” We used to place Hipster people on the top of our “want to please list”...now if it’s a 40 year old housewife that

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<sup>57</sup> *The Hipster Handbook*. (accessed March. 19 2006) <[www.hipsterhandbook.com/](http://www.hipsterhandbook.com/)>.

<sup>58</sup> Hal Niedzviecki, *We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Re-invention of Mass Culture*, Toronto: Penguin (2000), 255.

<sup>59</sup> Interviewee F.

<sup>60</sup> Interviewee J.

likes [radio single]<sup>61</sup> because she hears it on the radio at work, that's just as valuable to me as some fuckin' Arcade Fire-shirt-wearing-Broken Social Scene-listening kid. It's the same thing. She likes it just like they would like it.<sup>62</sup>

### **Live as if Someone is Always Watching You: Practices and Fashion<sup>63</sup>**

Respondents involved in this study used key subcultural indicators to identify themselves as part of, and to recognize other members in the indie scene. Much of my discussion with interview subjects concerned the social practices and fashion of Scenesters. “The pre-packaged glamour and sexuality of rock stars are traded for a retro, ‘nerd chic’ look, a wardrobe of ‘pre-permissive clothes,’” according to Simon Reynolds.<sup>64</sup> Cotton Seiler similarly argues, “Indie is the residuum of the co-opted and declawed subcultural style of punk rock.”<sup>65</sup> I asked interviewees to describe indie rock style.

Indie rock performers and audience members share a common fashion style. Indie style is based on the values invested in the subculture, as reflected in a thrift-store, vintage look. The stereotypical indie style includes distinctions in hairstyle, shirts, pants and shoes. The most common “look” for indie rock hair is shaggy and generally unkempt. Popular styles of shirts include close fitting band tee-shirts, vibrant coloured vintage tee-shirts, and button-up collared shirts. These shirts might be layered upon with a hooded sweatshirt or “hoodie,” a vintage suit jacket, or army jacket. The choice of pants often includes worn-in, vintage style jeans or corduroy pants. Shoes of choice are most often Chuck Taylor

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<sup>61</sup> Title of radio single edited to maintain anonymity of interviewee.

<sup>62</sup> Interviewee I.

<sup>63</sup> Smog, *Rain On Lens*, Drag City compact disc DC187CD (2001).

<sup>64</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990), 250.

<sup>65</sup> Seiler, “Indie Rock in Louisville”: 191.



sneakers. The emphasis on simplicity, low cost, and the appearance of being “low maintenance” expresses the values of the music through fashion. In addition, the style is common between both indie rock performers and audiences. As a result, the performers’ style makes them indistinguishable from audience members, closing the gap between performer and audience, or producer and consumer.

I’d say that’s what’s common in amongst all these people is that they like colour, even if it’s just little blemishes of colour, whether it’s a very dark outfit and then there’s bright socks...or a bright scarf or some colour streak in their hair, there’s always some sort of flair of colour that’s maybe not necessarily a traditional thing to do. Jeans are common, rips in their jeans can be common sometimes, and running shoes that are not corporate company kind of running shoes. Used clothing in general, vintage clothing, retro clothing from the ‘70’s and ‘80’s is common. Asymmetrical hairstyles where the shapes of these hairstyles are not traditional, the way make-up is worn is a way to identify them to, it’s maybe not the traditional Cover Girl kind of idea of make-up.<sup>66</sup>

Interviewees explained how this kind of anti-commercial style of dress is more involved than it appears.

The vintage market is pretty work-intensive...to make real finds; you have to go out of your way, which is kind of the point. But therein lies the catch. You have this balance between not wanting to look like the mainstream, but still looking like everybody else, between being disdainful of obsessing over how you look and cultivating this air of debonair disorder. Sometimes it’s a contrast with minimal distinctions. But the time issue isn’t insubstantial. If you don’t have the time to hit the right stores and hit them at the right times (or frequently enough, or know someone on the inside) you risk looking like a Goodwill poster child.<sup>67</sup>

Theorists Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson crossed the concepts of homology and bricolage to explain why a certain people were attracted to a certain subcultural style in their work, *Resistance Through Rituals*. The reason was that the appropriated objects

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<sup>66</sup> Interviewee L.

were “made to reflect, express and resonate... aspects of group life.” They were “objects in which (the subcultural members) could see their central values held and reflected.”<sup>68</sup> Observation and interviews contributed to the finding that band tee-shirts and one-inch band pins were two of the most noteworthy and easily identified minority signifiers for subcultural members. Other common stylistic trends included trucker hats, scarves, shoulder bags and shaggy hair. Participants generally claimed that clothes tend to be tighter and vintage-inspired.<sup>69</sup> When asked to describe indie style, one male participant responded, “Too bad you don’t have a video camera [laughing].”<sup>70</sup> One female participant illustrated female style as

They basically want to look like Karen O from the Yeah Yeah Yeah’s, so you’re going to have a lot of clothes that look like they didn’t cost very much but they really do, because they went to Toronto and bought them on Queen Street and they’re a hundred dollars, like ripped tee-shirts.<sup>71</sup>

Related to the utilitarian sense of style of indie rock is its co-option by such chain retail stores as American Eagle. This store has taken the “authentic” style of indie rock and marketed it to the general public. They sell brand new clothes that are constructed to look pre-used. For example, American Eagle sells new tee-shirts that are constructed to look like vintage tee-shirts, with worn logos, frayed collars, and jeans that consumers purchase off the rack that already have holes in them. Indie rockers frown upon this co-

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<sup>67</sup> Interviewee X.

<sup>68</sup> Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds, *Resistance Through Rituals*, (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 56.

<sup>69</sup> Interviewee S.

<sup>70</sup> Interviewee U.

<sup>71</sup> Interviewee D.

option, because their style, and efforts to establish uniqueness and resistance to the mainstream are silenced, as they cannot be distinguished from the mainstream.

For band members the presentation of self during daily life often coincides with the presentation of self during performance. The majority of indie rock bands will wear the same clothes throughout their band activities from travelling in a van, doing sound check and performing. They generally do not wear stage clothes or costumes. It is more about presenting themselves as they are, and to the people involved in this scene, that is an attractive quality. When scene members were asked if they construct their “look” to identify them in relation to the music they like, most responded “no” but thought that other people might. Only four respondents said “yes.” Each of those “yes” respondents were female.

I think by shopping at used clothing stores, I don't know if my sweater is an indication of that [laughing], but it's not really so much a constructed look but it's a cheaper look than going to a mall. I guess If I like wearing band tee-shirts, it's a constructed look, and trying to get the bands out there, so I guess I do.<sup>72</sup>

Age played a role in how participants constructed their looks. While most younger and older scene participants claimed they did not construct their look in relation to the music they like, the older participants explained that they did use their look to accord with the music they liked. However, the younger scene participants often wore band tee-shirts, whereas the older scene participants usually wore plain tee-shirts or ones that didn't have a logo on it. Although they claimed to have worn many tee-shirts in their younger days,

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<sup>72</sup> Interviewee R.

older participants wore fewer now because they work in more professional environments and purchased fewer shirts - possibly because they often attend less live shows.

Most of the respondents either wore band tee-shirts on a regular basis or had once done so. Tee-shirts were considered a “commemorative talisman - a reminder of a specific band, a specific evening at a specific venue on a specific night.”<sup>73</sup> All of the respondents who wore tee-shirts claimed that the primary reason for is to support the bands, and some described the additional effects of advertising their taste and their use as a social tool. The narrative of wearing tee-shirts in an effort to support bands permeated the subject responses. When I asked to whom they were advertising, they responded, “I guess potential new fans.”<sup>74</sup>

I guess it depends – because if I’m wearing a band shirt and no one has heard of the band before, they might not know that it’s a band at all, so it’s not really advertising anything, but if it’s someone else who maybe listens to the same thing maybe they’ll comment or start a conversation. In a way it’s sort of like a conversation piece.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, a band tee-shirt serves as advertising for a band and/or a conversation starter. According to subject responses, a band tee-shirt signifies something different to indie fans than non-indie fans, conveying shared knowledge to insiders and exclusive knowledge to outsiders. For example,

When you’re wearing a band shirt, you’re really trying to make a statement... You’re identifying yourself with something - so people could recognize it and make a connection with you... or just to stand out, “I like this band, no one else does”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Interviewee X.

<sup>74</sup> Interviewee F.

<sup>75</sup> Interviewee B, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 1 February 2005.

<sup>76</sup> Interviewee F.

As well as identity enhancement, the concept of support, promotion, and representation are recurring themes throughout the interviewees' responses regarding band and even record label tee-shirts. For example, "Some labels have a lot of good stuff that I like. I might as well just buy the tee-shirt and kind of represent them all at the same time."<sup>77</sup> Indie subcultural style is based around a No Logo ethic. The work of Naomi Klein has influenced the work of many theorists and interviewees discussed issues of branding in relation to indie band tee-shirts. For example:

I think the cause of support is better than wearing a brand name. I'm helping to support music when I buy a band tee-shirt, by wearing their name I'm maybe exposing someone else to that band, or a future discussion with somebody who's like 'Oh, you're wearing a Despistato tee-shirt, what are they all about?' And you can talk to that person about that, and maybe they'd be like, 'Oh,' and maybe they'd go buy the album. Whereas if I'm wearing a Nike shirt, they'd be like 'Oh you're wearing a Nike shirt...what's the deal with them?' [Sarcastically]. Then it gets into the whole sweatshop factor with major clothing lines.<sup>78</sup>

It's more stylish than wearing a brand name, it it's a band name, I guess they'll know more about you than if it's a brand name, they know you listen to that kind of music and I guess subconsciously they deem you in some sort of category like 'Rocker' or just someone they would or wouldn't like. It is advertising – to anybody that sees your tee-shirt. I want them to know that I listen to that type of music, I don't really think about if they'll go home and start downloading songs from that band, just let them know that I'm into that band.<sup>79</sup>

Others claimed the opposite, "If somebody is wearing a shirt that looks kind of interesting that has a band name on it, I'll do a search for that band and see what I could find."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Interviewee C.

<sup>78</sup> Interviewee G.

<sup>79</sup> Interviewee C.

<sup>80</sup> Interviewee M.

For some of the more fashion conscious scene members, the design on the shirt was of high importance. “I’ll only buy the shirt if I like the design on it, I won’t necessarily buy it if I just like the band.”<sup>81</sup> Others claimed that they sometimes sacrifice personal style to help bands. “The shirt may not fit me that good or the colour may not look good with my complexion, but I’ll still wear it because I want people to know the name of this band.”<sup>82</sup> A local musician described wearing band tee-shirts as similar to advertising, but on a smaller and more personal scale. He compared it to corporate executives wearing tee-shirts for other multi-national companies that they support and like.”<sup>83</sup> Participants preferred the terms, “promote” and “support” to “advertising,” but agreed that elements of promotion were generally involved in their decision to wear a certain band’s shirt.

Others wore band tee-shirts to make a statement about their identity. “Usually when I put on a tee-shirt...there’s definitely an element of me wanting to say that, ‘I like this,’ and in some cases there’s obviously going to be people who don’t get it, and you know there might be people who do and are interested.”<sup>84</sup> The social implications of wearing a band shirt can be powerful. Essentially, the comment was that “cool shirt” connotes “cool band.”

If you’re a guy and you’re wearing the Arcade Fire shirt, and that girl who knows who the Arcade Fire is, it’s like a billboard saying “If you like the Arcade Fire, come talk to me and we can go on a date.” And that one girl who does will be like, “Hey, the Arcade Fire, you like them? So do I.” He’ll be like, “Yeah, do you want to go to their show?” And that’s how it gets

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<sup>81</sup> Interviewee Q, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 March 2005.

<sup>82</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>83</sup> Interviewee J.

<sup>84</sup> Interviewee F.

started. You're looking for people who know who it is so you can be like "Oh, we can be friends."<sup>85</sup>

Hipsters understood and identified fashion faux pas such as wearing a band's tee-shirt at their live show: "I won't actually go to a Burdocks show wearing a Burdocks shirt."<sup>86</sup> According to the respondents in this study, a band's pin is acceptable to wear at their show, but wearing a band's tee-shirt would be more of a "fan" activity. At many major label band's concerts fans purchase tee-shirts and immediately put them on. It could be that they don't want to misplace their purchase during the concert but it seems that donning an indie bands shirt at their show would not serve the purpose of "helping" the band and therefore take away from its purpose. According to interview subjects, indie fans generally wait (at least) until the next day to wear a band shirt purchased at a show, displaying a tasteful delay.

One aspect of indie rock subculture worth considering is the production of more "feminine" style tee-shirts for sale at indie rock shows. This availability of "baby-tee's," which are closer fitting, cap-sleeved tee-shirts geared towards the female audience not only proves that a female audience exists, but that it is numerous enough to have specialty merchandise catering to it. This gender differentiation in fashion identifies that females in the scene have similar style characteristics to the indie rock male, but they can wear more feminized versions of tee-shirt to avoid look like a tomboy. For women, although their presence on the scene is numerous enough to justify specialty tee-shirts, it still appears that only when women can identify themselves as musicians do they feel they can legitimately

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<sup>85</sup> Interviewee D.

<sup>86</sup> Interviewee G.

talk to musicians at shows without being seen as “groupies.”<sup>87</sup> Even as musicians, women feeling as if they are swimming upstream through the male-dominated scene, fighting against some promoters’ attempts at “all-girl band bills.” Women who perform in indie rock bands often position themselves as “one of the guys,” playing what are gender coded as “male” instruments and construct their physical style against standard notions of femininity and beauty with their “boyish style” of short haircuts, band tee-shirts, jeans, and army jackets.

Another popular minority signifier for indie participants are one-inch band pins.<sup>88</sup> Pins are probably the most economical way for a band to advertise and promote themselves. They are sometimes free but usually cost about one dollar and provide revenue for bands. For scene members they provide a simple and effective way to accessorize, signify one’s taste, and promote bands. Respondents compared the social significance of pins to band tee-shirts, but claimed pins prove to be more economical. One scene member even purchased her own button maker so she could make buttons of bands she likes.<sup>89</sup> Pins are generally purchased at shows, so a bag or jacket covered in pins represents a lot of shows attended and therefore one’s commitment to the scene.

I’ve become pretty known for buttons... People started giving them to me so I’d put it on... people would be like “I want you to have my button” because it’s like an honour, you’ve got so many, it just gets out of control.<sup>90</sup>

A few interviewees compared pins to scout badges.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Mavis Bayton, “How Women Become Musicians,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, edited by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 243.

<sup>88</sup> They are also referred to as buttons/pin backs.

<sup>89</sup> Interviewee C.

<sup>90</sup> Interviewee N.

<sup>91</sup> Interviewee F.



It was really trendy to put all the bands that you've seen everywhere all over your one strap on your side bag, but now I think that there's been a shift and that's become a no-no. That's become a taboo and instead of putting it everywhere, you'll wear one at a time - go through them. I think it just became too obvious. It became a thing that Poseurs do. It's changed from wanting to wear all your pins to just wearing a select few and alternating them.<sup>92</sup>

Cotton Seiler describes this sort of “stealth aesthetic” as grounded in the “relative blandness and willed obsolescence of the indie style and predicated on the exhaustion of self-consciously radical musical subcultures as effective agents of cultural and political critique. As a result, indie style is ‘cool.’”<sup>93</sup> All of the interviewees admitted to having far more pins than they actually wear. Most of the younger scene participants claimed to wear many pins at once, whereas the older scene participants wore few to none. If the older participants do wear a few, they are carefully selected bands and often obscure. Again, we see more connoisseur-type activity within the older scene participant age category.

All of the interviewees claimed they plan to be involved in the music scene in the future. I was interested in the commitment of these people to the scene and the level of involvement and lifestyle practices and inquired about relationships between the music and a rejection of commercial culture. “I’m anti-commercial in a way so it kind of rules out malls. I just don’t like the huge amalgamation of commerce in one spot. Companies that I don’t really care for.”<sup>94</sup> One interviewee explained how he was, “truly a jock that listened to mainstream rock that wore sporty sort of clothing” and then was introduced to the band

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<sup>92</sup> Interviewee D.

<sup>93</sup> Seiler, “Indie Rock in Louisville”: 191.

<sup>94</sup> Interviewee K.

Guided By Voices. He then started going to independent record stores, buying vintage clothing, going to cafes, and house parties.

I just truly liked what I heard when I listened to Guided By Voices - I just liked the sound. It was so good to me that it made me abandon everything I was doing before. That's when I stopped being an athlete, that's when I stopped dating stupid girls, it's when I started buying vintage clothes: I abandoned my whole lifestyle.<sup>95</sup>

This is a strong statement about how indie music influenced and guided his lifestyle choices.

Over half of the respondents in this study claimed to have experienced forms of discrimination because of the music they listen to. These forms of discrimination ranged from verbal to physical assault. "Sometimes people assume that it *is* [his emphasis] like the pretentious bull-shit type thing, 'You're only listening to indie rock because it's different.' I get that all the time. You get people that don't know about it, that just *assume*, [his emphasis] before they listen to it."<sup>96</sup>

Everybody wants to somehow assert themselves and for most people it's belonging, so everyone wears the same kind of jeans or whatever is popular. Then there is the other people, the way they assert their individuality is by being different and if you are different in a world of homogeny, that's when you get picked on.<sup>97</sup>

Another interviewee said he experienced discrimination because he got into indie music at a young age:

When you're a teen you want to find an identity, so you start dressing like some of the bands you see. You start buying second hand clothes...we would get teased at school. They would throw pennies at us in the hall and things, and getting yelled at from cars and having guys want to beat us up,

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<sup>95</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>96</sup> Interviewee M.

<sup>97</sup> Interviewee V.

just because of the clothes we're wearing and not because they know us personally.<sup>98</sup>

I asked this interviewee if he thought those people listened to the same music he did. He said no. He presumed “that what they were listening to wasn't very good.”<sup>99</sup>

Promoters have even experienced opposition within the scene. A local promoter explained the opposition he had experienced. “Whenever you mix art with business, there's going to be conflict.” He considered himself a businessperson who uses art as the vehicle for his financial success and explained that musicians do not always agree with his perspective.<sup>100</sup> One musician stated that the primary conflict exists among scene members themselves. “People in the indie music scene, get along well with people from any other group but within each other, that's where the problem is.”<sup>101</sup> When asked if that was because people compete for indie cred she responded, “Yeah that's definitely it. I've thought about it, people don't like to talk about it.”<sup>102</sup>

### **Devotion: Investment<sup>103</sup>**

Social practices outline the overlapping role of scene members as fans and producers and highlight the complex narrative of investment. For the most part, scene members simultaneously attended shows as entertainment while also participating actively in its production, whether through working in an independent record store during the day,

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<sup>98</sup> Interviewee A.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>101</sup> Interviewee D.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Smog, *Dongs of Sevotion*, Drag City compact disc DC169CD (2000).

putting up flyers for upcoming shows, helping out with local music websites, or working in the venues as bartenders or door people. You can often find the bar staff at the clubs on their nights off; their work, the music they enjoy and their social circle are tied to the venue. Bar staff and members of local bands are often friends as both groups frequently share the same social space.

The amount of time and money participants invest in attending live shows and purchasing merchandise is considerable. One participant runs a local music website providing show listings, online articles and updates. Maintaining the website is a financial struggle. “I’ve lost money, but am starting to sell ad [Advertising] space.”<sup>104</sup> As a result, some bands she helped put her on guest lists for shows, a privilege she considered to be “indirect money, because it stops me from taking cash out of my pocket at shows.”<sup>105</sup> Not having to pay cover to attend shows is one of the perks often enjoyed by people who are involved in the scene, including press writers covering shows, poster kids (who are often co-op students or volunteers who put up show posters on behalf of venues), and staff members of the venue.

Participating in a band is another important way of functioning in an independent music scene. Being a member of a band ties a group of people together in many ways. This research found that bands are most commonly built on friendship and even a bands local following is often based on the support of friends. The collaborative nature of bands extends from the creative aspects of song writing, rehearsing, performing, recording, creating and producing album art, pins and tee-shirts, booking shows, creating websites,

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<sup>104</sup> Interviewee H.

creating and distributing show posters, to touring. Bands generally carry out these functions in a DIY manner. The vast majority of musicians interviewed were not formally trained but rather gained their musical skills from listening and exploration.<sup>106</sup> Interviewed bands responded that musical talent was not as important to being a band member as other aspects of musical production such as personality, creativity and listening tastes. Involvement in a band is time consuming and requires dedication, which can make members better friends, or cause members to quit and/or bands to break up.

Interviewees described how friendship is often the primary binding factor amongst band members and how important friendships with other people involved in the scene are, especially at the beginning:

The first two shows that you do, you bring everybody you know so you can trick the promoter of the venue to think that you have fans (that's what we did). We had the Raven packed. We had nobody [fans], we hadn't even played a show...we brought everyone we'd ever known and that's what you do. We brought our friends, and then our friends kind of liked us and their friends came, and they kind of liked us - but friends of friends, it wasn't really fans. I go to shows in Hamilton ...I see friends of people, I know who knows whom, and it's friends - friends, friends, friends.<sup>107</sup>

A similar phenomenon is evident with regard to message boards:

I see friends posting about friends. It's cool that the friends are supportive, but you don't really get *strangers*, like a guy in a Budweiser hat listening to your music until... [You have success in a mainstream market].<sup>108</sup>

He described the transition from a local audience of local scene members, essentially friends, to a broader audience of “strangers” with respect to radio:

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Only two of the musicians interviewed were in, or had graduated from, post-secondary music programs.

<sup>107</sup> Interviewee I.

When we signed, the very small following that we had with the scenester people, walked away... There was a two-month lull where we couldn't get people to shows in Hamilton, and then our song started to get played on the [mainstream] radio and then [mainstream] radio listeners came and it's been different since.<sup>109</sup>

This binary between local hipsters and radio listeners accentuates the different audiences attending shows at local clubs. To bar staff, the scenesters are considered regulars and the radio listeners that attend certain shows are considered part of a mainstream audience. One musician described his observations of the opposition between audiences for different shows

For the bigger ones [shows], like when a touring band comes or an established local band, it's a really interesting cross-section. There's all kinds of people there, I see people there that I'd never expect to see at a show. With the smaller shows it tends to be more of the die-hards, the people who are like really, really into it who would be there no matter what.<sup>110</sup>

The social practices involved in the indie rock music scene are what contribute to the sense of identity for the people involved in their local scene. Participants generally physically identify themselves by wearing band tee-shirts, pins, and construct their physical appearance in accordance with certain expectations that align with the “music first” nature of the scene. These types of practices contribute to an indie rock lexicon of terms and language used within the subculture. Having common fashion, language, and social practices establishes a sense of community within members, emphasized by the fact that most people involved in this subculture have been involved in this music since their early teens. Bands members play a special role in connecting the network of indie rock scenes,

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

by playing shows in cities other than their own. This practice works to provide other local scenes with a common experience or cultural capital, cementing social connections between bands, promoters, and scene members alike, thus establishing interlocality between particular localities. All of these things would not exist without personal investment from the people involved in indie rock scenes. Scene participants invest many aspects of themselves in the music for what people outside the scene might consider insufficient payment. In the next chapter, I will explore the narrative of indie rock as production for producers, the monetary investment of being involved in a band, the issue of indie vs. major labels, selling out, and the media.

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<sup>110</sup> Interviewee F.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Rescue Us From Boredom: Labels and Media<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Speak, See, Remember: Production for Producers<sup>2</sup>**

“I find it satisfying getting into smaller bands that people don’t know about and then when I open a Spin magazine and see The Arcade Fire being praised, I’m like ‘oh, I knew about them first’ and I have a satisfaction.”<sup>3</sup> This is connected to Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital. We see people gaining satisfaction from possessing knowledge and experience of a subcultural product. [“Everyone’s trying to find the smallest band that has the most potential. It’s fun - it’s like a game.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, information provides the person with cultural capital, leading to a sense of identity enhancement.] This argument is compounded by the cultural practices of wearing obscure band tee-shirts and pins, sharing mix tapes/CD’s, and seeking out the “smallest band that has the most potential.”

Many theorists have asserted that the sociology of youth directly involves the relationship between music and identity in youth subcultures. A number of studies throughout the 1970s and 1980s by theorists such as Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige offered what has become a familiar thesis: youth subcultures appropriate and innovate musical forms and styles as a basis for their identity, thus asserting counter-cultural politics. With respect to indie rock, the modes of production and consumption are a set of meaning systems that express the indie lifestyle as resistant to dominant meaning systems, and serve as signifiers of identity among members of the scene.

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<sup>1</sup> The Super Friendz, *Mock Up, Scale Down*, Murderecords compact disc MURD-017 (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Pavement, *Terror Twilight*, Matador Records compact disc OLE 260-2 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Interviewee Q, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 8 March 2005.



Indie production and consumption systems position active production in connection to the reduced distance between performer and audience – production for producers. This exists in contrast to major label production, which involves a highly skilled division of labour and forms of consumption in that releases can often be purchased from any record store without interaction with the producers. In contrast, Indie fans often acquire their music at shows from live performers and therefore participate in the culture they consume. **The indie scene places value in indie DIY production versus mass music production with “expert” consultants and technicians.**

The concept of a “specialty” indie audience versus a general “mass” audience enters here with regard to production and consumption patterns. A crucial aspect to this issue is the oppositional stance that indie rock takes; there is a conscious decision to emphasize the differences between indie and mainstream, rather than the similarities. These differences can be observed as a *Habitus*, a set of dispositions that generates practices and perceptions, and is the result of a long process of inculcation that becomes a “second nature” according to Randal Johnson.<sup>5</sup> This type of “second nature” is connected to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, or “forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions.”<sup>6</sup> Randal Johnson explains cultural capital as

A form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Randall Johnson, “Editor’s Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture,” *The Field of Cultural Production* by Pierre Bourdieu edited by Randall Johnson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, fans of mass music do not have the required knowledge, experience or cultural capital to appreciate indie rock. **Indie rock thus holds a unique position in the high art versus mass music debate.** To a consumer of high art, indie rock would appear to be relegated to the field of inferior culture as the musicians are often lacking formal training, **the cultural artefacts are created in a DIY manner, placing process over product, and the overall aesthetic is generally unpolished.** Indie music listeners often find it easier to describe who they're not (mass music listeners) over who they are. The appeal of indie rock is based in obscurity and otherness and the social practices and value of cultural capital position it as an elite faction within a larger field, sometimes referred to as Art-Rock. It can be argued that indie rock participants operate in a social structure similar to the avant-garde intellectuals of high culture as a group requiring cultural capital that distinguishes them from mass culture consumer. "Mass" enters as a term indie rock participants define themselves against.

Indie rock speaks out against the industrialization of music, described by Simon Frith as "a shift from active musical production to passive pop consumption, the decline of folk or community or subcultural traditions, and a general loss of musical skill."<sup>8</sup> Indie scene participants generally involved themselves in more than one facet of the subculture, from playing in a band to hosting a college radio show to working in a record store. The involvement in the scene of those interviewed is complex. For the most part, they simultaneously attended shows as entertainment while also actively participating in its production' whether it be working in an independent record store during the day, putting

up flyers for upcoming shows, helping out with local music websites, or working in the venues as bartenders or door people.

Thus, indie rock aficionados both consume and shape their culture. Frith writes, “Rock was a last romantic attempt to preserve ways of music-making – performer as artist, performance as ‘community’ – that had been made obsolete by technology and capital.”<sup>9</sup> Although the indie rock audiences generally are not performers, members of the audience often participate in the production of indie culture.

### **Life Stories For Minimum Wage: Monetary Investment – Bands<sup>10</sup>**

Musicians said the monetary investment of being in an indie band included instrument costs and upkeep, purchasing a van to transport the band to gigs in and out of town, gas money, poster costs, recording costs and/or recording gear costs, CD production and distribution costs, postage costs to mail CDs and press kits to record companies and radio stations. Participants justify such financial investments: “Monetarily, I’m using my student loan to pay for the recording of our CD. It’s always been my life, I’ve always been in and out of bands since I was fourteen or fifteen.”<sup>11</sup> Local indie label owners reflected on the beginning stages of their company, “We didn’t pay ourselves for a year and a half, which was pretty crazy. We all had other jobs, part time jobs to just

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Frith, *Music For Pleasure* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Cuff The Duke, *Life Stories For Minimum Wage*, Three Gut Records compact disc TGR007 (2002).

<sup>11</sup> Interviewee R.

basically cover our rent.”<sup>12</sup> Each participant interviewed had a different version of the same story to tell. They did not see their involvement in the scene as a sacrifice, but as a means to gain satisfaction.

With most musicians spending money to be in a band, paying cover to attend shows, and purchasing merchandise, their pay cheques have to stretch to pay rent and groceries. The caricature of the skinny indie rock fan/participant is not far from the truth.

I think people often mistake it for fashion representation, they do it for fashionable reasons and it's not that usually at all. They're forced to, that's what happens to you because of your need for the music. You don't eat well or don't buy a lot of clothes, you wear the same clothes repetitively just in different combinations so it looks like you're wearing a lot of different clothes...because of the sacrifices that you're making financially, it arguably means your day is not as organized...The common thing to do is you wake up late, you don't have enough time to do the things you've got to do, so you sacrifice getting clean or you sacrifice eating or you sacrifice going to school, and at least when you sacrifice those things you're not spending any money.<sup>13</sup>

The sacrifices made by indie participants therefore often include health. Many interviewees claimed to be sleep deprived and most were smokers, which some claimed suppressed their appetites. Smokers often rolled their own cigarettes or purchased cigarettes produced by discount manufacturers.

One participant described how his lifestyle revolved around music and the local music scene: from working at a record store part-time, attending band rehearsals, playing live gigs, and managing to attend university classes.

I think being a part, a musician, it takes a lot of time and a lot of it is, depending on where you're at, depending what you want to do, I think it can get in the way of school. It can get in the way of sleep. It can get in the way

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<sup>12</sup> Interviewee P, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 20 February 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Interviewee L, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 February 2005.

of a lot of things. But you know what? At this age I just want to be doing this right now more than I'd rather be doing something else.<sup>14</sup>

Band members, record store workers, promoters and staff members are often heavily involved in the scene and participate in the DIY nature of indie culture. Most bands create their own poster designs and CD artwork; "I learned how to do it out of personal needs. Bands I had played in at the time needed posters and CD artwork and stuff - I took it upon myself to do it. And I guess over the years, just learning, trial and error."<sup>15</sup> Privilege is given to cultural products made by the bands themselves such as hand made packaging with hand drawn images over slick, "production line" product.

This DIY indie aesthetic is often present in the recorded product as well as the CD packaging. Cotton Seiler describes the equipment most often valued by indie musicians

The home stereo, recording, and musical equipment that indie rockers value are precisely those which were rendered obsolete by the advent of 'superior' solid-state and digital technology. The increased availability and declining price of four-track analog and digital recorders has enabled greater numbers of musicians to produce their own 'lo-fi' recordings, which, in terms of sonic fidelity and production values, fall far short of the product generated in professional, multitrack studios.<sup>16</sup>

Since Seiler's writing in 2001, many indie musicians have embraced the availability of digital technology, albeit in a DIY way. Many musicians record at home or at friends' homes studios with software used in professional, multitrack studios. The difference between the indie recording and the studio recording lies in the process. Indie musicians aren't paying other people, in this case trained technicians, to record their material - indie musicians do it themselves with what they have. Studio product is often influenced by

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<sup>14</sup> Interviewee U, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 March 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee N, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 18 February 2005.

cost. Even if an indie band gets a FACTOR<sup>17</sup> grant from the government to do a studio recording, the money only gives the band so much studio time. From home, an indie band can record according to their schedules and not that of a studio engineer.

Indie musicians who operate on a DIY principle save money doing almost everything themselves, from booking shows, promotions, performing, recording, packaging, and distributing recordings. The question is – Can one live off indie rock? Interviewees were quick to respond, “Nobody’s getting rich off of live music in this town.”<sup>18</sup> Although a few musicians were hopeful, the reality is all of the musicians interviewed held part or full-time jobs or took shifts when they were not on tour.

I’m hoping I can [live off indie rock]. I know you have to invest a lot of money and a lot of time, like years before you might even see any recognition; so it’s a huge, huge, huge risk and gamble, but I’m doing it also for the process.<sup>19</sup>

The process is enough for some, but not enough for others. Band members explained the challenges of performing in bars.

When my band used to play a packed, sold-out show at the Underground you come out of it with maybe 200-250 dollars and after you spend all of it on booze and have none of it for the band fund and even then you’re not going to split it up and take it four ways. It doesn’t pay you back.<sup>20</sup>

For many bands, the money made from live gigs goes into a band fund for poster printing, gas, van repairs, and tee shirt, button, and recording supplies. Linked to the

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<sup>16</sup> Cotton Seiler, “Indie Rock in Louisville,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13, 2 (2001): 191.

<sup>17</sup> Foundation to Assist Canadian Talent on Records.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewee W, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 15 March 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee R.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewee D, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 4 February 2005.

challenge of playing live shows is the conundrum of touring. Bands often need to spend money making an album before they sell copies to make money.

Major label popular music artists often have what is called a “guarantee” arranged with the venue, that they will get paid a certain amount of money regardless of attendance. Indie bands often do not have this luxury, consequently, it is crucial that a decent-sized audience is present, otherwise, they might not get paid or invited to play at the venue again. Indie shows are often booked around at least one touring band and at least one supporting local band, and range from three to five bands a night. The idea is that either the headlining touring band will draw an audience and gain exposure for the up-and-coming local band, or likewise, an obscure touring band gets billed with a popular local band as the headliner.

Indie rock musicians are generally not formally trained, but accomplished flexible players. Evidence of this is the practice of having “guest” players on songs. Sometimes when a band is on tour they will have a local musician friend come on stage and perform a song with the band. Other times, a solo musician will tour and play with different back-up bands from the cities the touring musician stops to play in. Sometimes the musicians will have a rehearsal in the afternoon before a show. Other times, the touring musician assumes the band members know the songs from recorded CDs. Another practice is when bands plays a few shows together on a tour, on the last night of tour the headlining band will often invite the opening band on stage for the last song, or an encore song to play/sing with them. This sort of communal music making highlights the community aspect of the scene.

The first time a band plays an out-of-town city, the chances of having an audience are slim, and so for most bands the first tour is a challenge. If people liked the band the first time they were in town, word spreads and more people show up when the band returns on subsequent tours. It is especially difficult for a band playing a city for the first time as venue regulars tend to be music aficionados so the audience a band has to win over is probably the most discerning. One record label owner stated, “Those people that are successful are the people that have stuck by their word and toured, because touring is basically the life blood of being in a band...to make a living at being in a band, you have to do shows, and you have to want to do the shows.”<sup>21</sup> Indie bands can only play so often in their own city or adjoining cities. If a band plays a local show within a week or two, their audience is often split, however if the band performs once every two or three months, their audience has an opportunity to build up anticipation for the show. Therefore a band generally has to play other cities to make money. Indie bands make money from playing shows, which often means touring.

This truth is emphasized by the importance of merchandise [merch] sales. Merch sales are often an important source of income for a band. One label owner described the importance of playing gigs and having merch available.

You’re there, the kids are there to see you, they’ve got the ten bucks in their hand. They came prepared because they were going to buy a shirt or something...and if you’re not there, they’re prepared to see someone else, and spend the money on someone else.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Interviewee P, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 20 February 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



Bands recognized the importance of playing shows and selling their music and merch. Creating their merch themselves means they are responsible, and accountable, for the process and the product, whether it is learning a new computer program, four-track machine or creating album art, this process of acquiring new skills and overcoming challenges is valuable to band members as well as cultural participants. The people purchasing the merch [consumers] can talk to the band [producers] about the process of designing artwork, creating and recording music, screen printing tee shirts, and making pins. In the age of mass-produced products available at your nearest box store, having the ability to purchase a cultural product directly from the producer is valued by the consumers.

### **The Difference Between Listen and Feel: Indie Labels vs. Major Labels<sup>23</sup>**

Most small independent labels began operating out of apartments or houses. The local Hamilton record label Sonic Unyon started out of a small room in a parent's house that has since grown to encompass an entire building with office space, a store, and rehearsal and performance spaces. Interviewees emphasized that the business model adopted by independent labels and musicians is smaller scale, and less profit-frenzied than its mainstream counterparts,<sup>24</sup> describing indie labels as “more focused on the product than the profit.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Swearing at Motorists, *More Songs From The Mellow Struggle*, Secretly Canadian compact disc SC029 (2000).

<sup>24</sup> Interviewee X, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 16 March 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Interviewee K, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 15 February 2005.

By the end of the twentieth century, five multinational companies, Arco/Atlantic/WEA, Reprise/Warner, or the Big Five, became the key players in the mass music industry.<sup>26</sup> In recent history, major labels have controlled over ninety percent of recorded music distributed in the United States.<sup>27</sup>

Corporate Rock by definition is inauthentic, because they are making it for the sole purpose of making money. I think the classic definition term would be “pot boiler.” They are making music that is not of heart, not out of sadness, or happiness, not out of pain, not out of any real human emotion, but simply designed in some sort of mechanical fashion to induce something else out of someone else. It is not music by the young for the young...<sup>28</sup>

As distribution is the primary limitation faced by independent labels, indie labels sometimes make distribution arrangements with major corporate labels. For example, Matador Records (one of the more prominent indie rock record labels employing thirty staff members and representing a roster of about forty bands), located in New York, has distribution deals with Capitol records. Such arrangements allow artists and indie labels to maintain control over production while achieving widespread distribution via the resources provided by the major label.<sup>29</sup>

It could be argued that if a band on an indie label is distributed by a major label, the band is therefore on the major label; however, an artist on an independent label, like

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<sup>26</sup> Holly Kruse, *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing: 2003). 29.

<sup>27</sup> Deanna Campbell Robinson, et al. *Music at the Margins: Popular Music and Global Diversity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991), 52.

<sup>28</sup> Interviewee V, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 14 March 2005.

<sup>29</sup> An irony exists here that despite the problems with independent distribution, major labels have used independent distributors over their own distribution arms to better reach alternative music audiences. For example, BMG used indie Dutch East India to distribute records for Beggars Banquet and Silvertone while Geffen and DGC used an independent distributor - Cargo - to distribute vinyl singles. One can see how a small local label is able to transcend localness and reach a transnational subcultural audience through a network of indie distribution and mail order.

Matador, maintains their indie rock credentials by association with the smaller label even though the company that handles the actual distribution of the records is a major conglomerate. This is why small, in-house indies at major labels often makes signing with a major more attractive for an indie band, according to Holly Kruse.<sup>30</sup> In-house indies are smaller indie labels under the wing of majors. Some smaller labels have attempted to achieve international financial success while maintaining the perception of integrity as an indie label. Generally when an indie label gets money hungry, it leads to its demise. As fans label bands a “sell out,” fans also lose interest in indie labels if they move from an institution focused on supporting quality indie music to an institution focused on profit. During the third year of a five-year plan, the label Rough Trade failed after struggling between large scale financial success and being a distributor with a connection to and an understanding of the local, the symbolic site of indie music.<sup>31</sup>

Interviewees discussed the indie aesthetic as commodified by larger labels that make “pretty commercially successful products but capitalize on the independent aesthetic.”<sup>32</sup> Scene participants asserted the goal for the big independent music industry is to “commercialize it while keeping that countercultural aesthetic intact.”<sup>33</sup> One interviewee noted that indie music fans are

Really aware of who’s contrived, who’s been put together by somebody else that is not authentic and therefore not indie rock. But to other people who are not as schooled or knowledgeable...I don’t think The Strokes are indie rock, but they’re *called* indie rock. They look the part and sound the part

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<sup>30</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Kruse, “Institutional Practices in Alternative Music Scenes.” In *Popular Music - Style and Identity*, edited by Will Straw, et al. (Montreal: Dufferin Press, 1995), 54.

<sup>32</sup> Interviewee J, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 13 February 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

but they're not what indie rock is, but to other people who don't know, then it is, you know?<sup>34</sup>

The issue of inauthenticity within the industry of indie rock, was also discussed by an indie label owner:

There are lots of DIY people that get oodles of money from major labels and hide under the umbrella of the indie rock label. That kind of ticks me off actually. There's lots of people that work hard, and tough it out...but don't get to the same success level.<sup>35</sup>

Interviewees expressed their respect and admiration for bands that worked hard to succeed. Their responses highlighted the importance of indie bands' perceived authenticity - and perceived poverty. Many of the interviewed subjects regarded the indie rock music scene to be an "alternative" culture, rather than a subculture, counterculture, or youth culture. For instance, one subject explained

I like "alternative culture" because it means something more obscure, which maybe refers to subculture, but it's also a response to mainstream culture, which ties into counterculture. These are alternative culture people. To me, alternative culture is that you recognize pop culture, but you hand-select certain things from pop culture as being valid and you mash them with all the DIY discovery that you're doing.<sup>36</sup>

This subject described the irony behind his personal collection of cultural artifacts,

I know this much, I have all these things in my home that are common to a lot of other people in my subculture, but I often get most entertained by the fact that I have a Paula Abdul CD in that collection, or that my favourite movie is *Star Wars* and not *Blade Runner*. It almost gets to the point where alternative culture evolves and gets large enough, that you get more satisfaction from the mainstream things you embrace, than the original reason you embraced the alternative culture stuff.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Interviewee D.

<sup>35</sup> Interviewee P.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Another key indicator distinguishing between independent and major label music is scale, whether in terms of specialization, practices or sales. Major labels are often multi- or trans-national corporations that have the capacity to produce a diverse range of music to service the mass music market. Many indie labels, such as Three Gut Records, are started by bands themselves to put out their music and music of friends' bands. Other indie labels such as K Records sign premium indie bands (K Records now stands as one of the most respected labels in the indie circuit). Often indie labels develop a following, similar to the way bands develop a following.

Interviewees described the significance of certain indie labels as symbols of quality. "Touch and Go...Merge, Drag City...When I was in high school you'd see a CD and it had the little label logo and you knew it was good, and you'd give it a chance."<sup>38</sup> The symbolic value around indie labels is therefore important as people claimed to purchase an album by an unfamiliar artist if a label they trust represents the band. Death Cab for Cutie band member Ben Gibbard expressed his thoughts on the labels in an interview with the independent magazine *Comes with a Smile*:

If someone's going to make a decision about whether they're gonna like a band or a record based on the label on the back of it, I don't really want those people to be fans of our music. That's the wrong reason to like music. If a label has a reputation for promoting a certain calibre and style you like then that makes sense, but it's judging the book not even by its cover, but the barcode on the back.<sup>39</sup>

The specialization of indie labels therefore creates a sense of community connecting the bands and their audience. In contrast, major labels focus on large quantity album sales,

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<sup>38</sup> Interviewee N.

<sup>39</sup> Matt Dornan, "Death Cab for Cutie," *Comes with a Smile*, (Winter/Spring 2006): 6.

promoted through various sources including radio and video play to promote an album. This is a distinguishing feature between indie labels and major labels.

Major labels have large-scale promotion budgets for the artists they represent, and use a highly specialized division of labour to market a product to their consumer base. They select a band to promote vigorously, utilizing a variety of media ranging from mainstream radio, television, and print to disseminate their product. For example, Hal Niedzviecki found that large companies

Tightly control the product image and then unleash their forces: they hire street teams: of...youth to randomly plaster corridors of North American cities with stickers and posters meant to appear like the enthusiastic handiwork of actual fans.<sup>40</sup>

One band that was once an unsigned indie band from Hamilton that did its own booking and promotions is now signed to Universal and works with a team including a “Manager, lawyer, tour manager, booking agent, assistant to the booking agent, graphics guy, publicity team, marketing guy, A&R guy.”<sup>41</sup> Some bands lose their street cred when they sign to a major. Other DIY bands and fans see it as a loss of authenticity as other people have input in the bands “work.” The band that got signed to a major sees it as a benefit, though: “all we have to do is think about playing music, which is what’s great about having a team of people behind you. All we do is write songs and play live shows now.”<sup>42</sup> In contrast, a touring independent band would differ greatly from a major label band. Major label acts often have tour managers, bus drivers and roadies whereas an indie band

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<sup>40</sup> Hal Niedzviecki, *We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Re-invention of Mass Culture*, Toronto: Penguin (2000), 312.

<sup>41</sup> Interviewee I, interview by author, tape recording, Hamilton, Ontario, 10 February 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

has themselves. An indie band has to keep their van running, do the driving, load gear, keep fed, find places to sleep, make sure they get paid and put on a performance that people will want to see next time the band comes through town.

Indie labels generally rely on the indie rock web of communication including college radio shows, message boards, 'zines and especially word of mouth to support their artists. These forms of communication are important to note, because it's the fans of the music that are advertising the music. In a sense, indie advertising and indie community are one in the same.

### **That's When The Audience Died: "Selling Out"<sup>43</sup>**

Holly Kruse points the finger to the major labels as having "forced music scene participants who defined themselves, their practices, and their institutions in opposition to the dominant industry to disown some artists, locations and practices and take up others in order to remain outsiders."<sup>44</sup> Cotton Seiler found a similar situation with the band Slint who recorded with noted producer, Steve Albini. What they risked in "leaving Louisville," as Seiler puts it, "both in terms of recording with Albini and of participating more generally in the process of producing, distributing, and marketing records on a national scale - were the twin evils of co-optation and compromise."<sup>45</sup> Interviewees described the same trajectory for bands like Montreal's Arcade Fire, "I remember reading on Montreal

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<sup>43</sup> Final Fantasy, *Has A Good Home*, Blocks Recording Club compact disc □□□030, (2005).

<sup>44</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Seiler, "Indie Rock in Louisville": 201.

boards - threads of people slagging the Arcade Fire as soon as they got very successful.”<sup>46</sup>

This is often referred to as “selling out,” and it can take a number of forms. In general it depends on the perception that an artist has changed his/her musical style or relationship to his/her core audience in an effort to become more popular, according to Holly Kruse.<sup>47</sup>

In indie music discourse “selling out” revolves around the relationship between artist and audience and the aesthetic.<sup>48</sup> When a band steps out of the community of independent bands and scene participants helping each other, and into the sphere of mass-produced music on a major label, scene participants lose ownership and interest in the band. They might stop putting the band on mix tapes, and stop going to the bands shows - essentially dropping association between that band and the listener’s identity. This is different than selling-out and exists as an important construct within indie culture. Ben Gibbard of Death Cab For Cutie describes the risk of selling out in relation to signing with a major

I’m sure we’ll probably get a shitty review on Pitchfork and all of the indie purists will claim [we’ve sold out] but y’know that happens every time. That reaction is such as standard reaction to long-time indie band going to the major, which is unfortunate. But I think part of going to a major, in a weird way, you find out who your friends are and who your fans really are.<sup>49</sup>

One interviewee described how,

You like this certain band, but as soon as too many people like that band, it’s not cool to like that band anymore, even though creatively, they’re doing the exact same thing they were doing when they first were performing...if a bands ideals change – they’re going to be rejected.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Interviewee J.

<sup>47</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>49</sup> Dornan: 6.

<sup>50</sup> Interviewee L.



Another interviewee described the situation through the words of Morrissey – “We hate it when our friends become successful.”<sup>51</sup> Morrissey says that conflicts often arise as the band changes; their attitudes change, or they don’t work the local crowd as much and a band might stop sending out emails about upcoming shows, nor going to house parties and saying “We’re playing next week.”<sup>52</sup> One can recognize why music fans are skeptical of an indie band “going to the dark side” because of their awareness of corporate strategies. The major label band I spoke with offered a different perspective and described the benefits of being on a major:

They put your CD out. You don’t have to work at Herbies, and save up for a year so you can put it out, they put it out for you and they tell people it’s coming out. They put it on the radio.<sup>53</sup>

He also described the sacrifices that come with being in a contract with a major. On a major, “You have contracts with people, if it’s like ‘you’re touring this month,’ you’re touring this month.”<sup>54</sup>

After recording their record, and being signed to a major, the band was surprised to return to play shows in their hometown that were “embarrassingly barren.” The band figured, “Maybe Hamilton people lost ownership in it.”<sup>55</sup>

I think it made us a “fuck you” band, to the scenester, the hipster kids, because we were all hipster kids in the band...they’ll walk away from you if they feel they lose ownership in you, which makes sense. I used to be like that.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Interviewee V.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Interviewee I.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

He claimed that the band

Used to *care* what hipster people thought, and when you just realize that they're not real fans, and that's not a shot at them, it's like the hipster pricks are the ones that are listening to music because they care what the person beside them listening to thinks of what they're listening to. They're not listening to them because they love the bands, and it's weird, because they're the most passionate about music. But the guy at the hockey game that likes the band, the music, he doesn't fuckin' care what anyone else thinks of what he likes. They don't care. They're not going to stop listening to it because it's not cool anymore.<sup>57</sup>

Simon Frith describes the circumstance as an “ideological struggle between artistic truth and commercial compromise” for fans of a band that crosses over to mainstream popularity.<sup>58</sup> The question arises - Is success possible in both indie and mainstream markets simultaneously? Apparently, only in rare cases such as the Arcade Fire, according to interviewees:

The Funeral album is very catchy, well written pop songs, simple enough to be able to get stuck in someone's head, and catchy enough...an album that had a lot of artistic integrity but is also something that can be pretty universally appealing...maybe that can be appreciated without having to invest too much of your attention in it, but if you do invest a lot of attention in it, you probably can find more out of it too, which is why an album like Funeral can still be appreciated by a culture that's more versed in independent music, or that aesthetic, it's very true to that aesthetic, but has to be something more universal with just how catchy and how whistleable the songs are.<sup>59</sup>

This interviewee went on to explain that the song writing is fabulous, the aesthetic is neat, however it is probably not going to find commercial airplay because of the sound of the recording. He called the recording quality “pretty garagey” and claimed, “It's not

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Simon Frith, “Video Pop: Picking Up the Pieces,” *Facing the Music*, edited by Simon Frith (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 130.

going to be heard on 102.1 the Edge probably, except for maybe a special Dave Bookman show or something.”<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, the album did end up receiving commercial airplay on stations including 102.1 and even popular music stations like Mix 99.9. However, these stations play only a song or two off the band’s latest record; they do not seem to explore earlier recordings or more “obscure” tracks.

### **Information Travels Faster: Media**<sup>61</sup>

According to media sources in Hamilton, there’s a premium put on indie music because “it’s cool and everybody wants to be there first.” There is competition between media outlets to interview and do stories on the bands before they “sign to a major label, before they blow up, before people get interested in them.”<sup>62</sup>

College radio is an important method of dispersion of independent music. Interviewees listen primarily to the local school radio stations, CFMU at McMaster University and C101.5 at Mohawk College, claiming to like college radio for the variety: “I’d rather hear something that I haven’t heard...rather than stuff I hear every ten minutes.”<sup>63</sup> Other than College radio, Internet radio was a close second in terms of choice of radio station. Internet radio from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom were popular.

I listen to CFMU [McMaster University] a little bit, if I know the show, or The Edge just to see what they’re playing. I listen to a lot of Internet radio

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<sup>59</sup> Interviewee J.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Death Cab For Cutie, *The Photo Album*, Barsuk Records compact disc BARK21 (2001).

<sup>62</sup> Interviewee F.

<sup>63</sup> Interviewee R.

from the UK and the States. I listen to the BBC Radio 1 a lot, just a general mix. In the states I listen to KCRW, that's more of an alternative station, it's more like a college station. I do it to hear new stuff, but I think I know what I'm going to get into with the stations that I listen to.<sup>64</sup>

Others listened to commercial radio for the contrast. "I find the differences between commercial radio and independent radio pretty fascinating. I like listening to commercial radio to just be extra aware of that contrast, I guess."<sup>65</sup> Interviewees preferred the variety of new independent music played on college radio stations to the repetitive play of major label commercial music on mainstream radio stations.

The print media in Hamilton include the following publications: *The View*, Hamilton's independent weekly; *The Silhouette*, McMaster University's student newspaper; *The Satellite*, Mohawk College's student newspaper; *The Spectator*, Hamilton's daily newspaper; and *Exclaim!*, National Free Press. Just as independent labels and major labels contrasted in terms of scale and specialization, media sources do as well. The local weekly independent paper and the college and university paper placed more emphasis on independent music while the mainstream press focused mainly on major label performances. Interviewees agreed that the free local weekly paper is an important source for music fans. Not only does it provide a weekly listing of upcoming shows but also contains interviews with a number of bands that will be performing during the upcoming week.

Although a writer for the "big" paper in Hamilton said he wants the readers to know about "good music...whether it is Lowest of the Low, or the solo or duo – at

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<sup>64</sup> Interviewee F.

<sup>65</sup> Interviewee J.

Pepperjacks or Jack De Keyser's at the Corktown," he claimed it was his "territory" to write about bands when they get signed to a major label.

I got interested in Jersey as soon as they signed. Didn't know them from a hole in the ground before. As soon as they hit the big label, then it's my territory to pick them up – mainstream radio, mainstream readers, explain why a bunch of labourers from Burlington got signed to Sony.

He considers himself a presenter of music news and claims "It is news when you have 500 independent bands and the big label picks one – that's news". When asked about his work being a personal investment, he explained

If I'm saying as I did many times that Blackie and the Rodeo Kings *Bark* is probably one of the best Canadian CDs of the last year, I'm sticking my neck out, that's a personal investment, that's my reputation. It *better* be that good, and if I'm saying on past performance that they put on a great show, they better play well...

He described his approach to indie musicians as different than commercially successful artists: "you have to be different with amateurs, a bunch of guys who do drywall during the day and get into the Casbah at night..." He described his experience with local band, Fieldguide: "Those kids are tickled that I would run a picture and a recommendation to go see the show. It's validation to be in the newspaper."<sup>66</sup>

This is different than the perspective of an editor for the *Silhouette*, who considers himself invested in local music.

Whenever I do a story on a local band either writing it or editing it, the one thing that's in the back of my mind is I hope people are interested in this. I hope this gets people interested in this, because the more that happens, the better the city's music scene will be.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Interviewee W.

<sup>67</sup> Interviewee F.

He described some of the challenges of working with labels and promoters as tough: “a lot of the times they’ll want you to promote certain things that you don’t want to promote.”<sup>68</sup>

The *Spectator* writer described a different situation. “You build relationships with these labels; people at Maple, True North, etc...They all ask you to do a favour once in a while, express a copy over, and you do it...and it’s give and take.” Other perks he received were free CDs “I probably get more CDs than anybody else in town.” He added that he sees “a lot of shows. Sometimes people buy me beer, I buy them beer.”<sup>69</sup>

For writers at the university paper, keeping CDs after reviewing them is one of the biggest perks. The writers are first and foremost fans according to the editor, who explained, “For some people it’s pretty cool to talk to bands...that’s one of the biggest perks.”<sup>70</sup> Most of the bands they profile as reviews or interviews tend to be independent or on an independent label. Although free CDs and “cool” interviews provide incentives for writers of college/university papers, editors face challenges. One editor pointed a finger at promoters who he thinks can take a more active role in getting independent music to the forefront of local media. He explained, “It seems literally every time I get a press release...it’s about a touring band. I never get press releases about local bands and I don’t like that.”<sup>71</sup> Part of the problem revolves around ticket sales. Promoters pay large guarantees to touring bands to play their venues. Promoters therefore want as much exposure as possible from media, radio, and posterage. “It’s good to have them come to

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Interviewee W.

<sup>70</sup> Interviewee F.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

the city, but in the same respect, shouldn't we want our local bands to be selling out shows? I can't remember the last time I was at a local that was sold out."<sup>72</sup>

Since indie fans spend their time communicating on message boards and talking about independent music, the majority of them do not watch Much Music or MTV, and if they do, they view programs like *Wedge*, *The New Music*, and *Going Coastal*.

It shows a lot of what's happening with Canadian indie rock, showing videos and music that sometimes I've never seen before, or I put the face to a name or a song to a name, if I've heard a song before but I don't know who it is. So I like to watch it for those two shows, but I'm not really a supporter of what goes on from nine to nine on that station.<sup>73</sup>

Holly Kruse discussed the fact that alternative rock and pop videos were "ghettoized in MTV's Sunday night alternative music show, 120 minutes, which aired between midnight and two in the morning."<sup>74</sup> A similar development took place in Canada with *The Wedge*, MuchMusic's fringe program broadcast Fridays at 11 p.m. This time slot does not cater to its audience as most fans of the program and indie music are out at live music venues as promoters often try to book shows that draw a decent audience on weekends. This is why theorists like Holly Kruse have maintained that the Internet is likely to become the primary source for underground video distribution.<sup>75</sup> Evidence of this is on the popular site MySpace.com where bands post tour dates, blogs, songs, videos, and other bands can be posted as "friends" of the band.

Some interviewees watched these stations because of their music-related occupation as writers or promoters. Others said they "don't want to feel like a dinosaur in

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Interviewee G.

<sup>74</sup> Kruse, *Site and Sound*, 92.

my own time. If you lose touch with what's going on, you lose the ability to criticize it.”<sup>76</sup> Interviewees spoke in-depth of how they get exposed to new music through media sources. “I keep my ear to the ground, I read all the alternative music papers. *The View*, the *Andy*, which is an insert in *The Silhouette*, I look at CBC Radio 3 a lot, which is a website, and steelcitymusic.ca.”<sup>77</sup> Some people were introduced to new bands online, “a lot of times bands that I like have links to bands they like.”<sup>78</sup> One older scene member even connected the importance of being knowledgeable about independent music to an awareness of small business in general, arguing: “that there's more than Wal-Mart and Future Shop.”<sup>79</sup> A younger informant admitted that a bands “buzz” plays a big role in her decision to see a live show. “I usually give a lot of new bands a chance if there's a little bit of a buzz, and by buzz I mean David<sup>80</sup> [promoter] saying go to this show because it's going to be good – I'll check it out and then judge based on that.”<sup>81</sup> Her response contrasts with the perspective of older scene members, who go to fewer shows. First, in their younger years, they too attended many shows and have seen many touring bands before – most claimed to have seen most “good” bands a few times. Secondly, they are more particular about the music they listen to and see live because their tastes are generally more refined than the younger scene participants.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>76</sup> Interviewee K.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Interviewee S.

<sup>79</sup> Interviewee A.

<sup>80</sup> Promoter's name changed to maintain anonymity.

<sup>81</sup> Interviewee Q.



Word-of-mouth is one of the most important methods of communication in the scene. One prominent promoter spoke of his use of word of mouth advertising for shows at his club: his agenda is to get as many people to the shows as he can, but he does not tell people about every band that he has booked because it would “lose the effect.” He claimed that if he “were to plug every [show] with a passionate sort of energy behind it...every show would seem special” or lose its specialness. He explained that every show is not special and that such a tactic would adversely affect the turnout. For the most part, he provides people with information, website addresses, places where they can buy the music, biographical information and allows that to “do the talking.”

Every so often, though, there's a band that I truly think is great and I'm confident nobody's ever heard of this band and that's where you'll see me pipe up on a more verbal level, on the street, in the lounge here, “There's this band coming that I think you would really like” and I'm sincere when I'm saying that because I don't do that to every band that I book. There's 60 bands a week that play at my clubs and I usually only pipe up once every 120 bands.<sup>82</sup>

This promoter believes that spoken dialogue is a valuable tool in the indie scene if it is not overused. “If you go to the well too often with the verbal spreading of information, the legitimacy of what you're saying is going to be lost.”<sup>83</sup> Again, the relationship of verbal communication as cultural capital is solidified.

In addition to word of mouth, a buzz can also be created on the Internet. Promoters use the Internet to communicate with touring and local bands and fans. “Because of the Internet I'm able to get information out cheaper, I'm able to get

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<sup>82</sup> Interviewee L.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

information out faster, and I'm able to touch more quantities of people.”<sup>84</sup> This proves to be an effective way of making information available, but one cannot say for certain how many people the information is dispersed to or how deeply people receive this information in contrast to the direct nature word-of-mouth communication. This is different than the methods of major labels. Indie promoters and bands use word of mouth, posters, and online forums to communicate to potential consumers, which connects the producer and consumer, unlike the faceless advertising campaigns by major labels. One of the most prominent sites for indie music fans is [pitchfork.com](http://pitchfork.com). It provides record reviews, interviews with artists and music news.

It automatically sells records. The label guys know, you get on Pitchfork media, you sold 500 records that day. You get a good review - you automatically sell 500 CDs. It's the same as a label, it's the same thing as a magazine, it's telling people what to listen to, it's just like a fuckin' billboard, it's the same thing.<sup>85</sup>

It features sidebar advertising for records and indie rock related companies like American Apparel (sweat-shop free clothing) that is a popular tee-shirt brand choice for bands to screen-print their artwork on.

For indie fans, a premium is put on new music, going to live shows, talking with friends, sharing mix tapes, independent college and university radio, and learning about music via the Internet. Internet music sites for bands, labels, and most importantly music message boards have provided a new system of communication for like-minded people. Message boards/online forums are effectively the new form of fanzines. In 1993, Holly Kruse wrote,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

Local and regional scenes abound with low-budget fanzines, which help to create identities for unknown acts, and with artists who put out tapes and records on their own or with the help of independent record companies.<sup>86</sup>

Although fanzines still exist, most are now located online to avoid printing costs and potentially reach a larger readership. My informants claimed that such forums are “good for posting information about shows...but unless it’s done very strategically, they’re not good for hyping your band, like ‘We’re this great new band that you’ve never heard of.’”<sup>87</sup> A buzz can be effective however if non-band members are talking about a band as in the case of the Arcade Fire recently, the buzz started with people seeing their live shows and posting on message boards. The band went on to receive critical success from a multitude of media sources including a cover story in *Time* magazine.

Many people do not even post on message boards, they simply read what others post to keep informed about upcoming shows and to be aware of what people are talking about in the scene. Evidence of this is present on the online forum Stillepost. The number of *replies* to each post is listed, as well as how many *views* a post has received; it is not uncommon to see a post, which has received a few dozen messages, has been viewed a few hundred times. Most of the people who post know each other and although they have other names or titles they post under, they usually know who each other are. They generally know each other’s real names, forum personas, and they know each other face to face. This sometimes leads to email-like messages being posted in a public forum.

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<sup>85</sup> Interviewee I.

<sup>86</sup> Kruse. “Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture.” *Popular Music* 12, 1 (1993): 33.

<sup>87</sup> Interviewee J.

Differences of opinion sometimes arise on message boards; however, they seem to regulate themselves. One interviewee explained:

You don't even need to necessarily post the big rules and regulations of etiquette, because people, at least in those sorts of 20hz community, either conform to that sort of etiquette, or people who are of different mindsets don't post or don't feel interested in participating.<sup>88</sup>

The internet practices scene participants contrast to the work of a local record company who admitted putting college and high school interns on computers to post on message boards to create hype their bands. They know that message board people react to “friends” telling “friends” about new bands and have taken this approach to advertising.

We just have to have the quality of student that we trust to go on there speaking for us. There's companies in the states that will hire companies to do that sort of stuff, and we're not into that and want it to be at least reasonably legitimate. We're not forcing the kids to do it - we're like “You want to do it?” “Do you want to talk about Cursed on the Internet?” Go and post on all these places their tour dates and just say “hey the record's out” or “it's cool,” and “this review happened in whatever.” I've never had an intern say no. That sounds shifty thing to do. They're like “oh yeah!” - and you know they're on the computer all the time anyway and you know they're into it so we get kids to do that.<sup>89</sup>

These types of practices help provide information to people who are potential buyers, but seem to go against the ideology of indie rock. Hal Niedzviecki describes Focus-grouping of pop songs:

Get a bunch of kids together and ask ‘em: Do you like the song better this way or that way? Should this be the hit single, or that? Capitol Records even has a focus-group sign-up sheet on the Internet. “What about Beck? You are asked. You can choose only from parameters including “Like It a Lot” to “Tired of that Band.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Interviewee P.

<sup>90</sup> Niedzviecki, 312.

Practices differ in indie rock music production. Essentially the music fans are their own focus groups, constantly sharing music they like. Exhibited through attendance at shows, message board activity, mix tape sharing practices, and fashion, indie scene participants develop a sense of personal identity in relation to the scene. These practices are only part of the personal investment made by indie scene participants. As the culture operates as production for producers, most people are involved in the production as well as consumption of indie culture. For example, show goers, band members, promoters, writers, and label owners all described a monetary investment in the music. Importantly though, this is not viewed as a sacrifice by scene participants. They view their monetary investment as less than the value gained by attending a show, playing in a band, putting on a good show, writing about music, or running a label.

These types of activities are generally time consuming as establish a sense of dedication, investment and symbolic labour-of-love. Here we see indie participants as operating within a culture where economic capital is not the primary account of wealth. In indie rock culture we see Bourdieu's concepts of social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital serving as the main forms of accrued wealth. For Bourdieu, an individual is located in a social space and is defined not by social class, but by the amount of combined forms of capital. This resistance by indie participants to dominant meaning systems exhibits a resistance to the ideology of dominant society. Evidence of this resistance is in the indie resistance to major labels, mass media, and the concept of "selling out," essentially a loss of ownership of a band. The social arena in which indie fans

circulate involves a field of social positions structured in terms of cultural capital, personal investment, and identity within the scene.

### **The Past and Pending: CONCLUSION<sup>1</sup>**

At the beginning of this research project I started a collection of names and contact information for people involved in the scene. With this in mind, I approached Calvin Johnson, the founder of K Records and internationally recognized indie rock performer, who was playing a show in Hamilton at the Underground. After his set, I went to him and explained that I was doing a research project on indie rock music and asked if he would be interested in speaking with me. He grabbed a piece of paper and wrote his name, email address and home phone number on it. There is a level of trust, understanding and hospitality within the scene that has not been explored by researchers and I believe to be an important aspect of how this community - both on a local and interlocal level - operates. Independent rock's network of social practices and economic institutions works to locate subjects within a specific local network while connecting them within the larger framework of interlocal scenes. As members of independent rock scenes work to help bands and other members of the subculture, the community sustains itself.

Some believe that the scene is getting dangerously close to being co-opted by the mainstream. Certainly, the music can be profitable. In terms of record sales, indie market share grew from just over fourteen percent in 1999 to nearly nineteen percent in 2003. It dipped slightly in 1994 because Universal Music Canada increased its indie distribution: those sales are not counted among the independents.<sup>2</sup> Also not counted in these statistics

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<sup>1</sup> The Shins, *Oh, Inverted World*, Sub Pop Records compact disc SP# 0550 (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Laura Blue and Hugh Porter. "Indie Heat: How an Unknown Montreal Band Became a Critical Favourite and Helped put Canadian Music on the World Map," *Time Magazine* (Canadian Edition, 4 April 2005) (accessed March 31, 2006) <[www.timecanada.com/story.adp?storyid=001](http://www.timecanada.com/story.adp?storyid=001)>.

are indie albums that are sold “off the stage” directly from the performer to an audience member, which probably puts the percentage of indie sales even higher.

Seattle’s Modest Mouse had their most recent album, *Good News For People who Love Bad News*, debut at number nineteen on Billboard’s album chart, selling 80,000 copies in a week. Ben Gibbard’s side project, the electronic-pop duo the Postal Service, has sold 250,000 copies of its first CD, *Give Up*. “Five years ago, a record that sold 50,000 copies was a huge success in our world,” says Rich Egan, president of Vagrant Records.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise in the world of file sharing, Jonathan Poneman, founder of Nirvana’s original label, Sub Pop Records, whose roster now includes the Postal Service, the Shins, and Iron & Wine describes, “Each month we get our statements from Apple - for our music bought on iTunes - and we’re starting to make some serious money there.” He explains, “If that model’s working, and it appears to be, that changes everything.”<sup>4</sup>

Not everyone is getting rich of indie rock though. The people who do drywall during the day and play shows on weekends will probably continue to do so – and enjoy it. The cultural capital lies in the process for indie participants. Part of what indie fans like about the music is that not everyone else does like it, because they don’t have the required cultural capital or years of experience to appreciate the music for its value. Indie scene participants can appreciate the music, though, because they are most often producers themselves, whether as musicians, promoters or tee-shirt screen printers.

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<sup>3</sup> Devin Gordon. “Rock’s Big Bounce,” *Newsweek* (17 May 2005), (accessed 18 March 2006). <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4933394/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



According to Newsweek,

We're in a golden age for pure songwriting, with rare talents like Gibbard, the Shins' James Mercer and Wilco's Jeff Tweedy revitalizing the four-minute pop song and making a case that, in fact, it hasn't all been done before. If there's one knock against this new school of rock, it's that no one seems willing to step up and become class president.<sup>5</sup>

Ben Gibbard thinks, “something amazing is about to happen...I don't want to guess what it'll be, but you can just feel it coming.”<sup>6</sup>

Indie is indeed a phenomenon, and one requiring more exploration. The data collected for this project yielded more plentiful results than anticipated and covered a number of topics that could not be explored within the space limitations for this project. In our drive thru society, it takes thinkers like Hal Niedzviecki to propose an antidote, “Do something, anything, that can't be decoded and marketed back to you.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Hal Niedzviecki. *We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Re-invention of Mass Culture*. Toronto: Penguin, 2000. 311.

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APPENDIX A: POSTER



# RESEARCH STUDY

Do you like independent music?  
Do you see bands perform?  
Do you play in a band?

**Graduate Student seeks participants  
for an 'indie rock' research study.**

Interviews last about 1 hour and are conducted in  
Togo Salmon Hall 430, McMaster University  
(or a convenient location for you).

Interviews are tape-recorded (with your permission). No remuneration provided.

Email [indierockresearch@sympatico.ca](mailto:indierockresearch@sympatico.ca) before Feb. 25<sup>th</sup> for more details.

[indierockresearch@sympatico.ca](mailto:indierockresearch@sympatico.ca)  
[indierockresearch@sympatico.ca](mailto:indierockresearch@sympatico.ca)  
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[indierockresearch@sympatico.ca](mailto:indierockresearch@sympatico.ca)  
[indierockresearch@sympatico.ca](mailto:indierockresearch@sympatico.ca)

## **APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INFORMATION**

Student Investigator: Kate Davies  
McMaster University TSH 430  
indierockresearch@sympatico.ca

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Christina Baade  
McMaster University TSH 408 x23736  
baadec@mcmaster.ca

This research study is on indie rock in Hamilton, Ontario and is part of the completion of degree requirements for a M.A. in Music Criticism. The study will yield insight into the Hamilton indie rock music scene.

Interviews last about 1 hour and are conducted in Togo Salmon Hall 430, McMaster University (or a convenient location for the subject). The interview will be tape-recorded (with your permission). Interviews are conducted anonymously. You will not be identified by name in the research findings. Efforts will be made to avoid including any information that allows individuals to be identified in the research findings. You may decline from answering any questions. You may withdraw from participation at any time during the study. If you withdraw from the study, your data will be destroyed.

As a participant in this research study, you are involved in an important area of study currently being theorized by the critical community. You stand to gain a new understanding of your own scene by having access to the results. You will be contacted when the research results are complete and provided with a summary of the findings.

The project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). Participants with concerns or questions about involvement in the study can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat  
C/O the Office of Research Ethics  
Telephone: 905-525-9140 ext. 23142  
Email: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca



## APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Student Investigator: Kate Davies  
McMaster University TSH 430  
indierockresearch@sympatico.ca

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Christina Baade  
McMaster University TSH 408 x23736  
baadec@mcmaster.ca

This research study is on indie rock in Hamilton, Ontario and is part of the completion of degree requirements for a M.A. in Music Criticism. The study will yield insight into the Hamilton indie rock music scene.

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As a participant in this research study, you are involved in an important area of study currently being theorized by the critical community. You stand to gain a new understanding of your own scene by having access to the results. You will be contacted when the research results are complete and provided with a summary of the findings.

Please select **YES** or **NO**:

2. Can the information you provide in this interview be used for future use in related academic projects (i.e. Thesis defence, multimedia presentation, etc.)? ☐ **YES** or ☐ **NO**

The project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). Participants with concerns or questions about involvement in the study can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat  
C/O the Office of Research Ethics  
Telephone: 905-525-9140 ext. 23142  
Email: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_