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## Portland's Independent Music Scene: The Formation of Community Identities and Alternative Urban Cultural Landscapes

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Portland's Independent Music Scene:  
The Formation of Community Identities and Alternative Urban Cultural Landscapes

by

Rebecca Elizabeth Ball

A thesis submitted in partial requirements for the degree of

Master of Urban Studies

Thesis Committee:  
Gerald Sussman, Chair  
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Portland State University  
2010

## Abstract

Portland has a rich, active, and fluid music culture which is constantly being (re)created and (re)defined by a loose network of local musicians who write, record, produce, promote, distribute, and perform their music locally (and sometimes regionally, nationally, and internationally) and local residents, or audiences, who engage in local musical practices. Independent (“indie”) local music making in Portland, which is embedded in DIY (do it yourself) values, creates alternative cultural places and landscapes in the city and is one medium through which some people represent themselves in the community. These residents not only perform, consume, promote, and distribute local music, they also (re)create places to host musical expressions. They have built alternative and democratic cultural landscapes, or culturescapes, in the city. Involved Portlanders strive to make live music performances accessible and affordable to all people, demonstrating through musical practices that the city is a shared space and represents a diversity of people, thoughts, values, and cultural preferences.

Using theoretical tools from critical research about the economic, spatial, and social role of cultures in cities, particularly music, and ethnographic research of the Portland music scene, including participant observations and in-depth interviews with Portland musicians and other involved residents, this research takes a critical approach to examining ways in which manifestations of independent music are democratic cultural experiences that influence the city’s cultural identity and are a medium through which a loosely defined group of Portlanders represent their cultural values

and right to the city. In particular, it focuses on how local musical practices, especially live performances, (re)create alternative spaces within the city for musical expressions and influence the city's cultural landscapes, as well as differences between DIY independent music in Portland and its commodified forms and musicians and products produced by global music industry.

## Dedication

To Michelle and Doug Ball. Mama and Dad – for Portland, Seattle, Vancouver B.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, New York, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Paris, London, Barcelona. For Driggs, Jackson Hole, Yellowstone National Park, Targhee National Forest, Swan Valley, Palisades, Ketchum. For showing me that there are many ways to live and places to live in, and that there is more than one experience going on at any given moment. You didn't simply take me to cities and towns, you were the first to show me how to see them and their people. You were my first teachers of urban studies. You introduced me to my passions, and your belief in me is what has pushed me to pursue them.

## Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support and help of several individuals. Gerald Sussman, my committee chair and advisor, worked with me for over a year and a half on this research, but he has been an inspiring faculty member since I started my M.U.S. coursework. His Cities in the Political Economy class inspired me to apply to the M.U.S. program in the first place, and each subsequent class reminded me why I was in the program. From elementary to graduate school, I have never had a teacher who has expanded my critical thinking in the way he has. He is an amazing teacher and his support, enthusiasm, comments, thoughts, and critiques are the tools that allowed my idea to become a research study.

Ian Anderson and Arya Imig, two active members of Portland's independent music scene were key informants throughout the duration of my research. They introduced me to venues, other musicians, and their thoughts, comments, and excitement about this research were inspiring.

Ellen Basset and Karen Gibson, two of my committee members, offered helpful criticism at the end of this research project that helped me provide a stronger framework around independent music and DIY values and establish what this research is and is not (but could be), making it a stronger paper.

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## Chapter 1

### **Cultural Landscapes of Cities: Introduction to Portland's Local Indie Music Culture**

In a world of intensified globalization, links between space, music and identity are increasingly tenuous, yet places give credibility to music...and music is commonly linked to place through claims to tradition, "authenticity" and originality, and as a marketing device. John Connell and Chris Gibson 2006: 7.

#### **Creating Community and City Images through Local Music**

The first PDX Pop Now! Music Festival and CD compilation, both of which only featured Portland based bands, marked its debut at a local Portland all-ages venue called the "Meow Meow", which donated its space for the event. The festival was organized by a small group of young Portlanders who sought to "expand Portland's music audience, and enhance the sense of unity and purpose within [the] community" through local music (PDX Pop Now! 2008). Six years later the non-profit organization maintains its original mission to connect Portland's "vital and diverse" music community to the public through CD compilations, an annual all-ages music festival, and music benefits or related events throughout the year. Over the past six years, the festival has increased in popularity and notoriety, with an Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) journalist, Jeremy Petersen, claiming that the 2009 PDX Pop Now! Music Festival "proved once again that Portland's local neighborhood show featuring local neighborhood bands will beat your town's every time" (Peterson 2009).

The non-profit is not alone in boasting that Portland's independent ("indie") music scene is a distinguishing cultural element of the city that contributes to its cultural identity. Portland musicians, their fans, and even local media suggest that the

relationship between the city and its local independent music culture influences the city's cultural landscapes, or culturoscapes, and is an integral part of its image. In the introduction to *The Portland Edge: Challenges and Success in Growing Communities*, Connie Ozawa asks how can we, in a global atmosphere of inadequate social connections, “organize ourselves spatially and restore our sense of community?” (Ozawa 2004:1). The search for answers, she suggests, lies in studying communities in which people want to live, such as Portland, Oregon. People chose to live in Portland for differing and overlapping reasons – the geographic landscape and recreational opportunities, progressive land use laws and the Urban Growth Boundary (U.G.B), the growing public transportation system and safe bike commuting paths, the relatively affordable housing – but people may also want to live here because Portlanders seem to care about one another and their community (Ozawa 2004). And, perhaps even more importantly, they feel they have the agency and capacity to help shape the political, social, and cultural values of the city. Portland's local independent music scene represents one way Portlanders spatially organize themselves to foster community connections in a global atmosphere where culture is often used in cities to control public spaces and generate wealth.

Independent (“indie”) music scenes exist in cities and communities across the United States (and world) – notable scenes include those in Brooklyn, New York; Athens, Georgia; San Francisco, California; Seattle and Olympia; Washington, Chapel Hill; North Carolina; Austin, Texas; Detroit, Michigan; Chicago, Illinois; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Denver, Colorado. Some independent music scenes are

linked to particular sounds or styles, however more often these scenes are categorized as an alternative to “mainstream” popular music. “Indie” music, to be referred to in this research as “independent”, has roots in punk music from the 1970s that challenged and circumvented the global music industry and popular mainstream music. However, independent music is no longer one genre of music – it can be punk, rock, folk, electronic, underground hip-hop, or country (or a blending of genres). Independent music that is the subject of this research is tied up in new, mostly youth, forms of mediated communication and social interaction and is embedded in, at varying levels, DIY (do it yourself) values. DIY is a philosophy that Ben Holtzman, Craig Hughes, and Kevin Van Meter, authors of “Do It Yourself...and the Movement Beyond Capitalism” define as an idea that

you can do for yourself the activities normally reserved for the realm of capitalist production (wherein products are created for consumption in a system that encourages alienation and non-participation). Thus anything from music and magazines to education and protest can be created in a non-alienation, self-organized, and purposefully anti-capitalist manner...DIY is not simply a means of spreading alternative forms of social organizing or a symbolic exchange of a better society; it is the active construction of counter-relationships and the organization against and beyond capitalism (Holtzman et. al., 2007: 45)

While this is an adequate, albeit broad, description of DIY values and music cultures, it should be emphasized that DIY participants have debated the meaning of the concept since its emergence in the 1970s in Great Britain. It is fluid yet fragmented, localized yet sometimes linked to global social networks, and it reacts against or responds to the contemporary social, economic, and political climate (Holtzman et. al., 2007). For these reasons, independent music scenes in which

participants associate themselves (to varying degrees) with DIY values differ between communities. There is no set formula for building and sustaining a local independent music scene, and these types of cultural clusters are not part of larger cultural development or rejuvenation strategies. They are disorderly manifestations created by local musicians and audiences making each local music community authentic.

Portland has a rich, active, and fluid music culture which is constantly being (re)created and (re)defined by a loose network of local musicians who write, record, produce, promote, distribute, and perform their music locally (and sometimes regionally, nationally, and internationally) and local residents, or audiences, who actively engage in local musical practices. It should be stipulated here that the independent music scene that is subject to this research represents a specific type of music making in Portland connected to DIY values and a loosely defined network of younger Portlanders (to be further discussed in Chapter 3). While it is not inclusive of all music genres and not all Portlanders participate in the scene, it is one example of how people in Portland organize spatially, build community, and make Portland a place they want to live. The scene is evidenced through the variety of venues (all-ages; house; restaurant; bar) created to host live performances, and the demonstrated commitment of active participants to make shows non-exclusive and accessible. This is accomplished by a number of actions including making shows affordable or free, all-ages, and promoting music related manifestations through a variety of print and virtual mediums.

Local youth culture in Portland and the Pacific Northwest has a long-standing relationship with musical expressions and practices, with academic documentation of this dating back to the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the “Northwest Sound,” described as raw and unrefined, exemplified by the song *Louie Louie* that was made famous by the Portland band “The Kingsmen” in 1965 who adapted the song. Another example includes “garage bands” from the early 1990s, most closely linked to Seattle (Gill 1995). Today, Portland’s popular music scene is not known for a specific sound. It encompasses a plethora of genres such as rock, punk, hip-hop, electronic, and folk. Often, Portland bands choose multiple and untraditional musical genres to describe their sound. For example, according to their respective MySpace pages, Guidance Counselor is “glam/grime/ghettotech,” The Nurses is “visual/visual/visual,” Reporter is “experimental/electro/rock,” and Wampire is “alternative/psychedelic/crunk.”

The city’s music scene is one manifestation of what Carl Abbott, a long-time Portland historian, identifies as the city’s “strong alternative arts scene” that centers on musicians, performers, visual artists, writers, zine and comic book creators, and individuals engaged in other creative activities” (Abbott 2001: 93). Abbott asserts that Portland is on the “circuit of tolerant towns” that attracts recent college graduates and other young creative people who have consciously decided to live and work in Portland because of its “cultural and creative environment that takes intellectual life seriously but is supportive rather than cutthroat and has not locked in ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ styles” (Abbott 2001: 94). The artistic environment that Abbott describes is an alternative to capitalist culture. Cultural products and events are not valued

predominately because of their “exchange-value” in the symbolic economy, rather than their “use-value”, or the worth they have to people and how they choose to experience culture (Holtzman et. al., 2007: 45).

A recent transplant to Portland, local musician and producer Tai Carmen Wagner agrees with Abbott’s assessment of the city. She articulated her perception of differences between Portland’s local music scene and that of Los Angeles, where she played in bands for close to a decade, saying:

I think the tunnel-vision goal of getting signed by major labels, which is the dominant goal among Los Angeles musicians, drains people of the necessary attitudes that foster creativity. Everyone is trying to make it, and they forget about why they started, which was, in most cases, hopefully, to make good music. In Portland, we are all dependent on each other, because there aren't many – perhaps any – big companies backing us. There isn't any big money keeping us afloat. We are out here on our own and we need to help each other. It only makes sense to reach out and invite your neighbor to dinner; see how you can be mutually enriching to one another's goals. And of course when everyone's working together, everything goes better (Wagner March 2010).

While this is not a comparative study between the local independent music scene in Portland and Los Angeles (or any other city), Wagner’s comment reflects the DIY elements of the Portland independent music scene. She speaks of community and collaboration, with making “good music” primary over “making it” in the global music industry. Portland bands in the independent music scene – some born in the city and others that transplanted themselves there – with more national notoriety include “The Decemberists,” “The Shins,” “Modest Mouse,” “M. Ward,” “Floater,” the “Dandy Warhols,” “Menomena,” “Sleater-Kenney,” “The Thermals,” “Pyramiddd” (formally “Starfucker”), and late Elliot Smith. These are some of the more known

members of what is a large, growing, and loosely defined network of bands, musicians, and audiences who sustain the local independent music culture in the city. While people outside of Portland, and even many locals, would not recognize local bands like “Guidance Counselor,” “Nurses,” “Lovers,” “Fake Drugs,” “Breakfast Mountain,” “Reporter,” “Atole,” “White Fang,” “Explode Into Colors,” “Wampire,” “Typhoon,” or “The Blow” (and many more), the presence of independent local music making in the community is obvious, from small music venues in neighborhoods across the city, to paper flyers in coffee shops, bars, and restaurants advertising local shows, to major festivals like PDX Pop Now!, to media stories in the *Oregonian*, Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB), National Public Radio (NPR), *Slate Magazine*, and the *New York Times*.

### **The Relevance of Local Independent Music Scenes in Urban Studies**

Before moving forward, we need to ask what is “culture?” Culture is “what makes human human”; it is a way of life and a vehicle through which people build relationships and symbolic meanings in their communities (Mitchell 2003: 14). Individuals, groups, communities, and countries use culture to construct identities, express diversity, and publicly represent themselves. To this end, “culture” should be discussed in the plural form – “cultures” – because cultures are built from the diversity of human values, opinions, and identities. Cultures are representations of diversity. Like humans, cultures are not static, nor are they completely independent from other cultural expressions (Mitchell 2003).

Raymond Williams (1983) argued that communities can be studied through their culture(s) because they are a “record of a number of important and continuing reactions to these changes in our social, economic, and political life, and may be seen, in [themselves], as a special kind of map by means of which the nature of the changes can be explored” (Williams 1983: xvii). If cultures, in William’s analysis, are not only a way of life and medium through which communities define themselves, but also a mapping of society (and changes in society), than it is not only appropriate but necessary to incorporate an analysis of people’s relationships with cultural manifestations into urban studies, especially because these manifestations often occur in public spaces and contribute to place-making. This research adopts urban geographer Ray Hudson’s explanation of “places”. He describes places as “complex entities, ensembles of material objects, people, and systems of social relationships embodying distinct cultures and multiple meanings, identities, and practices...[that] are contested and continually in the process of becoming” (Hudson 2006: 627). Places are not just spaces, but also the emotions and behaviors that the activities they host foster.

Cultural manifestations take up space and influence how these spaces become places, and therefore are unequivocal parts of urban life, politics, and planning. They are realized through forms such as art, music, literature, farmers markets, parades, and sporting events that occur in public and other physical spaces like museums, theatres, arenas, convention centers, public parks, cafes, restaurants, and libraries. Most importantly, cultures are realized through people. Cultural identities can be expressed



through style of dress, locations people frequent (neighborhoods; bars; restaurants; coffee shops), and the activities in which people choose to engage. Cities have become centers for differing and disorderly cultural expressions whether they come in the form of commodities to attract tourists and earn capital for the city, symbols of diversity, or representations of people's contribution to public life (Zukin 2004; Sussman and Estes 2004).

Urban dwellers may passively experience culture at many points during a day. Simply by traveling through the city to work or home one is likely to see advertisements for music, sporting, or artistic events. There is high probability that one might pass by retail stores, parks, coffee shops, museums, restaurants, art galleries, and sports arenas on a regular basis. People are constantly experiencing cultures in cities, and because some of the most visible cultural expressions are structurally large, globalized, and commodified, examples in which individuals and communities have an *active* role in the creation, manifestation, and meaning of public cultural expressions can be overlooked because they occur in smaller structures outside urban centers. For example, in a city profile of Portland, the city's central business district is described as a "three mile radius and retail core of downtown [that] still includes nearly *all* [my emphasis] of the important regional institutions and civic facilities," citing theatres, a performing arts center, art and history museums, Portland State University, the Oregon Zoo, a minor league sports arena, a convention center, and professional basketball stadium (Gibson and Abbott 2002: 428). This cultural profile of Portland is not inaccurate, though it focuses solely on major structural institutions

in which organized and capital intensive cultural activities occur, overlooking alternative cultural expressions in the city that are important and meaningful to people. These institutions are often not accessible to all residents because of high-ticket prices and exclusivity in who is allowed to actively participate in deciding how cultural activities in these institutions are manifested. To this latter point, these institutions do not consult residents as to what cultural experiences are available in these institutions, but reserve these decision making opportunities for board of directors or high-level employees.

A common element of most cultural expressions, and of particular interest to this study, is that cultures manifest themselves in physical spaces. These expressions, and people's responses to them, are what transform spaces into *places* and establish "venues". Massive structures and the capital to create spectacles are not needed to experience culture or public cultural life. In Portland people come together to experience cultural manifestations in the living room of a house, a coffee shop, public park, or local show venue. And perhaps these cultural experiences are more accessible and pertinent to some people's daily lives than cultural manifestations decided by a board of directors, seeing an exhibit at the "Portland Art Museum", or watching the NBA team Portland Trail Blazers play basketball sitting in the 100<sup>th</sup> row at the "Rose Garden Arena".

Cultural landscapes of cities are often centered on artistic and cultural forms that are experienced visually or those that require large physical spaces for their consumption (Zukin 2004). In the context of music as a cultural form, until the earlier

part of this century urban studies and cultural geography literature focused less on how the action of performing and experiencing music in urban places may alter or add to their cultural meanings. Instead, studies discussed music in terms of where it is performed and consumed, including music halls, theatres, and on the radio. In other words, music has often been studied in terms of where it is played, instead of how experiencing live musical performances *creates* or *influences* the cultural meanings associated with places (Connell and Gibson 2006).

Using theoretical tools from critical research about the economic, spatial, and social role of cultures in cities, particularly music, and ethnographic research of the Portland music scene, including participant observations and in-depth interviews with Portland musicians and other involved residents, this research takes a critical approach to examining ways in which manifestations of independent (“indie”) DIY (do it yourself) music are democratic cultural experiences that influence the city’s cultural identity and are a medium through which a loosely defined group of Portlanders represent their cultural values and right to the city. In particular, it focuses on how local musical practices, especially live performances, (re)create alternative spaces within the city to host musical expressions and influence the city’s culturescapes, as well as differences between DIY independent music in Portland and its commodified forms and musicians and products produced by global music industry.

People in places shape musical practices and expressions, but they do so within larger historical, cultural, spatial, and economic structures (Connell and Gibson 2006). In this regard, several important questions must be answered to determine the spatial

and social significance of local independent music in Portland, and how people involved in music practices have created alternative and democratic culturescapes in the city to accommodate musical expressions. To begin, what role does culture have in cities and are the most visible and dominate cultural institutions representative of and accessible to all residents? Next, how does local music making influence how people in the city spatially organize themselves, and how does this alter Portland's culturescapes and the meaning attached to places? How do experiences tied to musical practices build community? Is it a democratic cultural expression in the city, and what factors define it as such? Lastly, how are the structural elements of promoting and distributing local music linked to those of the global music industry?

Answers to these questions help address the layers of local music culture in Portland. They illuminate how the practices, social networks, and values associated with music as a cultural expression create alternative culturescapes in Portland and influence the city's image. They also address how local music activities are bound up in space, create place, and are affected by the greater physical, social, and economic factors of the city. Finally, they identify how the promotion and distribution of local music are linked to *and* distinct from global music industry structures and influences.

### **The People and Places of Portland's Local Independent Music Culture**

Local music making has been playing a role in (re)shaping the culturescapes of Portland since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gill 1995). Integral to the development of local music cultures are the number and variety of available and accessible spaces to perform and experience music (Scott 1999). Local bars, dance

halls, coffee shops, and residences have been transformed (both permanently and for a fixed amount of time) by people into makeshift music venues, and these venues hold unique meanings to people because of their association with local musical practices and meanings (Enrikin 1996). Live music performances have become a way through which musicians and their audiences create a sense of meaning and belonging to the city.

Importantly, because these Portlanders value local independent music, they have created places for its manifestation, altering the city's culturescapes to accommodate their cultural needs and preferences. Many participants consciously attempt to make expressions of independent music culture accessible, illustrated through the number of opportunities for people to experience music culture – either through live music performances in house and business venues, or through virtual and physical representations of the culture including picture essays (PDX Pop Now! Photographs 2004-2008), short videos documenting musical performances such as those produced by Into the Woods ([www.intothewoods.tv](http://www.intothewoods.tv)) “a website hosting several episodic music series documenting and showcasing music of the northwest,” dinner lecture series put on by local organizations like the Dill Pickle Club (Northwest Passage: A 3-Part Dinner Lecture Series Examining the History of Independent Music in the NW, 2010), and dozens of blogs and social media sites (Into The Woods 2010). This culture is not based on capitalistic values. Instead, it is embedded in DIY values that encourage participants to create affordable places to actively experience an alternative to consuming products produced by the global music industry.

As briefly discussed, places where local musicians perform for local audiences are often overlooked or minimized in importance when studying the culturescapes of Portland and other cities. They are predominantly located outside the main cultural centers and may not represent economic or employment opportunities for the city (Zukin 1998). Instead, more prominence is placed on cultural institutions that require highly visible consumption spaces or those that are designed to accommodate activities that produce large amounts of capital and facilitate employment (Zukin 1998). These institutions may include theatres, concert halls, convention centers, sports stadiums, museums, and shopping centers. Although they may differ in size and design between cities, the activities they host are uniform and make urban centers into franchises of “the international distribution of the same standardized, mass produced, consumer goods such as clothing and movies, as well as the same generalized ‘aesthetic’ products, such as artworks and historic buildings” (Zukin 1998: 829). This idea is articulated by Lisa Schonberg from *Explode Into Colors*:

In Boston there’s so much art but it’s all “high art.” It’s not accessible. It’s different than here. It’s an economic thing there, it’s a cultural thing here. There aren’t any DIY scenes in Boston. I think [if Portland did not have the DIY music scene] maybe I wouldn’t live here, I don’t know. If I start a project here in Portland, I know I’ll get the support I need to get that project more attention and get shows and stuff. I don’t think it would be as easy [anywhere else](Schonberg 2010).

Like Boston, Portland does not lack for defined cultural districts and institutions, such as the “Cultural District” located on the South Park Blocks where the Portland Art Museum and approximately six theatres are located, the Rose Garden Arena, home to the Portland Trail Blazers that also acts as a venue for concerts of

global artists ranging from John Mayer to Hannah Montana, or the “Pearl District,” which boasts dozens of art galleries, high priced restaurants, and the “Gerding Theatre,” home of productions by Portland Center Stage. I do not suggest that the cultural roles of these institutions in the city should be discounted; rather the point is they are particular representations of Portland’s cultural identity and landscapes and are not inclusive of, desired by, or accessible to all residents.

In the context of independent music culture in Portland, is it more meaningful that Elton John, John Mayer, and Nickleback – musicians who have no local attachments to cultural places or practices in the city – are slotted to perform at the Rose Garden Arena in 2010 (for a minimum ticket price of \$50 or higher), or that on any given night at least 5 local bands are performing in coffee houses, bars, small music venues, or residences for a low or no cost? Both feed into the culturescapes and identity of the city, both serve interested residents. But, Portland Trail Blazers basketball games and trendy restaurants in the Pearl District are only pieces of a mosaic of cultural opportunities and experiences available in the city. While advertisements, high ticket prices, employment opportunities, and other capital generating factors linked to some cultural expressions make them more visible and, it could be argued, more valuable to the city’s economic interests, there is an alternative view on which this research is based. As poignantly put forth by Sussman and Estes,

Cities are not just for gentrified professionals who love the reliable atmosphere of Starbucks, afternoon lattes, nouveau cuisine or who welcome new sports arenas, conference complexes, and the simulacra of retail, tourist-oriented “restoration” of the old city, harborside areas, historical landmarks, and the like. Cities are shared space (and the media that represent them), are for all citizens – of all nationalities, ethnicities, ways of life, and outlooks –

and not just those with privileged tastes and “birth rights” (Sussman and Estes 2004:119).

Local independent music is an alternative way some Portlanders demonstrate how the city is a *shared* space and that it can – in disorderly ways – represent a diversity of people with varying cultural desires and preferences. Musicians and audiences use local musical expressions to attach meanings to places, fulfill their unique cultural desires, and express the social, economic, or political conditions of their lives. Places in Portland where local musical expressions occur, including their production, promotion, and performance, are often located outside Portland’s designated cultural districts or places. They are alternative cultural spaces that are continually being (re)created to experience local music. They include coffee houses (Stumptown; Backspace), bars and restaurants (Mississippi Studios; The Doug Fir; Rontoms; Branx; Rotture; Dune; Victory; Valentines), and small show (concert) venues (The Wonder Ballroom; Crystal Ballroom; Holocene; Aladdin Theatre). Many of these are locally owned and operated and host both local and visiting independent musicians. The venues often display advertisements for upcoming shows and have a presence in virtual spaces such as band websites, MySpace, and Facebook where local music cultural activity also occurs. Other spaces include residences that are temporarily transformed for music performances (“Dekum Manner;” “The Green Room;” “The Artistry”), empty buildings (The Hush, shut down by the OLCC in December 2008 for operating without a liquor license and not abiding by fire code), as well as parks, parking lots, and abandoned train cars.



## **Studying the Formation of Community Identities and Alternative Urban Culturescapes**

While academic studies of local music scenes often focus on how a particular genre of music and its associated scene or subculture define local music cultures (Cohen 1995; Bennett and Peterson 2004; Gill 1995), the significance of Portland's music culture lies in the infrastructure, networks, practices, and values that enable the existence of the local music scene, expressions of which can be seen in public, private, and virtual spaces across the city. This perhaps is the biggest limitation of many of the case studies on local music scenes – so much emphasis is placed on the “sound” of the music or its resistance to the global music industry that its spatial significance in communities is overlooked. Places in which music is performed and experienced, efforts to make the culture accessible to bands and audiences, and the role and responsibility individuals and collectives have in maintaining the presence of a local music culture in the city (and documenting it) are more pertinent descriptors of how local musical expressions influence culturescapes and experiences in Portland than placing these musicians and audiences into a defined subculture based on the genre or sound of the music. Regardless of whether the consumption of music is done passively or is actively experienced, “everyday associations with places may come to be defined by musical expressions on a number of levels” (Connell and Gibson 2006: 6).

In Portland, there is a strong presence of Portlanders actively experiencing music in alternative cultural venues across the city. These places in which musicians and audiences choose to experience live music performances become part of the city's culturescapes, making local music culture another representation of Portland's identity

and a way in which some residents understand social relations and cultural life within the city (Connell and Gibson 2006). Even more, because of the emphasis on authenticity, non-alienation, and an alternative to commercialized music, cultural places associated with Portland's local independent music culture are not franchises of the international distribution of cultural sameness (Zukin 2004). To this point, local musical expressions may be "an effective form of resistance to the homogenizing forces of the culture industry, not necessarily by producing an alternative sound, but by enabling people to experience music in distinctive localized ways" (Smith 1997: 237).

The following examination of how a community of local independent musicians and their audiences contribute to the creation of Portland's culturescapes and image has been framed through this discussion of how the study of local music cultures fits into the larger academic subject of urban studies and community development, relying particularly on theories put forth by Sharon Zukin (2004) about the significant role cultures have in the formation and control of public spaces. This discussion has also illustrated how local musical practices are examples of people's resistance to processes of cultural homogenization of cities, including the use of cultures to generate capital in a symbolic global economy.

The literature chosen in the following literature review is grounded in a critical theoretical framework that people (as audiences and musicians) can actively participate in (re)creating cultural places in cities, and that "understandings of space and place are mediated by popular cultural forms," including music (Connell and

Gibson 2003: 2). This theoretical framework relies heavily on critical literature by John Connell and Chris Gibson who “redress the rather neglected place of geography in any analysis of popular music, tracing the links between music, place and identity at different scales, from inner-city ‘scenes’ to the music of nations” in their book *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity, and Place* (Connell and Gibson 2006: x). Despite their heavy focus on linking music communities to particular sounds, which may be becoming less relevant in contemporary DIY based independent music scenes, their analysis of dozens of case studies about music scenes and expressions across time and place provided me with theoretical tools to examine the links between independent local music and the creation of cultural spaces in the case studies presented in the literature and in my own analysis of Portland’s local music scene.

Case studies found in the literature review, particularly the studies by Warren Gill (1996), Ken Spring (2004), Amanda Nogie and Alexander Riley (2007), and David Grazian (2004) are used as theoretical tools to examine how music is a way through which places are created and public cultural life is experienced. The literature and case studies represent the historical, cultural, and spatial significance of local independent music. They include an examination of identity formation through musical practices (Bennett 2004); people’s resistance to cultural homogenization and exclusivity within their communities (Connell and Gibson 2006); how local musical expressions create places and influence on the culturescapes of cities (Grazian 2004; Spring 2004; Bennett and Peterson 2004; Connell and Gibson 2004 and 2006; Hudson 2005), and how community identities may be tied to local music culture (Gill 1996).

The theories and observations found in the literature review are integral to critically analyzing findings from the ethnographic research conducted within Portland's local music scene. The presentation of these findings follows the literature review. Participant observations and in-depth interviews with musicians and other involved residents in Portland were conducted to specifically examine ways in which independent music in Portland influences the city's culturescapes and how people may chose to experience public life. From this ethnographic research, examples were found of how local music practices are linked to place-making and drive the creation of alternative culturescapes in the city, and also how local music is a vehicle through which musicians and audiences can represent their place in the city.

Next, as local independent music making is not completely separate from the structure and practices of the global music industry, an analysis of the music industry and how it influences Portland's local independent music culture is presented. This analysis is framed in Theodore Adorno's (1975) discussion of the standardization and commodification of art by the culture industries and it illustrates differences between commodified musical expressions from Portland's local music scene and those produced by "major" record labels. The commercial sell of these commodified products is further explored using Raymond Williams' (1962; 1980; 1983) theoretical analysis of mass culture and how advertising is a means through which images and spectacles produced by the music industry are sold to mass audiences.

Together, these chapters illustrate that independent musical practices in Portland (re)create alternative culturescapes in the city and influence the city's cultural

image. They further demonstrate how music can be a vehicle through which people construct understandings of public life, represent themselves in public spaces, and attach meanings to places within Portland. To reiterate, this research does not encompass *all* musical expressions in Portland; it is focused on DIY independent music making that presents an alternative to music produced by the global music industry and major record labels. This is a study that examines one way in which some residents spatially organize themselves to represent their cultural values and make Portland “their city.”

## Chapter 2

### **Creating the Image of Cities through Musical Expressions: Literature Review and Research Methods**

Music functions as a form of entertainment and aesthetic satisfaction, a sphere of communication and symbolic representation, and both a means of validating social institutions and ritual practices, and a challenge to them. Music may comment upon and reinforce, invert, negate, or diffuse social relations of power. Connell and Gibson, 2006: 43.

The following literature review highlights how music is a motivator and a vehicle that people may use to democratize urban spaces for purposes of unique cultural expressions. Further, by creating or transforming spaces for musical expressions, music is a cultural form people exercise to represent diversity and attach meanings to places within the city. Rowland Atkinson argues that music and sound “can be seen as spatial and temporal territories in the city suggesting that for particular groups the soundscape has a profound effect on patterns of social association, physical movement, and interaction” (Atkinson 2007: 1915). He refers to “soundscapes,” or alternative culturescapes, as places or areas within the city that have become linked or attached to music because of they are organized to some degree around musical activities (Atkinson 2007).

The literature reviewed in this section takes a critical approach to examining how alternative culturescapes are created by musicians and their audiences through musical practices which transform public spaces in the city to accommodate their diverse cultural preferences. The literature also highlights how local music making has historically been used to build relationships between people and places, and why

contemporary local independent music is not always (or only) a part of the global cultural economy, but a tool people may use to create attachment to places and represent themselves in their communities.

### **Brief Historical Examples of Building Culturescapes through Music**

The discussion of local music cultures, sometimes called “scenes”, often refers to the history of independent music making in the United States, from the Delta Blues in rural Mississippi, jazz in rural Louisiana and New Orleans, Motown in Detroit, garage bands in Seattle, to the birth of rap and hip-hop music in the Bronx, as well as how these places are linked to a particular style of music, particular musicians, or practices of making and promoting music (Connell and Gibson 2006). Even though musical expressions and meanings vary across time and space, as do practices of making, promoting, and experiencing music, a common element of all local music cultures or scenes discussed in this chapter is that each has a relationship between place, people, and music. Music in the context of this study is not only a form of cultural entertainment, but is also a tool people and communities use to represent their cultural identities and claim rights to spaces through performances, practices, sounds, and lyrics. As Adorno wrote “culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honoring them” (Adorno 1975: 276).

During the Renaissance period, music was commonly played at Venetian and Florentine festivals and events. It had unique elements that linked it to particular political or spatial communities making it a cultural mechanism used to create a sense of belonging to places, neighborhoods, or city-states. Music was also used to define the purpose of events by conveying political, cultural, and artistic meanings (Smith 1997). As it was commonly played in public or open spaces, music was more accessible to residents than other cultural forms at the time, such as painting or literature. It had the advantage in “appropriating, inhabiting and creating *secular space* (emphasis in original)” in communities (Smith 1997: 508-509).

This latter point is a recurring theme in alternative culturescapes. Local independent music cultures are often more accessible to people within particular communities than other cultural forms because the places where music is performed and experienced are often public spaces (or spaces transformed into public places) chosen by people themselves, as opposed to have been chosen for them, as a way to assert their right to the city. The accessibility of music is also linked to the idea that local music cultures are born from a collective of individuals to express shared identity, values, social understandings, alienation, or marginalization in their communities (Connell and Gibson 2006). Smith demonstrates this idea through her analysis of brass bands in industrial England.

In industrial England, as musical instruments (especially brass instruments) were mass-produced and made more affordable, there was a significant increase in which socioeconomic groups could participate in musical activities. This occurred in



conjunction with working class communities becoming more geographically and socially defined in the country. As brass bands began performing in working class spaces such as mills, missions, and pubs, brass music became an active force in creating cultural places and identities in working class neighborhoods across England (Smith 1997). This cultural expression was distinctly working or middle class, exemplified by its roots in working and middle class neighborhoods. In these communities, brass bands and their audiences created alternative culturescapes outside the main, downtown cultural districts through their transformation of local urban spaces into music venues. This included creating or transforming spaces for open-air concerts, dances, and public ceremonies and converting work or religious spaces into music venues, even if only for a fixed period of time. These places became those of “empowerment or resistance, a harnessing of musical expression to local aspiration” (Smith 1997: 513). As in Renaissance Italy, brass band music was an accessible cultural form for working class people in England. It was used to define social events and existed because people created places specifically to experience live performances, another key defining element of local music cultures. These live performances gave them an opportunity to voice their emotions, values, lifestyle, and economic and social conditions through sound, rhythm, and community (Smith 1997).

People have historically used music to create or transform cultural places, but music also is and has been used by people to challenge the legitimacy of accepted conventions or opinions about them and their economic, social, or political situation (Smith 1997). Take for example hip-hop music, the origins of which can be traced

back as far as the 1920s when Earl Tucker incorporated slides and floats similar to break dancing in his performances. Hip-hop as a local musical expression became defined in the 1970s when Herc Kool performed his first block party in the Bronx for his sister's birthday. The sounds he produced were distinctive from popular music at the time because he mixed the beats and breaks of multiple records together using two turntables. A year later, similar block parties were thrown around the Bronx and the music and dance style from these parties began to be referred to as "hip-hop" (Adaso, 2010). Hip-hop originated in local spaces and the music was used to articulate block parties or other events and continues to be a mode through which its creators and audiences can express their public, social, political, and economic realities living in ghetto communities. In addition, it calls attention "to the structure of contemporary society, and perhaps especially to racism, and exemplifies the critical relationship between popular music and place" (Connell and Gibson 2004: 75).

Take for example sounds associated with hip-hop and ways in which it is created. Hip-hop songs often are mixed using sampling – the act of taking parts of songs, or samples, and incorporating them into another song – and manipulating, reassembling, and scratching music to create distinctive sounds. Smith suggests that these ways of making hip-hop symbolize aspects of ghetto life in which people get by using whatever resources are available to them (Smith 1997). In conjunction with sounds, hip-hop lyrics tell a story about the history and geography of inequality, oppression, and resistance of African Americans in urban communities. The sounds and lyrics, which are strongly localized (southern, west coast, east coast; or further

categorized into cities and neighborhoods within these broadly defined geographies) articulate struggles to access or control public spaces and community resources, and they have helped bring the conditions of the ghetto (gang violence, drugs, poverty, marginalization, invisibility) into public consciousness (Smith 1997). This broad overview of hip hop exemplifies how local musical practices can be used by people to create identity with and claims over parts of a city.

Although only briefly discussed, these historical examples of local music making exemplify important elements of local music cultures pertinent to this study: the accessibility of locally made music, the role of place in local music cultures and how these places create culturescapes, meanings associated with how and where local independent music is performed and experienced, and making claims to the city through musical expressions. The following literature further discusses these elements and provides an in-depth examination of how local music is linked to place making, and in addition, is a medium through which people experience cultural public life (Smith 1997: 514).

### **The Place of Local Music Cultures within (Or Separate from) the Global Cultural Industry**

The study of local independent music and its relationship with culturescapes and identities in localities should be grounded in the idea that this type of music is born from individual community members or groups embedded in place. It is not merely or only an extension of the global music industry. The distinction here is important. In Adorno's analysis, contemporary art or music should be identified as

that which arises “spontaneously” from the masses themselves – from people, not corporations or board of directors. In this interpretation, people (the masses) are primary and active in artistic expressions because these expressions are created by their own volition and creativity. This is distinctive from the global culture industry that produces standardized cultural products packaged for consumption by people who are secondary in the process. Ideally, their contribution to cultural experiences is one of (re)purchasing and (re)consuming outputs from the cultural industry (Adorno 1975). Local music communities represent an effort by individuals and communities to resist cultural industries’ capitalistic values and they illustrate how “music is an important way that millions of people find enjoyment, define who they are, affirm group membership, and claim rights to public spaces. Even though the music industry is global, most music is made and enjoyed in diverse situations divorced from these corporate worlds” (Bennett and Peterson 2004:1).

Further exploration of the cultural industry is developed in the proceeding chapters, but differences between local music cultures and the global music industry warrants a brief mention here. Local music cultures have been framed as a form of popular entertainment, much like the products produced by the culture industries, as opposed to a form of art and community expression (Connell and Gibson 2006). Adorno’s distinction discussed above counters this position to an extent, but an examination of what should be considered “art” or merely “entertainment” is needed to further assert this point. In William’s analysis of culture, he concedes that there is not a clear distinction between “art” and “entertainment” because art can be

experienced as a form of entertainment, but notes that “entertainment” is more often produced by the culture industries for purposes of consumption than it is by local actors looking for a medium through which they can represent themselves in their communities (Williams 1962). Similar to Adorno, he describes entertainment as standardized or “routine” in its production and the reactions it inspires from audiences who lack knowledge and awareness of other cultural options. This is juxtaposed to art which represents more creativity, authenticity, and spontaneity. Music as a form of art is grown from musicians and audiences who are invested in it as part of their cultural and lifestyle experience. They are *active* in the construction of its meaning or how and where it is performed and experienced (Williams 1962).

Products from the global music industry are not embedded in or attached to place, and the industry itself is not reliant upon (nor does it allow) active involvement of local communities in creating its products. The culture industry relies on people being passive consumers and re-consumers. Local music culture could not exist without a network of musicians and audiences who actively engage in musical practices, including creating places for the performance and experience of music. Local music cultures are based on democratic values of inclusion, accessibility, and community, and contribute to the formation of alternative culturescapes.

Access, couched in the ability of people to experience, influence, and create local music in places, is a key element of local music cultures. While people have access to products of the cultural industries, they cannot influence or create them. Their role is one of consumption and conformity (Adorno 1975). These products are

not embedded in place or local tradition and therefore are not authentic to *anyone* (Connell and Gibson 2006). These products are dehumanized to such a degree that it is difficult to link the musical experiences of these products to any one place. Place has little to do with the consumption of the product (Adorno 1975).

### **Cultural Identities and Local Music**

The term “scene” is often used to discuss local independent music cultures because it accounts for the fluidity of individuals who are involved at varying levels in the production and distribution of music, as well as those who consume music for their own enjoyment, interest, identity formation, or as an act of resistance. This fluidity of scene participation is not accounted for in the term “subculture,” a term that has been criticized as restrictive because it suggests strict membership roles and separation from “mainstream” culture (Bennett 2008). The concept of scenes does not assume that all the actions of those involved in scenes are governed by certain sets of standards, morals, or values, nor does it assume that any values or actions associated with the scene are static. Instead people can participate at differing levels and in ways set by their own criteria and desires (Bennett 2008). People who participate in local music cultures are not members of homogeneous groups and participation is often one of *manyways* they experience cultural public life (Bennett 2008; Nogic and Riley 2007).

A concept explored by Amanda Nogic and Alexander Riley is how the accessibility of local music is tied to place, and how places where manifestations of culture occur influence how people experience cultural public life. In their case study of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, they found the city has “a multi-location scene in

which people can move in and out of several scene participation levels according to different rules for establishing identity in local and virtual locations” (Nogic and Riley, 2007: 327). They defined the center of the city’s local music culture as a club called Metro that based its operations on DIT and DIY principles. For example, Metro gave up the opportunity to profit from alcohol sales by making it an all-ages venue where individuals under 18 could both attend and perform, as well as maintaining low covers (entrance fees) so cost did not limit people’s access to the club.

Metro’s commitment to accessibility for both audiences and bands is further demonstrated in that it did not have an in-house promoter, someone who books (schedules) bands for a club, because promoters are often selective and exclusive in their choices. Instead, bands put their name on the list and were scheduled in the first available slot, making it easier for bands to book live performances at the club. As Metro was open to all bands, there was an array of music genres performed at the club and the people who came to experience music culture varied in their musical preferences (Nogic and Riley 2007).

Metro was forced to shut down temporarily after a fight broke out during a performance and a man in the audience was stabbed. City government closed the club, which sparked protests from younger residents who claimed that the club was an integral component to their cultural life in the city. These protests came in the form of stories about experiences in the club and how club events were associated with cultural lifestyles in Wilkes-Barre. In a content analysis of blog posts and letters submitted to community papers, Nogic and Riley found that many stories conveyed

the importance of Metro as a cultural place in the community and that by not allowing access to the club, access to cultural opportunities would be restricted and the cultural identity of Wilkes-Barre would be altered (Nogic and Riley 2007). While not discussed by Nogic and Riley, the club was reopened as Café Metropolis. According to the club's website, it has remained alcohol free, boasts its low door covers (seldom over \$10), and encourages local and touring bands to schedule shows at the club – highlighting that does not require bands to sell tickets to shows (Café Metropolis 2009).

Urban areas account for large and diverse clusters of spaces, each providing accommodations and circumstances that affect what people can and cannot do in those spaces. In turn, the meanings attached to these places may be defined by who is perceived to control them and the opportunities these spaces represent (Bennett and Peterson 2004). As shown in Nogic and Riley's study, and expressed by Bennett and Peterson in their edited work about local music scenes, local music cultures are created and maintained by music-related activities occurring in accessible spaces over an extended period of time. Musicians and audiences flow in and out of cultural places, but share common values and preferences about how music is created, performed, and experienced. In turn, local music cultures also influence (on varying levels) how people construct their cultural identities and represent themselves in their communities (Bennett and Peterson 2004).

The relationship between people and places is a guiding principle found in literature on popular music and how it shapes cultural geographies of cities and



regions (Connell and Gibson 2006). Some, such as Antoine Hennion (1993) and Cohen (1995) argue that the audiences, not just musicians, are inextricably linked to local independent music, acting as “creative agents” of music who react to the music being performed and thereby enter into a conversation with the band. Through this, audiences influence live performances of music. In turn, places in which music is performed and experienced are assigned cultural meanings because of the active relationship between audiences and musicians (Bennett 2008). Bennett adds that the “emotive energy that audiences invest in the musical texts is key to the latter’s function as conveyors of meaning in the everyday social world” (Bennett 2008: 425).

Using a similar theoretical framework, Andy Bennett explored in his study of “Canterbury Sounds” in Canterbury, England how residents (audiences) influence meanings attached to local musical expressions and sounds. He explains that Canterbury Sounds provides “a compelling example of music’s richness as a resource in the construction of narratives of the local...it comprises a series of competing fictive interpretations of particular urban spaces” (Bennett 2004: 218). Many people of Canterbury grew up with shared musical experiences and due to this shared experience, local musical expressions and sounds are linked to particular cultural places in the city ranging from pubs to local recording studios (Bennett 2004). The relationship between the city’s cultural identity and landscapes and Canterbury Sounds is so engrained in the community that, as Bennett argues, it was not surprising when community members and musicians compiled old recordings from the 1960s onto a four-volume CD compilation. For some community members it was a way to show a

physical representation of the relationship between the city, its cultural places, and Canterbury Sounds.

On another level, transforming Canterbury Sounds into a product for sale commodified the cultural expression of the city. Local record stores use the *Canterbury Sounds* CDs to attract tourists and make a profit, though Bennett argues that profit is a secondary benefit of the CDs (Bennett 2004). Commodification of local musical expressions represents a usurping of local music traditions and serves to remove these traditions from place. The degree to which local music can exist as a cultural *product* and an *authentic cultural form* used to experience public life and attach meaning to places is complex and it often requires a transformation of the relationship between a particular locality and the music it produces (Connell and Gibson 2006).

While Bennett does not specifically address this in his analysis, the commodification of the Canterbury Sounds represents the fragile state of the autonomy of local music cultures within the larger cultural industry. According to Bennett, the project to compile local recordings onto CDs was not profit driven. In Adorno's analysis of commodification and industrialization, a cultural commodity is industrialized when it is no longer *also* a commodity, but is *only* a commodity – a commodity “through and through” (Adorno, 1975: 275). However, even if Canterbury Sounds became *also* a commodity, the commodification or industrialization of local music cultures or sounds can spark a renegotiation of the relationship

between places, musical expressions, and the cultural identity and landscape of the city (Connell and Gibson 2006).

### **Sounds, Places and Culturescapes**

Musical sounds and styles emerge from and are embedded in specific places or neighborhoods scattered across a city or region (Connell and Gibson 2006). Local music represents a way that people reshape their communities and experience public life based on their needs and preferences. As Zukin asserts, those with power are often seen as people most capable of defining the image of a city because they are more likely to have the political and economic capabilities to build visible cultural structures and put on large cultural spectacles (Zukin 2004). Yet cities are diverse and the people who occupy them have differing values and ideas for how they want to experience public life, culture, and entertainment. Even if it is not through spectacular displays or large institutions, because public spaces in cities are for all residents, all people have the right and the ability to shape culturescapes in cities, no matter how small, and in turn contribute to defining the image of cities (Zukin 2004).

The “Northwest Sound,” a style of music played in dance halls and bars across the Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver areas during the 1950s and 1960s has been described as “loud, crude, simplistic, and accessible” and best suited for live performances at community gatherings (Gill 1995: 18). The Northwest Sound did not receive much national success as a popular cultural form, but it did alter culturescapes in the region. National corporate music labels often rejected the region’s most popular bands because the sound differed from the more polished Top 40 hits of the era –

sounds and styles that had a proven track record for success in the national marketplace. Nevertheless, it represented an important part of youth culture in the region, helped define cultural spaces, and may have even set a framework for contemporary independent music making in Portland (Gill 1995). It is also an example of how local independent music is more than a commercial form of entertainment. Instead, it is “a symbol of rebellion, collective consciousness, and sub-cultural and regional identity,” and illustrates that who can define the image of a community is open-ended (Gill 1995: 17; Zukin 2004).

During the time of the Northwest Sound, the Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia region was somewhat isolated geographically from the rest of the country because of mountain barriers to the east and the Pacific ocean on the west, with less access than present to reliable transportation services. While the majority of the region’s population lived in urban areas, these areas were sparsely populated compared to other U.S. cities (Gill 1995). According to Gill, the Northwest Sound was in a part a representation of conflict between the baby boomer generation and their older counterparts, but also “mirrored the externality, physical and social ruggedness, and ‘newness’ of the Pacific Northwest and helped mark the transition of these rapidly urbanized areas from frontier to metropolis” (Gill 1995: 23).

Both the sounds and the intentions of Pacific Northwest bands differed from national mass music culture at the time. Popular music produced by the cultural industries was not accessible to Pacific Northwest youth and it did not represent their

cultural desires, which centered on live music performances in community settings (Gill 1995). As Billboard Top 40 hits were being produced in a “Tin Pan Alley” factory style in New York City by songwriters and producers including Carole King, Gerry Goffin, and Neil Sedaka, bands in the Pacific Northwest were holding live music performances at dance halls across the region, including in The Chase, Headless Horseman, and the Lake Oswego and the D-Street (Division Street) Armories, during which audiences were active participants in defining the cultural experience.

In a lecture about poster art promoting performances by Portland bands in the 1960s and 1970s, Joe Kregal reinforced the importance of physical settings to the experience of the Northwest Sound, emphasizing that personal interaction through dancing was a main focus for audiences. They even invented certain dances (“The Horses,” “Cool Jerk,” “The Stroll”) to accompany particular songs performed by popular local bands like the Kingsmen and Paul Revere and the Raiders (Kregal, 11 March 2010). According to Gill, Top 40 hits were difficult to replicate through live performances, were not conducive to the region’s dance style, and the equipment to play recordings of these hits was expensive and not available at many dance halls. Bands in the region performing in the style of the Northwest Sound offered live performance-oriented alternatives to the Billboard Top Radio hits. The interactions between bands, audiences, and places defined how younger people collectively experienced culture and entertainment in public settings.

Although many Pacific Northwest bands played songs originally written and performed by other musicians, they appropriated and then transformed the music into

the Northwest Sound. In turn, these songs became a cultural representation of the region's youth population. As an example, the Kingsmen's most popular hit, "Louie, Louie" that embraces the sound of the Northwest Sound was originally written by Los Angeles native Richard Berry. Berry's version of the song sounded similar to the "Tim Pan Alley" hits – smooth and not easy to replicate in live settings. The Kingsmen recorded the song in 1963 in Portland in the fashion of the Northwest Sound and it became an instant hit in the region. Upon hearing the remake of the song, some friends of Richard Berry told him that "these white guys recorded your song and it's awful...they really messed it up," but Richard Berry countered that the remake was "raggedy and funky" – it was in the style of the Northwest Sound and transformed for the dance hall culture of the region (Gill 1995: 28).

Musical activities also contributed to the cultural economy of the Pacific Northwest. In addition to recordings being played on regional radio stations including KJR in Seattle and KISN in Portland, economically accessible independent recording studios were available to regional bands – The Kingsmen's "Louie, Louie" was recorded for less than \$40 in Portland. Promoting and booking agencies were also born, including KJR DJ Pat O'Day's booking agency that is now a multi-million dollar company called Concerts West. Ken Chase, a DJ at KISN, owned teen nightclubs across Portland that promoted bands playing the Northwest Sound (Gill 1995).

In the late 1960s, regional bands were still in demand at nightclubs across the region, but many began adopting versions of popular British songs from the Beatles,

and Rolling Stones, or even surf music from southern California. Gill cites a remark by political geographer John Agnew to describe the decline of the Northwest Sound:

The increasingly global organization of production, the increased homogenization of human practices through the influence of mass media and national education systems, and the 'surveillance' of national governments over their populations have helped to make the practices reproduced in different places more and more alike (Gill 1995: 33).

However, Gill maintains that mass culture may also spark desires for unique, more representative cultural options, and in turn, regional sounds may develop as people seek to define cultural forms that relate to their localities, preferences, and needs (Gill 1995). As exemplified by the history of the Northwest Sound, local and regional sounds are embedded in place and influenced by people, especially in this example where fundamental to the sound were live performances and dancing.

It should be noted that Gill does not address in his study several other sounds and musical expressions popular in the region during the same time period. Kregal related that during the 1960s, he attended performances by bands playing the Northwest Sound, but that another popular musical expression in Portland was R&B. During the decade of the Northwest Sound, the Crystal Ballroom (located on West Burnside Street in Portland and a place that continues to host performances by local, national, and international independent musicians) was a popular dancehall for R&B music. "If you liked music, that was the place to be" (Kregal, 11 March 2010). He noted that this musical expression was more popular among African Americans in the region but it did not prevent him, a young white man, from participating in the cultural experience during an era of acute racism in the region, again demonstrating the

accessibility and openness local music cultures can bring to communities (Kregal, 11 March 2010). Additionally, while the sounds and styles differed between these two musical expressions, their audiences – sometimes overlapping between the two sounds – had a shared preference for experiencing live music performances.

As in the era of the Northwest Sound and R&B musical expressions, Portland's contemporary local music culture is diverse in its sound while at the same time oriented towards accessibility, live performances, and community. Regional sounds are not always permanent or fixed – they may change or develop due to outside cultural forces, or musicians may even remove themselves from “the kinds of unity, homogeneity, and determinism implicit in these representations of local culture and its inherent commercialism” (Connell and Gibson 2006). Not adequately addressed in Gill's analysis of the Northwest Sound are the limitations and consequences associated with a local music culture defined by one particular sound, including a potential limitation of musical creativity and its ability to be representative as people and communities evolve.

Local sounds can also be easily commercialized by industrial actors and may limit musical creativity and exploration over time. Take for example the Chicago blues scene, which David Grazian asserts has been industrialized by a cultural industry that produces myths of authenticity by exploiting symbols and cultural places in order to draw in tourists and generate wealth (Grazian 2004). In the early 1930s and 1940s, the Chicago blues scene helped define a particular kind of urban life for the city's African American population who used locally created music as an escape from the



discrimination and marginalization they experienced in their daily lives. Blues music created by local independent musicians began a process of industrialization in the 1960s when it became evident to cultural industry actors that blues music represented a potential niche in the city's tourist industry (Grazian 2004).

In contemporary Chicago, places where blues music originated and performed as an authentic cultural representation are now urban entertainment zones with high concentrations of businesses geared toward mass-produced, industrialized entertainment (Grazian 2004). Many of these blues clubs draw in tourists for an "authentic" blues experience, but instead tourists are given a show specifically created to have the *vener* of what was once authentic. Many shows are sexually charged, outrageous, and continually re-perform songs by famous blues musicians such as Muddy Waters and Buddy Guy (Grazian 2004). Applying Adorno's critique of commodified culture, an indication of the industrialization of these blues performances is the lack of spontaneity and authenticity. They are manufactured and standardized according to a proven plan that incites consumption by people who are unaware of any alternatives, whereas blues performances in Chicago, prior to being commodified, were an expression of community and a way to represent musician's and their audiences in the community (Adorno 1975).

Although he did not provide an in-depth examination of alternative blues cultures in Chicago, Grazian noted that authentic blues culture was not completely replaced by its industrialized form. In alternative places outside of Chicago's main cultural districts, local independent blues musicians and audiences who reject the

commercialized and programmed products of the blues tourist industry have maintained an evolving alternative blues culture in which messages of solidarity and survival are still present in the sounds, styles, and lyrics of the music and the places in which it is performed (Grazian 2004; Connell and Gibson 2006). Instead of playing the same rendition of songs created in prior decades, the sounds, songs, and styles have evolved in this scene through time (Grazian 2004). Grazian concludes that the relationship between local music and place is not fixed but subject to changing meanings of authenticity and cultural relevance – the industrialization of the musical sounds and styles of blues music transformed the relationship community members have with the culture and how they identify “authentic” blues music (Grazian, 2004).

In his concluding remarks about the decline of the Northwest Sound, Gill suggests that an authentic local music culture requires a particular sound. This observation does not fully consider that culture is defined by the people who create, perform, and ultimately experience locally made music (and the places where they do these things), linking music cultures to behaviors and values, not only sounds. Musical expressions vary by locality based on local musical practices and behaviors and the spaces where practices and behaviors are manifested (Connell and Gibson 2006). For example, it was the structural standardization of Chicago’s blues scene – its manipulation into a form of entertainment that was not representative and lacked creativity, spontaneity, and authenticity – that altered the scene even while its sound remained fixed (Adorno 1975). And further, the survival of an independent, authentic blues scene in the city required that the places where musical expressions occur be

relocated to alternative places. Places often denote authenticity and represent the relationship between sociocultural conditions and particular musical values. These places are distinctive in a number of ways, such as being “smaller locations, places ‘off the beaten track,’ isolation and remoteness from hearths of industrial production or working-class neighborhoods” (Connell and Gibson 2003: 93).

The link between the social, cultural, and political meanings of local music cultures and the spaces where music activities occur is further explored by Ken Spring in his study of techno music in a largely Eastern European ethnic working class suburb of Detroit, Michigan between 1987 and 1996. The techno scene began in Detroit in the 1980s and spread across the United States to Europe and Southeast Asia. Eventually, various locally based “sub-scenes” manifested in reaction to growing exclusionary attributes of techno clubs and the larger techno industry. These sub-scenes were created in smaller urban communities and had strong structural components (spaces and places to perform, networks to promote musical activities) and community agency (networks of musicians, promoters, and interested people) (Spring, 2004).

According to Spring, techno clubs in downtown Detroit were exclusive and difficult to access for both DJs and audiences. For example, some night clubs would only admit entrance to certain individuals based on their dress, appearance, age, and socioeconomic status. This was a catalyst for excluded DJs to transform alternative spaces outside the main cultural centers into ones in which music could be experienced by people looking for an alternative to mainstream techno culture (Spring 2004). These DJs claimed alternative spaces to accommodate cultural experiences they

had been excluded from in main cultural districts. Alternative spaces often give credibility to the authenticity of dance scenes (and other music scenes) whether they are abandoned or vacant urban spaces or expensively and contemporarily designed nightclubs (Connell and Gibson 2006). Spaces transformed into techno clubs by DJs in this Detroit suburb included warehouses, old churches, and evacuated buildings. Many of these alternative clubs operated without business licenses and sold alcohol illegally (Spring 2004). Collectively, these places became alterative cultural districts that were open to all DJs and individuals who wanted to participate in the scene. They also became environments based on mutual toleration, inclusiveness, sharing, and anti-competitiveness (Spring 2004).

Initially, DJs were not exclusive in where they played and often did so in exchange for free drinks or a percentage of the low cover charge, if there was one, because they were invested in the accessibility of their music. Networks of DJs, promoters, and groups who organized the operation of the “clubs” became integral to the growth of the music community and were committed to the promotion of techno music for all interested individuals and groups (Spring 2004). However, cultural meanings associated with both DJs and their performance spaces began to rapidly deteriorate as the alternative techo scene gained recognition and popularity across the region. Some DJs and “club owners” (individuals who organized DJs and operations of alternative clubs) adopted entrepreneurial operating values similar to the clubs found in main cultural districts. It became more commonplace for DJs, especially popular ones, to insist on significant monetary compensation for their services,

claiming that they were bringing in individuals throughout the Midwest.

To accommodate these requests and turn a profit for their own self-interest, “club owners” began charging high entrance covers, denying access to certain individuals unable to afford the fees. In addition, many DJs stopped playing at alternative clubs and instead booked themselves at exclusive private parties where those in attendance could pay significant dollar amounts to listen to them play. Finally, as the scene expanded in popularity, legally operating clubs began to locate themselves in alternative cultural areas. Similar to the Chicago blues tourist industry, these clubs sold an illusion of authenticity for outsiders who had traveled into this Detroit suburb to experience the scene (Spring 2004). Democratic values originally ingrained in the alternative techno scene were overpowered by exclusivity and interest in profits, similar to those clubs found in downtown Detroit that had originally inspired DJs to create accessible spaces to experience techno music (Spring 2004). When cultural places cease to be used or become exclusive and available to only those with a certain set of physical, economic, or social attributes, the links between audiences, musicians, places, and authenticity deteriorate and the democratic values of the scene are lost (Connell and Gibson 2006).

The literature reviewed in this chapter was chosen because they provide examples of how local music culture “originates from ‘the people,’” as a form of resistance from culture being “imposed on ‘the people’” or even as a reaction against mainstream, industrialized culture that is not representative and does not fit the cultural needs, preferences and desires of people (Storey 2004: 7). Music is a cultural

form that people and communities can use to experience public life and attach meanings to places. Although, with the exception of Nogie and Riley's study, much literature presented in this chapter focuses on a particular sound or genre of music and musicians and audiences interested in the sound, they are also examples of how locally made music offers an alternative to homogenized and capitalistic cultures, and how it can be a catalyst for spatial organizing and community building. The literature has illustrated the potential of local independent music to be an accessible cultural form that contributes to the cultural landscape of cities through its place-making capabilities. Further, it grounds the study of Portland's local independent music culture in the idea that this type of music is not an extension of the global music industry, but rooted in places and relationships between musicians and audiences. In Portland's independent music culture, participating people are primary and active in musical expressions and what they mean to the city.

### **Methodological Details of the Portland Case Study**

The theories and observations found in the literature review were used as critical tools in designing, conducting, and analyzing the ethnographic components of this research. They serve as a framework for understanding how Portlanders have actively created alternative cultural places in the city to accommodate expressions of local music making, and enable a critical examination of the accessibility of local independent music to interested residents. I should note here that while not a musician myself, my personal interest in independent music is longstanding and is a way through which I came to develop a relationship with Portland when I moved to the city

seven years ago. Coming from a small town, the existence of the music scene in the city was immediately evident to me – from articles in the *Willamette Week*, flyers promoting shows posted in coffee shops, restaurants, and on the Portland State University campus, KPSU radio playing locally made music, the number of venues scattered across the city, and conversations with people about shows they saw or shows that they intended to play. This critical study of local independent music as a cultural manifestation that influences city spaces and how people spatially organize in the city was born from my own interest in independent music scenes.

Field observations and in-depth interviews with musicians and other involved audiences in Portland were conducted to specifically examine ways in which independent music making in Portland influences the location of the city's cultural places and cultural identity. The ethnographic component of this research was designed to find examples of how local music performances drive the creation of alternative and accessible culturescapes in the city, and why these performances can be considered democratic community building tools. This ethnographic research consisted of participant field observations and in-depth interviews with musicians, their audiences, as well as music promoters and bookers. In combination, they allowed me to authentically experience local music culture and provided respondents the opportunity to engage in research processes.

Before discussing methodological details, it should be noted that Portland's music culture is structurally dependent upon electronic communication and exchanges in virtual spaces. File sharing and promotion of musicians and their shows are done

using web platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, email, instant messaging and Gmail's Google Chat (gchat), blogs, text messaging, and local music websites such as the Portland Show Guide ([www.pcpdx.com](http://www.pcpdx.com)). When appropriate, follow-up interviews were conducted in virtual environments. The research methodology was structured to accommodate modes of electronic communication because of how frequently it is used by musicians and others involved in Portland's local music culture. For example, I often received invitations to shows through Facebook or was emailed and instant messaged information about music activities through Gmail.

The element of personal interaction and live experiences is at the core of Portland's local independent music culture and therefore it is necessary that the research be informed by personal interactions with musicians and audiences. It was also essential that I actively participate in expressions of local music culture (i.e., live music performances). To this point, extensive field research was conducted over a twelve-month period. This involved attending approximately twenty shows, both at business venues, such as Romtoms, Holocene, Dune, Backspace, Branx, and Rotture, and residences that regularly host musicians such as "The Green Room" and "Dekum Manner."

At these field observations, I looked for examples of accessibility, including the mediums through which the show was promoted, if it was all-ages or reserved for residents ages 21 and older, and how much it cost to attend the show. Secondly, I observed whether the audience was able to actively participate in the musical experience, identified by the size of the venue and whether there was a stage or other



barriers that separated the audience from the band. Evidence of commodified cultural products of the scene were also observed, including if the band was selling CDs, T-shirts, or other materials linked to their band and if so, I inquired how were these products created. Observation sessions were also conducted at meetings of a start-up production non-profit organization called “Potlatch Presents” and a filming session of “Lost Gospel,” a documentary series that records live performances of local bands in public spaces not traditionally designed for music performances. These field observations placed me at the site of cultural manifestations that I would not have been able to understand solely through in-depth interviews.

The ways in which I determined field observation opportunities developed throughout the course of my research. At the initial stages, I attended performances of musicians I interviewed, beginning with a Guidance Counselor show at the venue Dune, followed by attending a Breakfast Mountain performance at Rontoms, which I had learned about through an interview with members of the local non-profit Potlatch presents who organized the show. As I learned more about how music performances are communicated, including through *Willamette Week's* blog “Local Cut” and the Portland Show Guide, I broadened the scope of my field observations, attending shows of musicians who I had not interviewed including DoublePlusGood and Atole. Finally, I developed a Facebook page specifically for this research in order to be involved in virtual communications that occur in the scene. I was invited by my Facebook “friends” (i.e., musicians) to a variety of music events through Facebook, including “Lost Gospel.”

I had several advantages in building relationships and finding informants in my field research. First, even before I began my research, I was interested in independent music and had attended a number of shows in the city for social purposes. I already knew of some local bands through attending shows, frequenting coffee shops in which people in musicians are employed, and reading the *Willamette Week*. This made the transition of my social interest into a research study easier. I am also in the age group (under 35) that many people who are involved in Portland's music scene fall under. Secondly, and most importantly, individuals and bands I asked to interview were excited to teach me about Portland's local music scene. I did not experience any notable barriers to entry or difficulty finding interview respondents. Every individual I contacted agreed to be interviewed and multiple musicians continued to invite me to performances throughout the duration of my research through Facebook, email, and text messages. One individual, Arya Imig, served as an informant during my field research, not only by helping me set up interviews, but also because his deep connection to Portland's local music culture through his friendships and employment as a KPSU DJ enabled him to provide me with context to certain news articles, blogs, and events.

Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted, a majority of which were done with local independent musicians and DJs. To provide a broader understanding of localized music making practices, supplementary interviews were conducted with individuals running independent record labels and production agencies, most of which are unlicensed businesses, self-identified bookers (those who help musicians find

venues for live performances), KPSU radio employees, and a documentary film maker. I did not use a standard questionnaire for each interview because not all questions were applicable or valid for each person interviewed. It is not logical, in my opinion, for a researcher who is attempting to learn and understand a culture to ask a standard set of questions, especially when studying an alternative culture that prides itself on DIY. It would be impossible to expect any meaningful set of responses between interviews with a single standardized questionnaire. To understand Portland's independent music culture, I felt it necessary to allow active members to explain its meaning in their own words and through their own stories. As the researcher, I was in control of the interviews – I kept each interview focused on the spatial and community building aspects of the culture, not on music theory or other important but not applicable topics – but I left it open for respondents to speak to the study's interests in their own way. Finally, because the scene is based on and values active participation, the in-depth interview and field observation components of this research needed to be structured to allow for active participation.

In interviews, respondents were guided to share details about how they organize live performances, how they choose places to perform and ways in which the meaning and success of performances may have changed because of the space used. They were also asked questions to gauge if they valued participation of community members in the scene, possible ideas to foster participation, and the extent to which they affiliate Portland with local independent music. The interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Questions were aimed at understanding the accessibility of the culture and its community building characteristics. For example, by asking them to explain how they set up their first show, I was told stories about it being “easy,” “receiving support from established bands,” and the number of house venues available in Portland. In their descriptions about the structural set-up for shows, I often heard references to the proximity of the audience, all-age shows, and asking for band donations rather than charging an entrance fee. As interviews progressed, certain topics became more relevant. For Ian Anderson of Guidance Counselor, because he was in the process of recording an album he spoke of the fund raising he was doing in the community to make this album; Pyramidd spoke of their experiences being signed under a record label; Nilina Mason Cambell spoke of her “love story” to her favorite places in Portland through her documentary films Lost Gospel; and Lisa Schonberg spoke of being a woman drummer in an all-female band and how the DIY music scene is connected to other arts in the city. It was important that the interviews be structured so that respondents were able to share the stories and experiences about the music scene that were meaningful to them.

Several techniques were used to identify potential respondents and effort was made to interview a range of bands – new, established, and popular (both nationally and locally). The local website Portland Show Guide ([www.pcpdx.com](http://www.pcpdx.com)), to which anyone can post show listings, maintains a list of bands that have performed shows since 2008. In an interview with the site’s operator, Damien, he maintained that it may be the most comprehensive listing of bands in Portland because the users post shows,

unlike popular Portland weeklies such as the *Willamette Week* and *Mercury* which only list certain shows and bands depending on their popularity (Damien, March 2010). This site was used to identify potential bands that have played at least twenty shows since January 2008. It was important to have evidence that some of the bands and musicians interviewed have experience performing and promoting music in Portland as this lends them more knowledge about the structure and networks of local music culture. Two bands – Guidance Counselor and Explode Into Colors – were interviewed that were awarded a top ten position in *Willamette Week's* “Best New Band 2009.” Finally, several bands were identified using a snowball technique in which respondents were asked to offer a list of referrals he or she believed would be important to interview. This methodology allowed for the incorporation of newer bands, as well as people involved in music making but not in a band. These individuals include a KPSU DJ, documentary filmmaker, and a group of individuals who formed Potlatch Presents. This variety of methods to identify bands and other individuals to be interviewed was an attempt to invite a random and representative group of individuals to participate in the research project.

There is not a concrete demographic profile that can define the physical or socioeconomic attributes of people who participate in the local independent music culture pertaining to this project (an demographic overview is offered in chapter 3), however effort was made to conduct interviews among women and ethnic minorities. Of the eighteen interviews conducted, six were with women and three were with individuals who identified themselves as ethnic minorities. The percentage of women

interviewed for this study (33 percent) is slightly lower than the percentage found in the 2009 and 2009 PDX Pop Now! CD compilations, however this is in part due to two members of Explode Into Colors, an all women band, who had a last minute conflict and were represented by their drummer, Lisa Schonberg. Had all three band members of Explode Into Colors participated, the male to female ratio would have been more balanced at eight women, eleven men.

Each interview was conducted in an environment selected by the participant, including their homes, coffee shops, or at shows. Depending upon the location, interviews also offered observation opportunities as participants often chose places they regularly frequent and in which local music practices occur. All interviews were conducted in person and ranged from sixty to one hundred and twenty minutes in length. Most interviews were digitally recorded and portions of the interview were transcribed when appropriate and are referenced thorough this research. Immediately following each interview detailed notes were taken. Electronic communications often proceeded and followed in-person interviews through a variety of communication modes including email, text messaging, and Google Chat in which several respondents continued to share information and experiences over the twelve month period. These interviews were electronically recorded.

Again, this research does not encompass *all* musical expressions in Portland; it is focused on DIY independent music making that presents an alternative to popular music produced by the global music industry and major record labels. This is a study that examines one way in which *some* residents spatially organize themselves to

represent their cultural values and make Portland “their city” and has several limitations that require examination and could be addressed through further research.

The definition of “indie” music is not fixed. This research frames independent music as an outgrowth from the punk scene (but is no longer only or just punk music) that is based on DIY and DIT values. This may prove useful for subsequent research of a local music scene in trying to determine if the scene is based on one genre of music or if its meaning is more embedded in values. However, it does present complications as to what can be considered independent music applicable to this research. Secondly, it was outside my capacity to create a demographic profile that includes ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic class of bands. While these characteristics were collected of the people interviewed, this is not a large enough sample to make determinations about the rest of the scene. There was great effort to be random in the people chosen to be interviewed and the purpose of these interviews was to look for themes of how shows are promoted, accessed, and performed, and how bands produce and distribute physical products. More focused research would need to be conducted to determine if there is an ethnic divide in the scene. For example, hip-hop may be underrepresented in this independent music scene and this research but expressions of this type of music may exist in other music scenes in the community. If research was conducted about the ethnic divide, and if that ethnic divide had different musical sounds, that may put firmer borders around what is “indie.” This research could prove useful to compare the independent music scene subject to this research to other music

cultures in the city, and to determine if there are overlapping values of the scene and the spaces in which they manifest.

Finally, if resources permit, a study of this nature would benefit from quantifying themes found in field observations and interviews. For example, of the over 3,000 shows that the Portland Show Guide has posted for this year, what percentage are all ages? What percentage are located at eastside or house venues? How many people, on average, attend house shows compared to shows at business venues? What is the ethnic make-up of audiences and bands in the audiences of 100 shows? These data would serve to put a firmer framework on the accessibility and structure of the independent music scene.

This research is limited by time and capacity and does not address every question or aspect of the independent music culture. It is also not a comparative study of other music cultures in the city or elsewhere. It does however serve as one of the first formal studies about Portland's local independent music scene and introduces spaces where this scene manifests, ways in which it is promoted, and how it differs from the global music industry. It is not attempting to frame Portland's independent music scene as unique or distinct from those in other cities (although it does make claims that it is unique and different from the global music industry), but it does attempt to represent one way in which Portlanders can chose to participate in culture in the city.

The remaining chapters focus specifically on local music making in Portland and contextualize local music practices through findings from field observations, in-



depth interviews, and various local media sources. They discuss places in which local music performances occur, attempts to make the cultural accessible, communication networks and flows related to music practices, commodification of local music products, and how Portland's local music scene is situated in the larger structure of the global music industry. An analysis of these topics is grounded in theories and observations presented in previous chapters and illustrates how local music making in Portland is a democratic cultural experience that is continually creating alternative cultural places in the city. Further, it represents how the larger cultural identity of Portland is linked to local music practices.

## Chapter 3

### **Defining a Cultural Image of Portland through Access and Cooperation: Celebrating Local Musical Expressions and Consumption**

Reactions to globalization have differed – musicians have sought out new sounds or returned to ‘roots;’ sub-cultures have emerged that, even if momentarily, evade the products and commercial logic of media corporations while audiences – fans, critics, occasional listeners – receive and interpret music in the diverse contexts of their own lives. Connell and Gibson 2006: 11.

The literature review in Chapter 2 presented theories and case studies that examined why local music can be a medium through which people can take an active role in creating alternative cultural spaces to represent their right to the city, build community relationships, and express their values. Moreover, the studies and theories also illustrate how music used with these intentions differs from music as a cultural product designed for consumption and capital generation. The images, memories, sounds, emotions, and identities that are attached to cultural expressions have a reflexive relationship with people because they use cultural expressions to articulate their belonging to specific places and serve to articulate the meaning of those places and the city itself (Zukin 2004). As found in the case studies presented in this study, it is not merely musical experiences occurring on a local level that defines music cultural places in Portland, it is the emphasis on community and accessibility of places where music can be experienced. This occurs against a backdrop in which culture as an industrial force has become the “business of cities” that stimulates their symbolic economies and defines city spaces through large structural institutions and cultural spectacles (Zukin 2004: 2).

As Zukin notes, while those people and groups with the most economic or political power often control public culture by defining spaces and controlling access to cultural places, “the question of who can occupy public space, and so define the image of the city, is open-ended” (Zukin 2004: 11). This chapter introduces the Portland case study and provides specific examples of how Portland musicians and their audiences have created alternative cultural spaces in the city to represent themselves, their cultural preferences, and to build community. An underlying theme is also their attempts to make the scene available to the community through low to no-cost live performances, all-ages venues, and the opportunity to actively participate in the scene. How the image of the city is defined through music is illustrated in large celebrations, such as in events hosted by PDX Pop Now!, a local non-profit organization “dedicated to stimulating and expanding participation in the music of Portland, Oregon,” or daily expressions of spontaneous and planned performances occurring in bars, show venues, and local residences in neighborhoods across the city (PDX Pop Now! 2008).

Local musical expressions in the city come in many forms and serve a multitude of demographic groups. In Portland, there are jazz and R&B bands, fiddle groups, classical musicians, and a host of other types of musical expressions in which residents may have interest. As stated earlier, this research is focused on independent, or “indie”, music made and experienced by a group of younger Portland residents. Manifestations of this culture are concentrated in eastside neighborhoods – those on the east side of the Willamette River, which separates them from downtown Portland.

R & B soul singer Ural Thomas, who has been a Portland resident for over fifty years, opens his North Portland (located on the eastside) house at 1:30 p.m. every Sunday to neighborhood residents and passerbys who want to listen and watch him and others perform. While his music may draw in different audiences than free Sunday shows at Rontoms, a local bar and restaurant located on East Burnside that hosts younger independent musicians, he expressed in a lecture about the history of independent music in the Northwest that all local musical expressions in Portland are a form of community building. This research represents one of what may be many musical cultures in the city. Thomas stated “everyone is playing from their souls. [When I got started], we just wanted to get together and play. It’s a feeling we shared with the audience... just like back then, kids now are playing music to relate to each other, to build community. Some of [the music] is bad, some is good. But listen to it” (Thomas, 11 March 2010). For these “kids,” local musical expressions and practices occurring in public, private, and virtual spaces are ways in which they are able to experience public life in Portland and build community relationships. Through music, they state their right to the city and contest assumptions that their generation is passive and uninvolved in the community.

Who are these “kids”? I hesitate to categorize them into a certain group or place a label on them to which some may take offense or not subscribe. Through over a year of field research, I have observed that Portlanders who participate (on varying levels) in local music culture are mostly between the ages of 18 and 34. According to 2006-2008 U.S. Census projections for Portland, approximately 24 percent of the city

falls in this age group (U.S. Census 2009). They represent both gender groups, and while a majority of them are white (79 percent of Portland residents identify as white) there are African Americans, Asians, Indians, and Latinos who are in independent bands (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). It is not in the scope of this research to provide a detailed analysis of the ethnic characteristics of people who participate in this culture; but it does provide a gateway and the theoretical tools for this research to be conducted. It is important, however, to provide a small overview of the under-representation of women or minority groups in the music industry, and how that may differ from independent music scenes. In recent years this topic has become a growing interest in cultural studies of popular music (Leonard 2007; Schilt 2004; Reddington 2003). A brief examination is presented here to bring further context to the framework and inclusivity of the city's local music culture.

According to Marion Leonard (2007), white male musicians have historically dominated popular music, especially rock. This is perpetuated by the practices of the music industry (and the media that represent them) that often portray female rock musicians as a niche within popular music – female rock musicians are often framed as rare and novel “practitioners in a male field” (Leonard 2007: 34). Her analysis of various rock volumes focused on non-independent (“major”) musicians (i.e., *Encyclopedia of Rock Volumes One, Two, and Three; The Encyclopedia of Rock, Pop, and Soul*) found that all-female bands or bands with at least one female member accounted for between 8 and 22 percent of the total number of entries.

In a similar analysis of indie (independent or non-“major”) music guides (i.e., *Spin Alternative Record Guide; Alternative Rock*), she found that female musicians were represented by between 22 and 26 percent of entries, suggesting that “the indie music scene may offer a cultural space that is more appealing or accessible to female performers and within which they are more likely to achieve success and prestige” (Leonard 2007: 44). This can be attributed in part to the idea that individuals who create alternative music scenes are those who want alternatives to mainstream (male-dominated), corporate controlled popular music because it is not representative of them (i.e., women, “geeks,” and other “outsiders”) (Leonard 2007). And further, independent music making, tied up in notions of being the outsider, “has frequently presented a softer, less macho articulation of masculinity or male experience” (Leonard 2007: 47).

In analyzing bands and musicians in the 2008 (39 bands) and 2009 (36 bands) PDX Pop Now! CD compilations, between 44 and 51 percent of bands had at least one female member. Even more, of the 75 bands in the two compilations, at least 11 had one or more member of a minority group (15 percent) including “Bird Announced Land”, “Magic Johnson”, “The Thermals”, “Copacrescents”, “New Bloods”, and “Ravishers”. It should be noted here that these data were determined by visiting bands’ MySpace and website pages in which band member’s names and pictures are listed, thus leaving room for misidentification of gender and ethnicity. However, while more in-depth research needs to be conducted, this analysis suggests that independent

music scenes as an alternative to mainstream popular music may have more cultural space for women and minority groups (Leonard 2007).

As discussed, term “indie” or “independent” is used to describe a type of music making that is created and distributed independent from global corporate record labels, often referred to as the “majors”. Music journalist Kristen Anderson wrote in *Indie Music Universe* that “indie music is not about mass production, it is not about trying to fit into a mold and get sold. Indie is the soul of music. The thing that makes music the voice of the people and not the marketing of the masses” (Anderson 2010). Embedded in the term is also the idea (even expectation) that independent musicians subscribe, at least in part, to DIY (do it yourself) or DIT (do it together) values that consist of creating, recording, promoting, and performing music locally and without the assistance of a corporate label. In following the DIT or DIY value system, the musician should be active in all phases of the creation, distribution, and promotion of the music. Equally significant, independent musicians in Portland view themselves as part of a community in which bands support and help promote each other.

People making “indie” music have been called “hipsters”, both in describing themselves and in countless articles, books, and blogs (i.e., “Look at this Fucking Hipster”; “Hipster: The End of Western Civilization”; *Hipster Handbook; The Mercury*), of which the definition is unclear. Robert Lanham, author of *Hipster Handbook*, recently wrote an article in which he acknowledged that “hipsterdom,” while difficult to define, is “about *stuff*...the natural byproduct of a consumption-obsessed culture with a thriving middle class...*pastiche*, the hodgepodge blending of

elements from pop culture to create a sensibility... [and] *irony*, a knee-jerk way for hipsters to emotionally distance themselves from sincerely enjoying things” (Lanham 2009).

He speaks to a certain aesthetic of some, mainly urban, members of Generation X and the Millennials that is tied to clothes that are not considered “cool” (tight jeans, colorful sweaters circa 1985, lens-less glasses) to rebel against purchasing the latest fashion trends and “new” products, and appropriating elements of “low” culture to create “new” meanings, perhaps through sampling or covering music by contemporary or past Top 40 artists (i.e., Pyramiddd’s “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” cover). It is also comprised of a focus on creativity or creation in a DIY or DIT fashion, (i.e., creating music, paintings, films, clothes, zines, or poetry individually or as a community without the assistance of profit-oriented corporations). While Lanham admits that “hipster profiling is about as effective as racial profiling,” at the core of his analysis of these generations is that there are elements of rebellion against a consumer driven, capitalistic society in which many find themselves living (Lanham 2009).

While this research focuses on a younger (hipster?) demographic of the city involved in “indie” music, it does not place firm demographic boundaries on *who* they are. Many have college experience, although not all. Some may be those who came to Portland, in the words of Abbott, to “hang out between college and career and [who] want career alternatives” (Abbott 2001: 94). Some may work in a coffee shop or other service oriented jobs like Zach Osterlund of Breakfast Mountain, while others have “professional” or government jobs like Nathan Rede (DJ Detroit). They may wear



tight jeans and have a giraffe tattoo on their ankles like Ian Anderson of Guidance Counselor, or have a “clean cut” look, as does Jessica Bagnall of Typhoon and DoubleDutch. In addition to sharing or having overlapping values, most respondents interviewed live in eastside neighborhoods where rent is less expensive compared to the westside and where there are three times as many alternative show venues than the westside. There are numerous elements of a common identity they may or may not share, but what is important to this project is that these young Portlanders participate in local independent music culture as a way to build community and relationships, as a form of entertainment, and as a vehicle through which they can experience public life in alternative cultural places throughout the city.

### **From a Northwest Sound to a Complex Mosaic**

As in the decade of the Northwest Sound (and other musical expressions), Portland boasts an independent music culture that is sustained by locals who create musical expressions that are representative of their cultural values. In addition, it is also a form of resistance (and reaction) to the capital-intensive constraints of the music industry. Wagner, who moved with her husband and band mate from Los Angeles to Portland, said that Portland has a “‘land of milk and honey’ reputation” because the city has “so many creatively vital people... it’s become a kind of mecca for artists and musicians seeking other creatively vital artists and musicians. There is the expression and support of creativity” (Wagner, personal communication, 2010).

Portland’s local music culture is, even if not strongly, historically linked to the Northwest Sound because during the 1960s the possibility of a thriving local youth

music culture based on live performances was realized for the first time in the region (Gill 1995). However, instead of being defined by one discrete sound, contemporary local independent music making in Portland is made up of a mosaic of sounds and musical genres. Portland local bands tend to define their sound by combining a variety of established and new musical genres such as “rock/electronica/hip-hop”, “indie/country/pop”, “glam/grime/ghetto tech”, “tropical/afro-beat/surf”, “pop/disco/post-punk”, “psychedelic/experimental/German pop”, or “indie/pop/electro”. Differences in sounds do not divide or separate the scene.

There is a tendency in geographies of music to link places to particular *sounds* – grunge rock in Seattle; country music in Nashville; blues in Chicago – as a way to understand expressions and meanings of local music cultures (Connell and Gibson 2006). A particular sound as a point of analysis is limiting to this study because it is not only or always – especially for “indie” music – the sound of the music that articulates a music scene. In Portland, it is also the behaviors of musicians and audiences that describe the music scene and its influence on the city’s cultural image, especially how *spaces* are transformed into music venues to accommodate musical performances. If a dominant sound exists in Portland, it is not obvious. In an interview with Arya Imig, a former KPSU DJ and someone who regularly organizes local shows, he said “I can go to three or four shows in one night with each band having a completely different sound” (Imig, personal communication, 2010). Further, Darren Bridenbrech from the band “40 10 100 Locked Up Guns” related “Portland is different from other cities as far as I know because of the mix of bands that play in one show. A

noise band can easily open for an electro band” (Bridenbrech, personal communication, 2010). For example, at one of the first shows I attended during my fieldwork, the line-up included two bands with distinctly different sounds – “Syrup” (“tropical/concrete/Dutch pop”) and “Guidance Counselor” (“glam/grime/ghettotech”). Before the show, Ian Anderson of Guidance Counselor warned me that I “may think it’s kind of a weird line-up. We’re really different bands, but it will be tight!” (Anderson, personal communication, 2010).

The variety of styles of music offered by Portland’s local music scene was mentioned in multiple interviews and affirmed in field observations, representing the diversity, appeal, and possibilities of the scene. The bands I interviewed for this study represent a variety of different sounds but despite differences, most bands knew of each other and some had even played shows together. The idea of supporting each other – regardless of sound – was articulated by multiple bands, most explicitly through an example given by Lisa Schonberg of “Explode Into Colors” (sound: “experimental/minimalist/crunk”):

The community is so tight. When we won *Willamette Week’s* “Best New Band” contest we knew we’d be on the cover of the *Willamette* and we thought, let’s cover our faces and wear a T-shirt of our favorite local band. We thought man, we’re really stoked that we got this recognition and it’s so amazing that people like us enough to vote us number one...let’s support our favorite bands that we think are awesome. We each wore one of our friend’s bands shirts on the cover –Panther [sound: “other/other/other”], Asss [sound: “big beat/post punk”], and Rob Walmart [sound: “other/live electronics/visual”] (Schonberg, personal communication, 2010).

Figure 3.1 Explode Into Colors *Willamette Week* “2009 Best New Band” Picture



Source: “Explode Into Colors Myspace” *MySpace.com* N.p. 6 May 2010  
([www.myspace.com/explodeintocolors](http://www.myspace.com/explodeintocolors))

The importance of live performances and musicians and audiences being active in musical expressions remains from the era of the Northwest Sound as a defining element of Portland’s music scene – it is based in actively experiencing it, not passive consumption. The local music scene is structurally dependent on accessible and available venues in which music can be performed and experienced, and it remains a cultural form that is used to define landscapes in the city and its “disorderly possibilities” (Sussman and Estes 2004: 119). Beyond those “orderly” cultural occurrences that are the “business of cities” – those tied to larger industrial and capitalistic structures – “disorderly possibilities” embody those cultural occurrences that are anti-systemic manifestations of art, music, creativity, and innovation made to represent the diversity of human cultural preferences, desires, and identities (Sussman and Estes 2004: 119). Local musical expressions in Portland are created by people to

accommodate their cultural values and therefore are equally important to the formation of the city's cultural image as are events at the Portland Rose Garden hosting national or international musicians signed by "major" record labels.

### **Celebrating Music Culture through Live Performances: PDX Pop Now!**

Historically, music has been a cultural resource embedded in place. It influences people's behavior in places and how they attach meanings to places. In contemporary society, the relationship between place and music has become more complex against the backdrop of the industrialization of music and a global political economy. Accordingly, as Connell and Gibson note, "many geographers of music have tended to locate analysis in more detailed local circumstances, generating place bound theories and regional ethnographies of music scenes, audience subcultures, and experience of place"(Connell and Gibson 2004: 11).

The analysis of Portland's independent music scene is rooted in place – how residents transform non-music spaces into music venues and use public spaces to demonstrate a right to the city – because integral to the existence of the scene are live performances. This chapter offers examples of how the local independent music scene influences Portland's culturescapes through the creation of spaces to experience live music performances. This space creation decentralizes symbols of culture away from the main culture districts. When a group of young musicians, people operating venues, artists, writers, and zine producers wanted to do something to celebrate Portlanders "making our own music in our own clubs and studios, making our own T-shirts and zines and selling our own records on our own labels...powering this thing ourselves,"

they chose a celebration centered on a series of live performances over a weekend in an accessible, free, all-ages event: PDX Pop Now! (Kirby 2009: 2). People and the democratic organizing principles inherent in the scene defined the celebration. The organizers asked the public to nominate and then vote on which bands (all local) played in the festival and whose songs would be on the PDX Pop Now! fundraising CD compilation (PDX Pop Now! 2008).

The first PDX Pop Now! festival occurred at a local club in a Southeast Portland industrial area called The Meow Meow, away from Portland's defined, central cultural districts. It featured 44 Portland bands including "The Minders", "Junior Private Detective", "Sunset Valley", and "Tara Jane O'Neil" over a three-day period in July 2004. According to the introduction of a photo essay of PDX Pop Now! festivals, the first festival was made possible by hundreds of volunteer hours from Portlanders who dedicated their time, talents, and in some cases money to build stages, help carry equipment, and make flyers and posters. Many local business including Jackpot! Recording Studio, Music Millennium, *Portland Mercury*, *Willamette Week*, and Stumptown Coffee Rosters donated funds to create the budget necessary for the festival (Singer and Clark 2009).

Most interesting about the PDX Pop Now! photo essay, published in 2009 to help raise funds for the 2010 PDX Pop Now! festival, is the emphasis placed on the the interactions between the audience and the bands, reinforcing the idea that music is a way through which relationships between people and places are built. A quote from the book by *Willamette Week* Music Editor Casey Jarman exemplifies how audiences

are actively engaged in articulating Portland's local music culture through their active participation:

I saw a photo that really struck me. It was a crowd shot from my first PDX Pop Now! in 2005 – a sea of faces packed tight into Lovelands' downstairs room. At first, I was just excited to spot myself in that crowd and to be reminded of that special summer when I was still new to Portland and took the best crash course in local music I could ask for... Then when I looked more closely [I saw] so many strangers that in that crowd were musicians, industry folks, and fans that would welcome me warmly in the years to come. That's the kind of audience PDX Pop draws, and the artists play to the height of their ability because of it. It's not just music after all, it's dreams and day jobs and disappointment. And most of all it's community (PDX Pop Book 2009: 6).

PDX Pop Now! festivals symbolize what Smith defined as a “harnessing of musical expression to local aspiration” (Smith 1997: 513). PDX Pop Now! as an organization represents how Portlanders are primary and active in the city's musical expressions because these expressions are created by their own volition and creativity. Further, the organization (and other musicians) views the festival as a way to make the music scene accessible to interested residents.

In an interview with Darren Bridenbrech, I asked him if he thought the music scene was out of reach to most Portlanders. He responded by saying that “anybody who says finding out about Portland bands is difficult who doesn't go to PDX Pop Now!, well, I just don't feel bad for them” (Bridenbrech, personal communication, 2010). When probed, he said that dozens of bands play in PDX Pop Now! each year and because no two bands play at the same time, it is an easy way interested residents can be introduced to the scene because they “don't have to look for it” (Bridenbrech, personal communication, 2010). In addition to hosting over forty local bands each

year for a ticket price of \$35 (less than a dollar for each band), being all-ages so not to exclude residents based on age, PDX Pop Now! is also well promoted in local media including the Portland Show Guide, *Oregonian*, OPB, *Willamette Week*, and the *Mercury*. This increases the likelihood residents may hear about the event and is another representation of active participants trying to create a non-exclusive environment.

PDX Pop Now! is not a spectacle and is not a standardized cultural production. Different bands participate in the festival each year, in part because each year there are new bands emerging in the community. In 2010, there were 675 submissions by local artists who wanted to perform at the 2010 PDX Pop Now! festival, and the line-up was in the process of selection by 70 local volunteer listeners at the completion of this research. The festival continues to be organized by volunteers and will be hosted by Rotture (formally Loveland), located in an industrial area in Southeast (PDX Pop Now! 2009).

### **Beyond PDX Pop Now!: Alternative Culturescapes and the Location of Independent Music Venues**

Portland Show Guide ([www.pcpdx.com](http://www.pcpdx.com)) is an interactive website that lists shows occurring each night in the city. While it is managed and hosted by one individual, anyone can contribute to the content. According to Damien, the site's creator and designer, the idea behind the site is that there is "a ton" of shows happening each night in Portland not listed in *Willamette Week* or *Portland Mercury*, two weeklies with dedicated sections on music listings, and a central site is needed to



better share information about all music events happening each night (Damien, personal communication, 2010). Local bands and interested residents are able to use the site to post the time and location of shows as well as blog about the shows or music generally.

The site's creator, Damien, was inspired to create the Portland Show Guide after a trip to Seattle when he had difficulty as a visitor finding local music shows. In an interview, he said the trip made him realize the trouble Portland's local bands must have trying to promote their shows, and even more, the barriers locals face trying to access local music performances. To connect Portlanders with music performances, he created a public virtual space to which anyone can contribute content, including posting show times, dates, locations, and images. The only content restriction is that no advertisements can be posted on the site – “If someone wants to post a Britney Spears concert, that's fine. This site is to share music with people. But if it's a ‘Coca-Cola presents Britney Spears,’ I or another user would flag the posting and it would be removed” (Portland Show Guide, personal communication, 2010).

The website is organized into various sections including show listings, a blog, a list of local venues, and an image section of photos taken at shows (like those found in the PDX Pop Now! photo essay, these photos are often focused on the audience and how they are experiencing performances). Users can sort performances by day, week, or month and they can filter for all-ages shows or those that only admit people ages 21-years or older because of strict laws established by the Oregon Liquor Control Commission (OLCC) that limits the number of music venues selling alcohol that can

put on all ages shows. Each show listing identifies the venue, its address, directions through Google maps, and the number of past and upcoming shows at the venue.

The Portland Show Guide, often called “pcdpdx” in interviews, was often mentioned unprompted by interview respondents as a way for audiences to access the scene and for musicians to promote their live shows to the city. When asked if he viewed the independent music scene as accessible to interested residents, Zach Osterlund of Breakfast Mountain responded that:

access to the scene could be seen as limited because you have to look for it. We don't try to limit ourselves to anything or anybody. We're all really cool, nice people. But we're not going to go post our flyers up at Burgerville. We post flyers at people's work, our MySpace pages, or go to [pcpdx.com](http://pcpdx.com). I guess that gets 1,500 hits a day (Osterlund, personal communication, 2010).

Osterlund's comment is interesting. First, he acknowledges that in some ways, promotion of the scene can be insular because it is done through “friends” and only in certain locations, which could be seen as symbolic of the scene's exclusivity. However, he viewed the Portland Show Guide as an accessible resource for people to learn about music performances, citing the amount of people that visited the site each day and explaining to me that anyone can post shows or comments about shows. As Damien explained in his reasoning for creating the website, the idea was to extend the promotion of local music outside of friend networks and to make the scene more visible in the community.

According to Damien, the Portland Show Guide has been successful in opening the scene to a broader network of residents since its creation in 2008. Since January 1, 2008, there have been shows posted at 699 different “venues” in Portland,

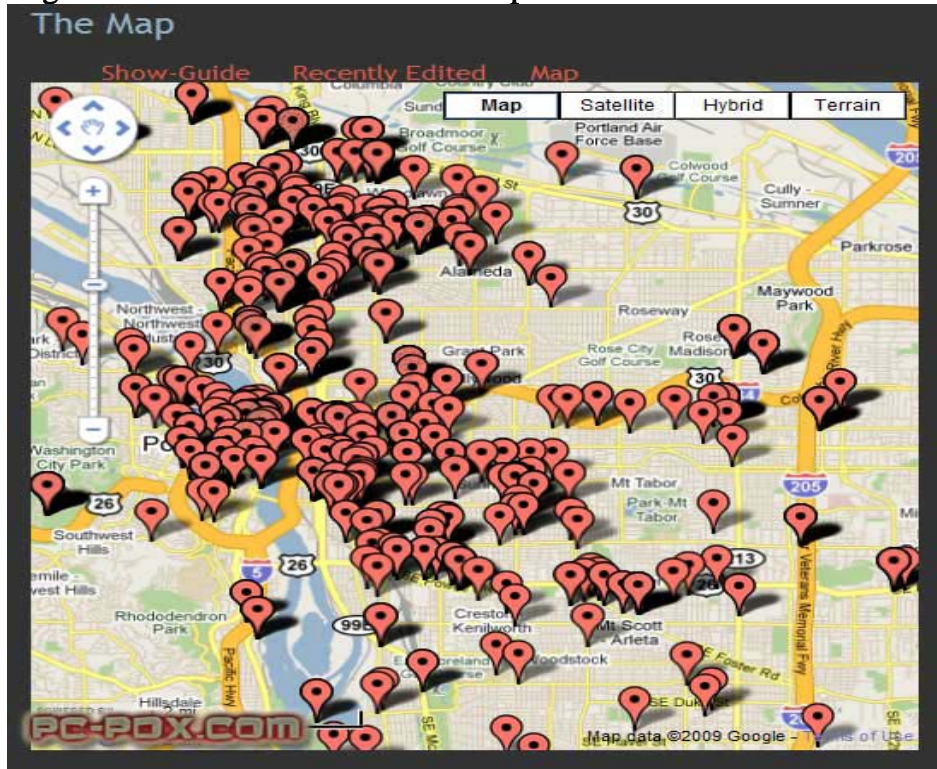
with venues being simply defined as any place in which a show was played – a residence, coffee shop, park, bar, or club. By January 21, 2010, there were 439 upcoming shows for the year at 76 different venues around the city, 138 of which had been posted by 93 separate contributors within 24 hours of January 21, 2010 (there has been 1,898 contributing IPs since January 1, 2008). In 2009, there were 55,714 unique visitors to the website and 6,786 unique shows posted, an increase from 5,894 shows in 2008 (Portland Show Guide, personal communication, 2010). On January 21, 2010, Damien also reported that there had been 832 users, “decent” for a Wednesday, but it gets higher on weekend nights and starts a new ramp up on Mondays. There is a big difference on the number of users depending on the day of the week!” (Damien, personal communication, 2010).

Using the Portland Show Guide’s content data, the 6,786 shows posted in 2009 represent an average of 19 shows each day that year. While it is not known how many of these shows were played by local musicians, Damien notes that it is “significant; there are so many Portland bands playing shows every day” (Portland Show Guide, personal communication, 2010). Out of personal curiosity and growing requests from users, Damien mapped out all “active” venues in the city, with active defined as venues that have hosted at least one show in the Portland region in the last five months (see Figure 3.2). The mapping is posted on the website with an explanation to the image that reads:

This is why Portland has the best damn music scene in the country. Check it out: there are about 305 active houses and venues hosting shows here in Portland. There are so many fucking awesome people hosting shows and so many more bands here that you barely have to cross the street to catch a part

of the scene. All it takes is a basement and some tallboys and you're gold. We've been doing the Show-Guide for about three years now and have almost 700 venues and houses listed, about 305 are them have been active and thrown shows in the past five months. We plotted all the venues and houses that have done a show in the last year and we came up with this wild ass map. Keep it classy Portland! (Portland Show Guide 2010).

**Figure 3.2 Portland Show Guide Map of “Active” Local Venues**

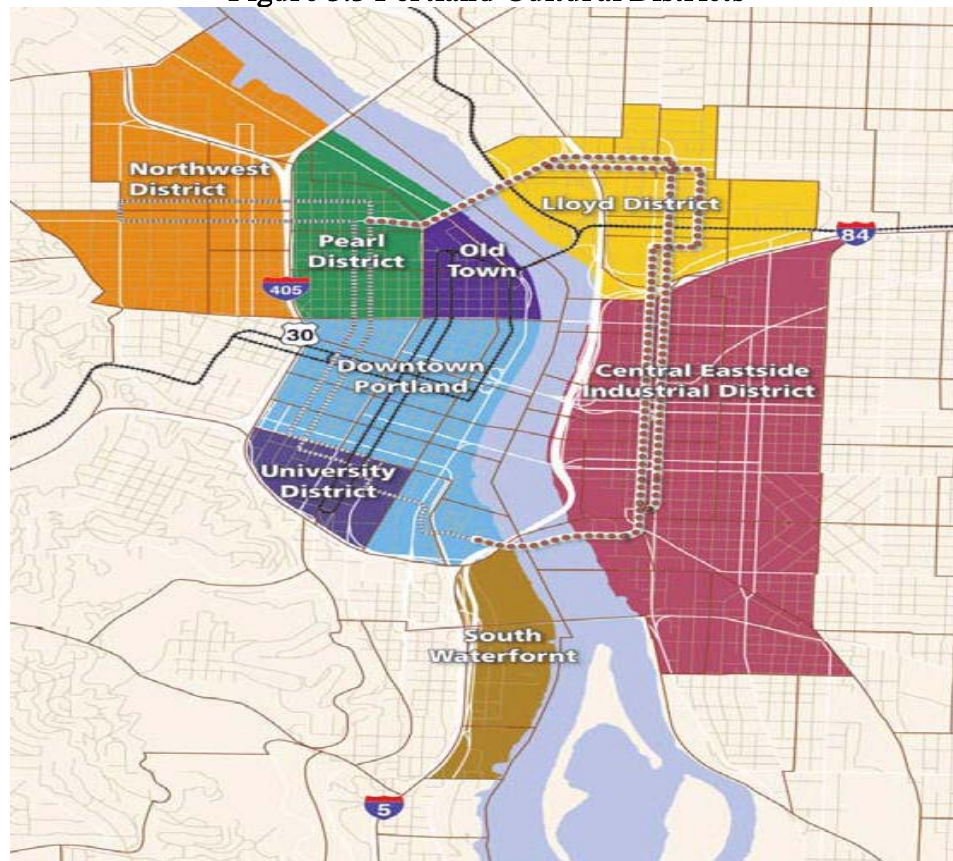


Source: “The Map,” *Portland Show Guide* “Blogs: The Word On PDX” N.p. 29 October 2009. Web. 10 January 2010 ([www.pcpdx.com](http://www.pcpdx.com))

Portland Show Guide users created “The Map” to illustrate what the “scene looks like from space,” and further because they wanted spatial representation of musical expressions in the city, symbolizing the significance of *public spaces* in the local music scene (Portland Show Guide 2009). While it is evident from Figure 3.2 that there are number of venues located across the city, it is difficult to see from this map that over three-quarters of the venues are located on the eastside of the

Willamette River, outlined in Appendix B, even though Portland’s more known cultural districts are located west of the Willamette River. These include the Cultural District (“Downtown Portland” and “University District” in Figure 3.3) located on the South Park Blocks in which the Portland Art Museum and six theatres are located or the Pearl District (“Pearl District” in Figure 3.3), which boasts dozens of art galleries and the Gerding Theatre, home of productions by Portland Center Stage, or directly across the Willamette River where the Portland Trail Blazers play at the Rose Garden Arena (“Lloyd District” in Figure 3.3).

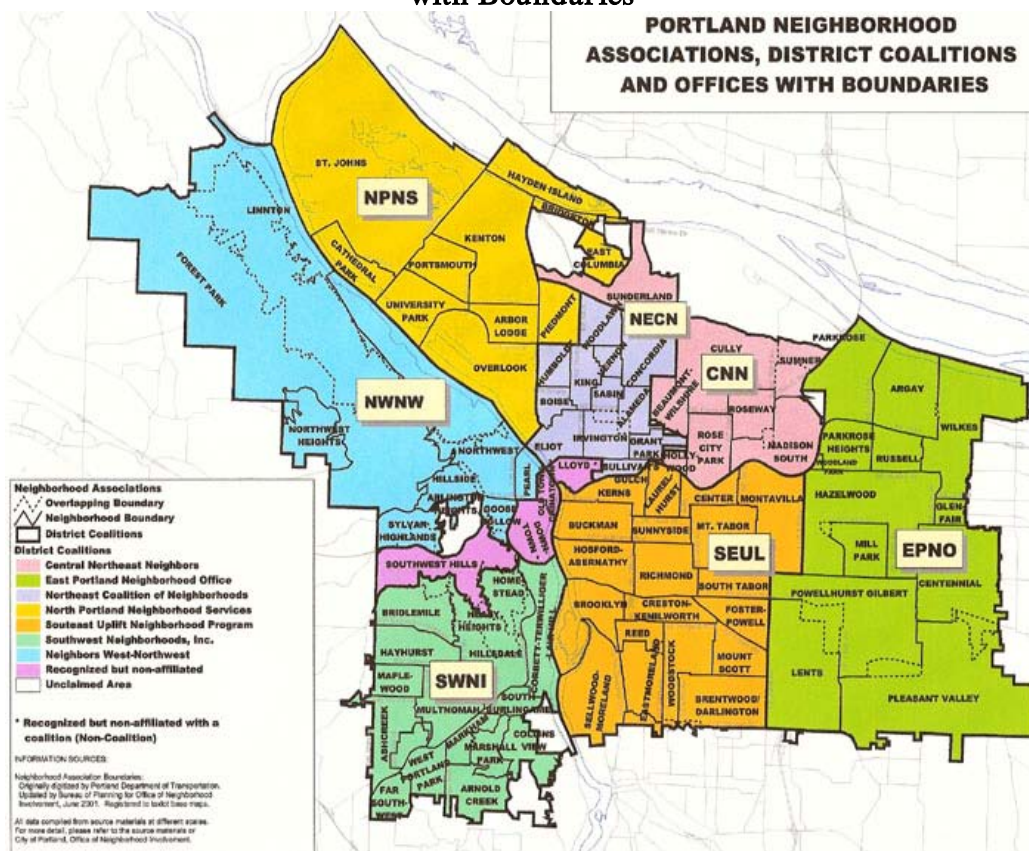
**Figure 3.3 Portland Cultural Districts**



Source: Marthens, Susan, “Inner Portland Neighborhoods,” *Moving to Portland*, n.d. Web. 7 April 2010 ([http://www.movingtoportland.net/living\\_downtown.htm](http://www.movingtoportland.net/living_downtown.htm))

To provide further perspective of the location of local music venues, Figure 3.4 is a map of Portland Neighborhood Associations. The defined cultural districts referred to above are located in the “Central Northeast Neighbors” (CNN) and “Neighbors West-Northwest” (NWNW) district coalitions. Conversely, in the map of Portland venues (Figure 3.2), a majority of the venues are located in the “North Portland Neighborhood Services” (NPNS), “Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods” (NECN), “Central Northeast Neighbors” (CNEN) and “Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Program” (SEUL) neighborhood association boundaries.

**Figure 3.4 Portland Neighborhood Associations, District Coalitions, and Offices with Boundaries**



Source: Hochstein, Miles, Portland Neighborhood Associations, District Coalitions, and Offices with Boundaries, Portland Ground, n.P. n.d. Web. 7 April 2010 (<http://www.portlandground.com/maps.php>)

The majority of the venues listed in the Portland Show Guide are integrated into Portland neighborhoods, especially neighborhoods in North (“North Portland Neighborhood Services” in Figure 3.4), Northeast (“Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods” and “Central Northeast Neighbors” in Figure 3.4), and Southeast (“Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Program” in Figure 3.4) Portland. According to Abbott, neighborhoods in Portland “express different views of the city region – different ideas about what it can and should offer as a place to work and live” (Abbott 2001: 79). He characterizes eastside neighborhoods as civically active, more integrated by age and ethnicity than westside neighborhoods, and supportive of citizen involvement and participation, which he traces back in part to the 1960s when neighborhood associations were formed to revitalize the eastside (Abbott 2001).

Many neighborhoods on the eastside, such as the Albina District in North Portland, have been (or are being) affected by gentrification, but cultures of strong neighborhood participation and activism by residents remain, evidenced by the number of independent music performances occurring nightly in these neighborhoods. These neighborhoods have offered cultural space for the city’s independent music scene. The location of music venues also suggests that the “orderly” cultural institutions are not relevant or accessible to musicians and audiences involved in Portland’s independent music culture because of their size, high costs, and accessibility to bands to host shows in these areas. As found in the work of Grazian and Spring, factors including exclusivity, commercialization, and inaccessibility can act as catalysts, rather than deterrents, for groups of individuals to seek accessible

spaces in which an alternative cultural activity can be expressed, thereby creating new culturoscapes in the city, or alternative areas in which music culture is experienced. In the case of Portland, these alternative culturoscapes are located in eastside neighborhoods and they may inform the cultural image of the city more accurately than activities that occur in large scale and wealth generating cultural institutions (Sussman and Estes, 2004).

While many venues posted on this map are licensed local businesses, such as “Holocene”, “Rotture”, “Branx”, “Doug Fir”, “Mississippi Studios”, “East Burn”, and “Rontoms”, or not-for-profit organizations like the “Black Rose Infoshop”, “Work Sound”, and “Disjecta”, in a review of the venues, over one-third are local residences that are transformed into performances spaces. Sometimes, the address or cross streets are listed to identify the place. Other times formal names are given to residences, especially for those that regularly host live music performances. These include “The Artistry”, the “Green House”, “Dekum Manner”, and “Camel House.” Most of the houses listed have been temporarily made into venues less than five times, but several, such as The Artistry, Green House, and Dekum Manner, have hosted dozens, even hundreds, of bands and opened their doors for public experiences of the city’s independent music culture. Performance spaces, whether residences are temporarily transformed to accommodate live performances or smaller licensed venues or bars, allow for active participation in music (Connell and Gibson 2006).

Cultural expressions manifest in physical spaces that make up the culturoscapes of cities. As represented by the sheer number of show venues, the



independent music scene is manifested in a notable number of alternative cultural spaces in the city and these spaces signify that the city's cultural landscape extends beyond the central culture districts – the Pearl District, Old Town, Northwest District, University District, Downtown, and Lloyd Center District. The emphasis on the number and location of show venues illustrate that the scene is also structurally dependent on spaces to perform music. Without these spaces, the formation and activities of the scene would be drastically altered.

### **The Foundation of PDX Pop Now! Festivals: Daily Occurrences of Live Performances**

Live musical performances can inspire behaviors, reinforce or create cultural meanings, and foster community building in particular places (Connell and Gibson 2006). The ability to access and actively experience music is dependent on the type of venue. For example, aside from tickets to concerts at the Rose Garden Arena being extremely more expensive than those of local bands, the arena is structurally large making it necessary for people seated in the back of the arena to rely on a television screen to see the performance. Even those individuals able to afford a front row ticket are separated from the musician by a physical barrier and a large stage. In venues of this size and type, musicians and audiences are physically separate – the musician raised above and distanced from the audience. Due to this separation, the number of people (sometimes in the thousands) attending the performance, and the standardized, rehearsed spectacle created for the audience, there is less room for active participation

at these concerts. The audiences are often passive consumers in a rehearsed, processed performance.

In smaller venues in the city, these physical separations are minimized, if they exist at all. There is often no stage, and if so it is low to the ground. The venue is smaller which does limit the amount of people able to attend the show, but also provides for a more interaction with audience members and the bands. In addition, because Portland independent bands often play multiple shows a month, there are more opportunities to see performances. Last, these venues are also lower in cost, and sometimes all ages. In my field observations, in addition to finding examples of accessibility (promotion of shows through public mediums like the Portland Show Guide and local media, the number of all-ages shows made possible through house venues, and the low to no cost of music performances) I found examples of audiences actively participating in musical experiences which was often enabled by the smaller size of venues and the absence of stages or other barriers separating the audience from the band.

Rontoms is a bar and show venue located on East Burnside Street. It is small with just one room with a collapsed stage area and a back patio for warm weather seating. Every Sunday Rontoms hosts a free show that features two to three independent bands, many of which are Portland-based. A local group called Potlatch Presents, a “grass roots concert promoter in Portland” that is currently attempting to obtain non-profit status, organizes the Sunday shows. The primary function of Potlatch

Presents is to promote local music by organizing live music performances. The name “Potlatch,” according to their website, is a:

festival or ceremony practiced among indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest coast. At these gatherings different events take place, like [sic] either singing and dancing, spiritual ceremonies (sometimes with masks or regalia), and/or the barter of wealth through gifts...each nation, tribe, and sometimes clan has its own way of practicing the Potlatch so as to present a very diverse presentation and meaning” and the organization attempts to follow stay true to the cultural meaning of its namesake (Potlatch Presents 2009).

Contemporary potlatches are especially evident through the Sunday shows at Rontoms, which represent commitment to local music and making it accessible for new or lesser-known musicians to perform and for audiences to be introduced to them. Potlatch Presents members Matt King and Darren Bridenbrech characterize the organization as being inclusive of bands scheduled to play shows, and they attempt to pair lesser known or newer local bands with those that are more established in the community as a way to support and foster the scene (Darren Bridenbrech, personal communication, 2010). This type of pairing of bands is not uncommon in Portland’s independent music community. Anderson of Guidance Counselor explained that

if you’re a new musician and you’re relatively good, and you give your stuff to a more established band, they’ll do whatever they can to help you out. If a new dance band is good and people like them, it helps the whole community of dance bands. When I made my first album, Atole had me open for them. It helped me get a fanbase. Now I’m going on tour with Starfucker (Anderson, personal communication, 2010).

These collaborations discussed by Anderson, King, and Bridenbrech are symbolic of the lack of competition in the scene and the importance of community support. Bands view it as advantageous for the entire “community”,

including themselves, if more bands are active in the scene and draw in a broader audience. The emphasis is placed on expanding the size of the scene not *just* because it increases the capital-generating potential of the scene, but because it makes the scene more integrated into the community and increases its creative possibilities.

In the summer, the Sunday shows are located on the outside porch area of Rontoms. It is evident that the area was designed for dining and lounging purposes, not to accommodate musical performances, and is transformed on Sunday for the purpose of hosting music related cultural events. There is no stage to separate the audience from the band, something that Arya Imig related in an interview is not an uncommon element of live performances in Portland. He adds the lack of a stage presents more opportunities for the band to react to the audience and is a “democratic” and “equalitarian” way to experience live music performances (Imig, personal communication, 2010). This performance set up enables the equal contribution of both groups (audience and band) in shaping the meaning and feeling of the performance (Hudson 2005).

Rontoms is unique in that it hosts one of the city’s only weekly free shows, however it does not stand out for its set-up. Many venues in Portland do not have a stage (or have a very low stage), putting the audience on equal (or close to) footing with the musicians. These venues include the Ace Hotel, Holocene, Dunes, East Burn, Valentines, and Backspace. Although, it should be noted here that other spaces, especially those ones designed specifically for music performances such as the

Wonder Ballroom, Crystal Ballroom, and the Aladdin Theatre, are structured in a way to separate the audiences – those under 21-years of age or sectioned off from those 21-years and older – and to separate the audience from the band – larger stages and a barrier between the audience and the stage itself. Smaller venues seem to foster more interaction between people and have less structural evidence of hierarchy, exclusivity, or separation. While the small size of these venues and close proximity between musicians and audiences they foster are evidence of the scene’s democratic community values, there begs the question of who has access to these venues despite their low-cost. The goal of the free Sunday shows at Rontoms is to represent the diversity of Portland’s independent music community, however only bands and audience members 21-years of age or older are able to attend shows at this venue.

Transforming private residences into performance spaces symbolizes a collective agency Portlanders have to make local music accessible in a city in which many music venues are restricted to people under the legal drinking age because of laws set by the OLCC. The OLCC has set requirements for defining restaurants and bars. In almost all circumstances, if food sales exceed that of liquor, it is a restaurant; conversely, if liquor sells exceeds that of food (which is the case for many show venues) than it is a bar and cannot permit minors. A 2007 article in the *Willamette Week* about Portland house shows suggests that the OLCC is attempting to prevent young Portland residents from drinking and experiencing Portland’s music culture, and is failing. Jen Olesen, a booker at the time for local establishment Valentines, is quoted in the article saying, “For as hard a time as the OLCC gives different venues in

this town, it does create a weird incubator for an alternative framework” ( *Willamette Week* 2007).

This “alternative framework” is Portland’s house show scene, an “all-ages culture” that predominately manifests in houses in eastside neighborhoods ( *Willamette Week* 2007). Imig agrees with the *Willamette Week* article, claiming in an interview that without house venues, the size, scope, and accessibility of the scene would be drastically limited – “house shows are the foundation of the scene here. A lot of people are under 21 so a lot of venues are out. Valentines, Rotture, Holocene, Doug Fir. Sometimes these places have all-ages shows, but not every weekend” (Imig, personal communication, 2010). House shows open the scene to all interested residents – musicians or audiences – who are excluded from independent music manifestations because of Oregon’s strong liquor control laws. The creation of house shows also signify how residents are using music to represent their right to the city and put into question who really controls public life and public spaces.

House shows offer a different experience than business show venues. First, house shows differ from house parties. The central purpose of house shows is to actively experience live music performances, as opposed to house parties at which music is often a background noise used to create a social atmosphere. Activities at house shows center around music performances – people gather in particular rooms in which the music performance is occurring and unlike many house parties, people are not dispersed between multiple rooms doing a host of different activities.

The Green House is an established residential show venue in Portland that has hosted over dozens of shows in the city since 2008 (Portland Show Guide). On its MySpace page, it represents itself as hosting “house shows” not “house parties” (MySpace/TheGreenHouse 2010). My first field observation at this venue was on a rainy Saturday in March 2009. As I was walking to the house, a group of young men, all of whom were 20-years of age, yelled to several people on the porch, “Hey, is this where the show is at?” A young woman affirmed it was and invited everyone into the house, although she did not live there. The rest of the evening I saw people enter and leave as they pleased, much like a business establishment. Inside, there were groups of people clustered in the living room and kitchen, a vegetable and hummus plate was set out, and later someone brought over homemade cookies. A number of people had brought cases of beer, primarily Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR), and people seemed to grab cans at their will, with no one checking to make sure they were of legal drinking age. Alcohol consumption may be less concerning as most people seemed to arrive by bus or bike.

I sat down at a table with a group of people and through conversation I learned that two of the people were in one of the bands performing that evening, Junkface. I was struck by the level to which these musicians, the “performers”, interacted with people attending the show, the “audience”, as if there was little separation between the two. The personal interaction between audiences and performers before and during musical performances illustrates the community relationships *Willamette Week* Music Editor Casey Jarman said defines Portland’s music scene. The performers do not push

a product for consumption by the audiences who are mere consumers of the music. The performers and audiences together build community and participate in place making through musical interactions.

Three bands performed that evening, two of which were visiting from Seattle. The first performance was located in the back room of the basement and featured a folk band that played a 30-minute set. During their performance, the next band was setting up in the main room of the basement which played another 30 minute set while the final band, a Portland local band called Junkface, set up their equipment in the back room. The organization and fluidity was impressive. According to Randy from Junkface, the three bands together along with a resident of the house quickly established the rotation and show times an hour before the event started. During the Junkface's performance, a crowd of 30 people squeezed into the back room. Junkface describes their sound as "rock/indie/powerpop" and it filled the dark room, which had only one light shining on the band. Periodically, flashes of cameras illuminated the audience swaying and bouncing to the music, and there was little talking. At one point Randy, the lead singer, jumped on the arms of the crowd playing his guitar as they supported him. After the final show, people flooded out of the room, sweaty and ears ringing. A few people stayed behind to talk to the band and congratulate them on their performance. For 20 to 30 minutes after Junkface's performance, people congregated upstairs before going their separate ways, many by bicycle. From the perspective of an outside observer, it was not obvious who were musicians and who were members of the audience.



While the bands and food differed, the behaviors and elements noted in this account were consistent in the other two shows I attended at the Green House during my fieldwork. Even more, there were distinct commonalities between the three house venues at which I attended shows – Green House, Dekum Manner, and the Artistry – although they were not identical. First, each house only hosts all-ages shows. They do not limit access or exclude people by age. Secondly, they do not have a stage and the shows are played in rooms in the basement or bottom floors of the house, in part for noise control issues. Nilina Mason Campbell, expressed in an interview that she “really [doesn’t] like going to shows that have stages because it separates the bands from the audience. House shows don’t have stages which I think is important from changing it from a show to an experience” (Mason-Campbell, personal communication, 2010). This set up increases the ability of the audience and the band to collectively create the experience.

Next, others and I walked directly into the house to attend the show, symbolic that these houses are no longer residences during shows, but are makeshift music venues. Activities at these shows are centered on musical performances. It is not a background noise and is not passively consumed by people at the house. Finally, the bands playing the shows interacted with the audience before and after their set indicating that the independent music community is comprised of both bands and audiences, and each group is important to music experiences.

How music is consumed in a space alters the way in which it can contribute to or alter the cultural meaning of places and people’s interactions in places (Connell and

Gibson 2006). Through these two accounts given, it is evident that licensed business venues differ in the level of accessibility and community interaction they can accommodate or inspire. House shows, once someone learns of their existence (primarily through the Portland Show Guide), are accessible to all age groups and allow for interaction between and within musician and audience groups. The basement of the Green House offered three bands and several dozen audience members the accommodations and circumstances to create a shared musical experience accessible to all residents, not just those of legal drinking age, as is the case for Rontoms.

### **Creating Shared Meanings through Music vs. Controlling People in Places through Music**

To understand how unique and democratic music consumption is in both these examples, an understanding of the ways in which music is used to control people's behaviors (as opposed to inspire reactions) or act as a passive distraction is required. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the concept of Taylorism, referring to the work of industrial economist Fredrick Winslow Taylor, was introduced. Taylor found that by playing certain types of music in manufacturing plants, worker productivity and efficiency could be enhanced (Connell and Gibson 2006). During the second World War, Muzak channels were played in work places with 15-minute cycles of "subdued" songs alternating with "stimulating" ones, with the primary objective being to maximize worker output by manipulating workers "fatigue curve" (Connell and Gibson 2004: 194). Music continues to be employed as a manipulative tool and is often used in consumption spaces to influence consumer behavior. For example, music played in

retail spaces can create an atmosphere that “reinforces corporate images created by certain stores” and is used to motivate consumers to stay in certain retail spaces for longer periods of time, increasing their likelihood to purchase (Connell and Gibson 2006).

Take for example the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, the second largest enclosed mall in the world. Retail stores there use different types of strategies to reinforce marketing goals. The Levi store has a wall of television screens that play popular music videos which may inspire consumers to want to look like the images in the videos by purchasing the newest fads on display at the store, while Victoria’s Secret plays romantic and lighter music which links a romantic setting to the store’s products (Connell and Gibson 2006). In these settings, music targeted at mass consumption. This is also true of large-scale live performances at places such as the Rose Garden Arena. The music is attached to consumption images – the sponsor of the concert, or the multitude of products on sale at the concert. These concerts create opportunities for consumption, not active participation.

Music has become a part of the spectacle of capitalism. It is used to help create an image of a product and to motivate consumers to purchase it. Music has become one of the many avenues of advertising and marketing in a global economy. However, the difference between music played at the Green House versus the Mall of America suggests that music “can and does enable resistance to globalizing trends” (Connell and Gibson 2006: 271). An integral reason why local musicians and audiences in Portland boast the authenticity of Portland’s music scene is because it is not associated

with a product, rather places and people – the city at large, venues, houses, streets, or even particular bands. It is a tool people use to ground themselves in their community in a world where, because of advertising, marketing, and capitalism, culture is global and associated with images and products instead of the people who create culture (Connell and Gibson 2006).

Music can be used (and is) as a means by which people position themselves into their community:

In the place of the continued commercialism of popular music, and in a world of uncertainty, the quest for identity and meaning has been rekindled. Place became a critical musical resource, as a symbol in music (requiring strategic inauthenticity for adequate commodification), a means of national identity, and the inspiration for ever-evolving local scenes. Invented traditions require an invented geography (Connell and Gibson 2006: 277).

In many respects, Portland musicians and audiences who comprise the music scene have invented a cultural landscape in the city by reclaiming and transforming spaces – houses, local bars, public spaces – to allow them to experience culture created by and for them in public life in a more organized, less industrialized way. Zukin’s assertion that public spaces are intrinsically democratic and can be reclaimed and reused in different contexts is demonstrated by a Portland group known as Lost Gospel (Zukin 2004). According to *Willamette Week*, Lost Gospel is a “collective of creative individuals pursuing community through various forms of collaboration and art” (Mannheimer 2009).

Coordinated by Nilina Mason-Campbell, the collective organizes shows and music events as a method for community building. On their blog ([www.thisislostgospel.blogspot.com](http://www.thisislostgospel.blogspot.com)) they write, “The idea of Lost Gospel is that

everyone is invited! Anyone who wants to be a part of it is. This is about community and forging new connections through collaboration. Let us know what you want to do because we'd like to do it together" (Lost Gospel 2009). In an interview with Mason-Campbell, she articulated this idea of collaboration further, emphasizing her desire to create an alternative to what she views as the broader, more competitive artistic world – a value embedded in Portland's independent music scene. She stated "when I first started to freelance people just ignore you. They only talk to you when they want you. There are so many people with creative energy here why not collaborate? A lot of people don't know that you can say 'I want to do this!' and people are supportive of it" (Mason-Campbell, personal communication, 2010).

A theme across Lost Gospel sessions is local bands perform in a public spaces not designed for musical expressions and through performances, the spaces are transformed into public cultural places. Lost Gospel events illustrate key characteristics about Portland's independent music scene. The performance spaces chosen for Lost Gospel are essential to creating the musical experience. For Mason-Campbell, there is a connection to the city and music. She views live performances as a way to show people the variety of public spaces in the city, and the right of people to experience those places.

The locations I choose for Lost Gospel are locations that are important to me. It's my living love letter to Portland. It's showcasing Portland...places I love and visit and bands I love and watch. To me it's logical to connect them. Music can bring an extra magic to places. Like the mounted police stables. It's so cool that they're right downtown, yet not many people know they're there...Horse Feathers were playing, the horses were running in the stable, and then the train went by. It was beautiful" (Mason-Campbell, personal communication, 2010).

I had the opportunity to attend this Lost Gospel Session in Spring 2009 that featured Portland folk band Horse Feathers. The session took place at the Portland Mounted Police facility located near the waterfront in Northwest Portland. While the location borders Portland's trendy Pearl District and is surrounded by high-priced condominiums, it is removed from Portland's defined cultural areas. The public space is associated with its public safety role, not culture or music. Mason-Campbell chose this spot for her Lost Gospel session because she thought it was a beautiful location and wanted to expose Lost Gospel attendees to the space and to the fact the city has a mounted patrol unit. In addition, through music she also connected two very differing groups – the mounted police and young Portlanders. A group of several dozen people, including me, met outside the facility and were greeted by a Portland Mounted Policeman who gave the group a tour of the facility, introducing us to the horses, and discussed the role Portland mounted police play in the city's public safety. Following the tour, the group was led outside to a grassy area next to the horse stables where Horse Feathers was waiting to perform. The band played several songs for the audience, most of whom were seated on the grass in a half circle around the band while Nilina filmed the interaction between the audience and band against the backdrop of Portland Mounted Police horses grassing in the stable.

Interestingly, the mounted police did not participate in the music experience even though they were explicitly invited multiple times. Instead they stayed in the facility while Horse Feathers played 100 yards away from its front entrance. They did not explain their lack of participation when I asked. Perhaps this lack of participation

was most striking because as a researcher, I saw multiple examples of accessibility, community building, and opportunity for active participation at this Lost Gospel event. It was promoted through *Willamette Week*, Portland Show Guide, and mass Facebook invitations (Mason-Campbell has over 1,000 “friends” on Facebook). Mason-Campbell had everyone congregate outside the facility and wait until 5 minutes after 2p.m. when the session started so that no individual had to enter the police facility, a place that could be seen as unwelcoming to a lone individual. The police introduced these young Portlanders to a part of the city few had any experience with, and then these Portlanders transformed the space into a place they could better identify with (and the city itself) through music. The mounted police were less willing to be introduced to the city’s independent music culture despite their suggestion in the tour that it is their job to be more connected and integrated into the city than other police officers.

Other Lost Gospel sessions also adopted non-music oriented public spaces and transformed them for live music performances. Events have included a “pool party” on a vacant lot in southeast Portland (SE 34<sup>th</sup> and Belmont) where the band Pyramid (formally Starfucker) performed inside an inflatable “kiddy pool” on a hot summer day in 2008. People attending the event, which was promoted through flyers, the Lost Gospel blog, Facebook, MySpace, the Portland Show Guide, and word of mouth, were encouraged to come dressed in swim wear and be ready to “party down” (Lost Gospel 2009). According to Mason-Campbell, over 200 people came to this Lost Gospel session and even though she did not have a public gathering permit – “they’re like \$100. I can’t afford that!” – the police who arrived at the scene did not shut it down.

Again, this represents an acceptance by the police for music gatherings with Mason-Campbell attributes to the sheer number of spontaneous (yet not out of control) musical occurrences in the city each day.

Lost Gospel Sessions, as well as house shows, best reflect how locals participating in local musical expressions have created alternative culturescapes (even if temporary ones) through their transformation of spaces to accommodate musical expressions. Through musical activities, these residents express their right to use the spaces in the city and in turn define the image of the city. As articulated by Zukin

The right to be in these spaces, use them in certain ways, to invest them with a sense of ourselves and our communities – to claim them as ours and to be claimed in turn by them – make up a constantly changing public culture. People with the economic and political power have the greatest opportunity to shape public culture by controlling the building of the city's public spaces in stone and concrete. Yet public space is inherently democratic. The question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of a city, is open-ended (Zukin 2004: 11).

Spaces to perform music are central to Portland's independent music scene. Some, such as bars and restaurants, are more obvious. Other spaces like house shows and spaces used for Lost Gospel sessions are actively transformed into music venues to make the music scene more accessible to interested residents and to illustrate the right of residents to gather in the city's public spaces. Portland's local independent music culture discussed in this research is not *just* a place-bound expression; it is made in the context of global music structure and influenced by advances in communication and recording technologies. Although sounds and styles of Portland's independent local music are embedded in places within the city, the music scene still operates (on varying levels) within the framework of the global music industry and systems of



advanced capitalism (Gill 1995). To portray a more accurate picture of Portland's local music scene, it must be acknowledged that musical practices and are influenced by the global music industry and in some respects, the culture is constantly undergoing a process of commodification in which its image or products are being branded, bought, and sold.

## Chapter 4

### Commodification of Musical Expressions, Digital Communications, and the Global Music Industry

Local musical cultures are bound up in questions of economy (how much musicians are getting paid for gigs, the companies involved in producing and selling musical instruments, the commercialization of local sounds, the changing economy of music retailing); meanwhile economic aspects of musical activities are always socially and culturally embedded, relying on aesthetic judgments, and particular networks of actors that are not always obviously economic. Gibson and Connell 2006: 9

A reoccurring theme in Gibson's and Connell's critical study of music's spatial dimensions and relationship with localities is the tension between music as a commodified product of the cultural industry and music as a cultural form used to create and assign meaning to places (Connell and Gibson 2006). In local scenes, music can simultaneously have economic, social, and cultural values. The authors note that the academic study of music has avoided "complex connections between cultural and commercial trends" by defining local music either as a unique and democratic cultural expression *or* by focusing solely on its function as a potential source of economic growth, job creation, and a draw for tourists (Connell and Gibson 2006:7). This chapter addresses ways in which local musical expressions are (also) commodified products in Portland, the analysis of which is embedded in Adorno's distinction between cultural entities and industrialized cultural products. He explains:

The cultural commodities of the industry are governed...by the principle of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation. The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms. Ever since these cultural forms first began to earn a living for their creators as commodities in the market-place they had already possessed something of this quality. But then they sought after profit only indirectly, over and above their autonomous essence. New on

the part of the culture industry is the direct and undisguised primacy of a precisely and thoroughly calculated efficacy in its most typical products. The autonomy of works of art, which of course rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, and was always permeated by a constellation of effects, is tendentially eliminated by the culture industry, with or without the conscious will of those in control (Adorno 1975: 176).

Symbolized by the guiding principles of PDX Pop Now!, free Sunday shows at Rontoms and house shows, the ability to participate in Portland's local music culture and the availability of accessible show venues, are its defining elements. However, as Connell and Gibson, Spring, and Grazian note, there are usually economic elements tied to local musical expressions, ranging from paying for recording equipment and instruments, bands promising to bring in a certain number of people so a venue can cover operating expenses through alcohol or food purchases, or the act of selling and buying CDs. For example, PDX Pop Now! currently sells low-priced tickets (\$35 for all three days and more than 40 performances) to the festival to cover operating expenses, and when attending local shows it is not uncommon to see a table set up displaying burned CDs in jackets with self-made CD cover pages (PDX Pop Now! 2008).

The relationship between audiences, musicians, and live performances of musical expressions serve to ground music, even in a commodified form, in place. This is juxtaposed to those musical goods manufactured by the global music industry that have removed human agency and creativity to create a standardized product for mass distribution and consumption. Commodified musical forms are still recognized for their "use-value" as opposed to their "exchange-value" (Holtzman et. al., 2007: 45)

Manifestations of Portland's musical expressions may simultaneously be both commodities *and* cultural expressions, born from individual or community creativity and fixed in place, but fluid as they flow in commodified forms across space and geography (Connell and Gibson 2006). The following analysis distinguishes commodified musical expressions in Portland from those produced by the culture industry, beginning with an overview of the current state of the global music industry.

### **Advances in Digital Technology and the Restructuring of the Global Music Industry**

Cultural industries can be defined as those institutions that use modes of mass production to commodify symbolic (music) or physical (CDs, music carriers) cultural goods and services to be sold in the global market place (Garnham 1990). As is expected of cultural industries, many corporate record labels operating within the larger structure of the global cultural industry are constantly searching and competing for profits by selling mass-produced cultural products to global consumers (Garnham 1990). Despite illusions of authenticity and newness, the sounds and styles put forth by corporate record labels, often epitomized in musicians, are typically replicas of former products (i.e., Madonna and Lady Gaga, Janet Jackson and Rihanna), because the artistic and creative quality of the music is less valuable than its marketing potential, and the marketability of the musician. These "new" goods are mere prototypes of the older products, songs, sounds, genres, and styles that have been repackaged for consumption (Garnham 1990).

Record labels, promotion and advertising agencies, and other entities operating within the global music industry are capital-intensive institutions that produce cultural commodities through industrial modes of production and organization. They share a common goal of efficiency and profit maximization. Common to these industries are advanced production and distribution systems, intense labor divisions, and hierarchal management systems (Garnham 1990). The global music industry is divided into a number of record labels, four of which, known as the “majors” (Universal Music Group, Sony BMG Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group, and EMI) acquire a significant majority of music profits each year. In 2008, Universal Music Group accounted for 35.12 percent of the U.S. music market, followed by Sony BMG Music (22.79 percent), Warner Music Group (21.12 percent), and EMI Group (8.35 percent). The remaining 12.61 percent of profits was scattered across thousands of Independent record labels around the globe (IT Music Facts 2009).

These data points, however, may not account for all record labels or organizations producing music. Musician Ian Anderson of Guidance Counselor expressed in an interview that, in his view, “‘record labels’ could mean anything. A record label could be a kid selling tapes out of his basement for \$1.00 or a bunch of bands ‘signed’ under Boy Gorilla who help each other burn copies of their CDs and sell them at local shows” (Anderson, personal communication, 2010). One example of such a label is Portland’s Boy Gorilla, established in 2005 as an LLC, that operate underneath the radar of organizations tracking this information such as the International Federation of Phonographic Industry (IFPI), which represents the

recording industry worldwide with 1,400 members in 72 countries and seeks to “promote the value of recorded music, safeguard the rights of record producers, and expand the commercial uses of recorded music” (IFPI 2010).

According to Devin Gallagher, a co-owner of Boy Guerilla, while many labels like Boy Gorilla do not generate a profit (and sometimes do not cover basic operating costs), they produce CDs and vinyl records that are available for purchase through websites or local music stores (Gallagher, personal communication, 2010). But he notes that Boy Gorilla is different than those labels or organizations looking to expand the commercial uses of recorded music. In an interview, he described the label as such:

The label officially became a business in 2005, but the idea started in 2004. We were making a new album for Typhoon and we weren't really interested in sending out demos to a bunch of labels and trying to promote ourselves that way. It was pretty easy to get it started. We just applied for an LLC...what we offer is not profit driven. If you want to be a label that will produce and manufacture the product for you, pay for you to go on tour, and do all the advertising for you, then we're not your label. But if you want to be part of a community that has a certain aesthetic and makes something unique, that's what we offer (Gallagher, personal communication, 2010).

The way in which Boy Gorilla “produces” albums is strikingly different than that of “major” record labels. According to Gallagher, a typical process of producing an album consists of recording the album using home recording devices in the house he rents with his brother, and then gathering friends and other musicians with computers for a “CD burning party” during which copies of the album are burned onto writeable compact discs. A band member or local artist usually draws CD covers, and copies are made to insert into the front cover of the CD. A similar process for

producing physical CDs for sell was shared by other musicians interviewed for this project before they became signed by an independent record label. When the band Pyramidd first started out, they burned CDs to share with friends, the cover was drawn by a band member, and they put lavender in the CD jacket to “I don’t know, make it special or something” (Pyramidd, personal communication, 2010). The basic DIY values of the scene are not lost in the process of commodification. Musicians are involved in each part of the process and the production of these products is often done in a collective setting. Even when these practices are more professionalized, as it was for Jordon Bagnall when her second band, DoubleDutch, produced their first album, it still differs from mass production processes common to the cultural industries. Her album was produced by local record label Bangback Records who gave her use of their professional recording studio for the album. Instead of burning copies of the CDs with her friends, the label professionally produced the physical product, but band members were able to draw the cover art (Bagnall, personal communication, 2010).

The physical products produced may look amateur or unprofessional. They are regularly packaged in soft plastic cases versus hard-shelled “pearl” cases found in record stores. The cover art is often hand drawn and photocopied or printed to fit into the CD jacket, examples of which can be seen in Figure 4.1. However, this lack of standardization and the level of involvement bands have in producing the product are symbolic that the motivation for creating a product is about promoting their art to a wider audience, as well as commercial. The products are still valued (also) for their use, not their exchange.

**Figure 4.1 CD Covers Made by Portland Independent Bands**



Source: CD Baby. *Gungle Dungen*, DoubleDutch. *Dust and Stars*, Reporter. *I Am The West*, Lovers. *S/T*, Guidance Counselor. N.p. (<http://www.cdbaby.com/>)

Beyond producing a physical product, local bands also upload their albums onto various Internet sites, including those made specifically for the band. Guidance Counselor's newest self-titled album was made available to download for free on a friend's website [www.keilcorcoran.com/oldwave](http://www.keilcorcoran.com/oldwave) a month before the album was officially released at a CD release party at Holocene. Anderson promoted the availability of the free download through social media sites, including posting the URL to the download on friends' Facebook pages. Other local bands such as Breakfast Mountain have done this as well.

Because of the sheer volume of music being produced and made available through multiple mediums including online platforms, it is difficult for the global music industry to create a climate of scarcity for which prices can be increased or even maintained. This is made even more complicated as audiences choose to download



music files illegally from the Internet, bypassing the reproduction aspect of profit-making, or when bands make their albums available to download at no monetary cost. How corporate record labels are able to create a climate of (re)consumption has been impacted as the global distribution of music has become digitalized and another level of competition has been added to the market as independent musicians promote and sell their music through iTunes, MySpace, Facebook, Portland based company CD Baby, and independent blogs and websites.

### **Web 2.0 and the Digital Shift of Music Distribution and Consumption**

Web 2.0, a term used to describe a perceived “second generation” of web development, facilitates communication, information sharing, and collaboration through applications that include social networking sites (MySpace; Facebook; Twitter) and video or picture sharing sites (YouTube; Flickr). While the coding change did not significantly update any technical specifications of the Internet, Web 2.0 dramatically changed the way people use the Internet because users are able to add, edit, and delete web content of their own creation (Beer 2008). Local independent musicians, for example, use the Internet as a vehicle to distribute and promote their music to a wider range of audiences within and often beyond the geographic borders of their communities. The shift in the ways the Internet can be used gives audiences more choices, and the ways in which musicians can be recorded and promoted by musicians is constantly evolving. More choices sparked actors in the music industry to reevaluate their promotion and distribution strategies because increased choices,

unless minimized in visibility, has the potential to redirect profits to other (non-“major”) musicians (Williams 1980).

In 2004, the IFPI released its first digital music report entitled: “IFPI Online Music Report: The Music Industry’s Internet Strategy is Turning the Corner,” a version of which has since been released annually (IFPI 2009). Issues identified in the 2004 report, such as developing legitimate online services (i.e., sites and online digital distribution stores from which users can legally *pay* for and download music), promoting the existence of these online services to users, spreading awareness of the illegality of downloading music from the Internet without permission and inciting users to abide by these laws through anti-piracy campaigns, and creating business models to drive industry success in the new virtual environment, continue to be primary focus points for the IFPI and the broader music industry (IFPI 2004).

Despite increases in digital music revenues, in 2008 95 percent of music downloaded, more than 40 billion files, were not paid for by the downloader. In other words, for each digital track downloaded legally, 20 more were downloaded illegally (NPD Group 2008). This equates to approximately 694,000 songs being downloaded illegally every five minutes (IFPI 2009). The IFPI’s stance on this issue is that online piracy is “swamping the legitimate music business, harming sales, innovation, artists’ careers and investment in repertoire. Government regulation holds the key to addressing this critical issue” (IFPI 2009). The 2008 digital report was slightly stronger in its statements regarding file sharing, stating that “the spread of unlicensed music ISP networks is *choking* [my emphasis] revenues to record companies and

investment in artists, despite a healthy increase in digital sales in 2007, up approximately 40 percent on the previous year”(IFPI 2008).

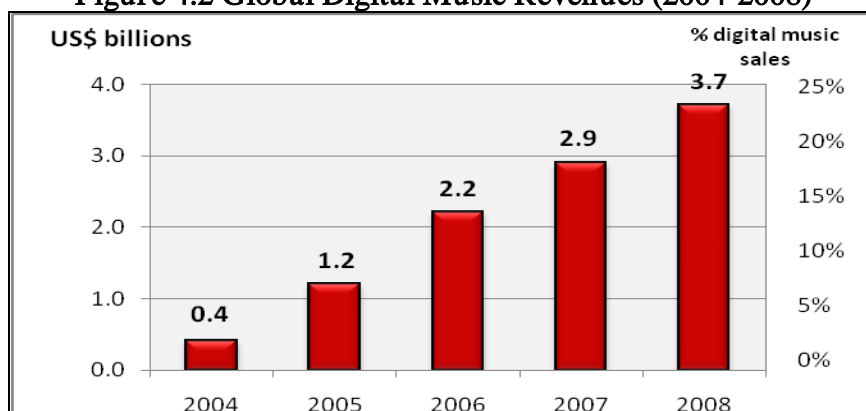
Although only 5 percent of downloaded music files were paid for, revenue from online music sells is in the billions, posing the question of what is considered a profit by “major” record labels. According to the IFPI 2009 report, in 2008 the international digital music business grew by 25 percent to US\$3.7 billion in trade value, its sixth consecutive year of expansion (see figure 4.2). Digital platforms now account for approximately 20 percent of record sales, an increase from 15 percent in 2007. In addition, the U.S. accounts for close to 50 percent of the global digital music value and the proportion of U.S. consumers’ disposable income spent on digital music is more than five times higher than in Europe (IFPI 2009).

The goal identified in the 2004 digital report of increasing the availability of “legitimate” digital distribution services such as iTunes, Napster, and Rhapsody, obtaining a commitment of ISPs and record companies to establish themselves into new online markets, and gaining government support to establish stringent laws (and enforcement of these laws) in regards to downloading and file sharing, were said to be successful in the 2008 digital music report. In fact, music is said to be at the forefront of the online and mobile revolution, generating a greater percentage of its revenue through digital platforms than newspapers (4 percent), film industries (4 percent), and magazine (1 percent), remaining behind gaming (35 percent) (IFPI 2009).

In addition to establishing online music stores and lobbying government to create strict laws to deter Internet users from downloading music files illegally,

relationships between the global music industry and media are a critical component of creating an environment of (re)consumption. As Kretschmer asserts, “if the media controls the main communication and distribution channels through which new acts are promoted, they will continue to dominate the global music market” (Kretschmer et. al 2001: 423). Media creates cultural market spaces on a global scale, enabling music companies to promote and manage the global distribution of their product. The global industry, in short, uses advertising and the media to limit consumer choice (Adorno 1975).

**Figure 4.2 Global Digital Music Revenues (2004-2008)**



Source: International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), *Digital Music Report 2009: New Business Models for a Changing Environment, Digital Music Revenues*. January 2009. Figures include online, mobile and subscription trade revenues. Figures rounded and expressed on a fixed exchange rate.

A significant site of Portland’s local music culture is virtual. Almost all bands interviewed in for this project had a MySpace page to which they upload digital files of their songs that users can then listen to songs in a virtual setting. In addition to a short description of the band and their sound, many bands use MySpace or other virtual sites to post digital flyers promoting their shows, which they then post on their “friends” respective pages, further spreading who may come into contact with the

flyer, and therefore potentially increase the number of people who come to their shows. Through another social networking site, Facebook, many bands send electronic invitations to all their friends about upcoming shows or events related to the band. In the year I was doing fieldwork, I “friended” bands through a Facebook page I set up for the project. Through my Facebook account, I learned about the Lost Gospel session at the Portland mounted police facility, a virtual show by the Nurses which Internet users were able to watch real time in dispersed settings through a website, Guidance Counselor’s CD release party at Holocene, and countless other weekly shows. Invitations with the time, date, location, and sometimes directions through Google Maps were sent as mass emails to anyone on the bands “friend” list. These examples of the Portland independent music scene materializing in virtual environments suggest that while the global music industry may saturate virtual environments like MySpace and Facebook with advertisements promoting their musicians and products, they do not, as Kretschmer suggests, completely control the main communication lines through which music is shared and live performances are promoted. Portland musicians and audiences have appropriated MySpace and Facebook (and other virtual tools) to stay connected with local music experiences. They have also created alternative tools to promote the scene when existing mediums prove ineffective, such as the Portland Show Guide.

Much of the digital communication done by the global music industry is directed at enticing consumers to purchase music commodities. Portland independent musicians use digital communication tools primarily to promote live performances,

although products, such as Guidance Counselor's new album, are also promoted through these communication lines. The Portland Show Guide is perhaps the most democratic way to promote shows in Portland. Unlike MySpace, owned by the oligopolistic News Corporation, The Portland Show Guide does not make a profit through advertising sells so users do not have to filter through advertisements and coded messages as they do on MySpace and Facebook. It is also something unique to Portland. According to Damien, he is "currently in the process of helping a few people in San Francisco [at no financial charge] use the same platform we developed to make a Portland Show Guide-type website to promote the independent music scene there. But, as far as I know, no other city has something like [www.pcpdx.com](http://www.pcpdx.com)" (Damien, personal communication, 2010).

Beyond promoting live shows, digital communications are also used as a fundraising tool for actors in Portland's local music scene. In 2009, I received an email from Guidance Counselor with the subject "Guidance Counselor Needs Your Help!" In the email, the band explained that they had finished mixing their first full-length album with which they had worked with a local producer Jacob Portrait. Guidance Counselor had recorded its previous albums using home recording devices, the software from which they had illegally downloaded from the Internet (Anderson, personal communication, 2010). However, they needed to make duplicates of the CD to send out to "press people" and because the band was "broke as a joke" after having to fix their van in Palm Springs during a tour, they were asking 400 people to donate \$5 a piece in order to earn the \$2,000 to master and duplicate their records.

Anderson from Guidance Counselor estimates that only 30 people made a donation, but through this the band was able to earn one-third of the costs to duplicate and master their CD. Once the CD was finalized, Guidance Counselor made the entire album available to download for free from the Internet or to purchase a physical CD. In an interview with Anderson, he explained that promotion of music (i.e., sending press releases to indie music magazines like *Pitchfork* and *Stereogum*, or local weeklies like *The Mercury* and *Willamette Week*) is a necessary if bands want to expand the scope of people who can hear their music. In his view, the music of Guidance Counselor and other bands in Portland offer an alternative to mainstream, commercialized music, but to give people the choice of what to listen to, they have to know about it. The strategy of the global music industry, on the other hand, is to saturate the market with advertisements thereby distracting audiences from choice and redirecting their attention to a select few products.

To foster an environment of (re)consumption, corporate record labels attempt to draw attention to their products through mass advertising and marketing in addition to a never-ending search for the newest trend or “next new thing”. Advertising has become an essential mechanism to (re)sell musical products to the masses which Raymond Williams refers to as a “magic system” (Williams 1980). He argues that advertising has become a significant part of capitalistic business practices and a form of modern communication. He describes it as a “highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed

scientific society” (Williams 1980: 705). In a market of increased choice, advertising is used to magically obscure choice – the music industry floods the market with advertisements of a few musical acts who then dominate music sales (Williams 1980).

In promotion and advertising, a further distinction can be drawn between the global music industry and musicians within Portland’s independent music scene. As discussed by Williams, corporate organizations use advertising to legitimize or add importance to products through fanaticizing them and associating them with social and personal meanings and images (Williams 1983). False meanings must be attached to these products to obscure the fact that they are often prototypes and have little connection to the “consumers” (people) purchasing these products. They are not rooted in place or individual creativity, and further, consumers are not involved in the creation of these products (Adorno 1975). Promotion of musicians within Portland’s music scene (or the scene itself), on the other hand, often emphasizes place and community. On their respective websites and blogs, PDX Pop Now!, Lost Gospel, Into the Woods, and the Portland Show Guide promote Portland’s music scene as a way in which people can be involved in the community and experience a unique and authentic cultural form. They link the music scene to the city – its residents, residences, show venues, public transportation, bicycles, rain, food carts – and promote local music as something authentic to Portland (or the Northwest) even though there are independent music scenes across the U.S. Active members in the scene seem to think it is different for varying reasons – the number of house shows, the number of total venues, the community support of DIY art, and the rain.



## **Relationships Between Local Music Scenes and the Global Music Industry**

IFPI encourages record labels to invest 20 percent of their revenues to discover, market, and advertise new talent, which it considers to be a critical component of staying at the forefront of the music industry. By searching for talent in cultural satellites, which often have high levels of insecurity, low levels of profitability, and a concentration of unwaged labor, the music industry is able to shift cost and risk of cultural research and development onto these satellites, which are supported by communities without promise (or desire) of profit (Garnham, 1990). The music industry views local music communities as test sites for potential “products” that may be appropriated and reformed as industrial music products from which high profits and commercial success can be realized. Although digital communications and social networking sites such as MySpace have enabled unsigned, independent musicians to share and promote their music, established record labels recognize that unsigned musicians do not have the skills, knowledge, or resources to manage the business side of their careers.

In my interview with the band Pyramidd, they related that being signed under an independent label had certain advantages, including being reimbursed for gas costs when they went on tour, but that they had lost a degree of control over their music. When asked about several of their songs being featured on an IBM commercial in during the Superbowl, and later on a Target commercial, band member Shawn Glassford explained that they no longer owned the song –“I don’t really understand the whole licensing side of things” – and conveyed that they felt lost in the

complexities of recording rights and practices of the music industry (Pyramidd, personal communication, 2010). Glassford was speaking to the complexities of industrialized cultural practices, which he noted were strikingly different from the homegrown Portland music culture that he and the band were accustomed to. This indicates that the independent music scene in Portland has not reached a level that its potential economic value is more important than its DIY and community building values. I am not suggesting that bands may not seek or appreciate benefits the culture industries offer. Glassford added that they valued the improved sound quality they were able to achieve in producing albums with a professional independent label and that, despite the complexities of business operations, because they had some financial help, they were able to go on tour more than they would otherwise, “though, sometimes people think we’ve ‘made it’ or whatever. We’re still broke” (Pyramidd, personal communication, 2010). As exemplified by Spring’s case study of techno music culture in a Detroit suburb, DIY values in a music scene are under constant negotiation and trade-offs often exist. Pyramidd’s adoption of some industrialized cultural practices – signing under a label, their removal from the promotion and distribution elements of their music, and allowing their music to be played on commercials for large corporations like Target and IBM – are symbolic of the fragileness of a popular homegrown music scene.

Over the last year, Pyramidd has illustrated the complexities of maintaining independence and control over the processes of distribution and use of their music as they become increasingly popular and, in turn, more noticed by record labels and

advertisers. Some people in the community criticize Pyramidd for altering itself to become more easily “sellable.” Take for example their decision to change their name from “Starfucker” to “Pyramidd” because their name, “Starfucker,” was limiting their opportunities for national radio play or to go on tours with other independent bands. When they announced they were changing their name, it sparked some in the community to call them “sell outs” on local blogs. Pyramidd band member Josh Hodges explained in a *Willamette Week* “Local Cut” interview that their name was hindering their ability to play on tours with bands signed under independent record labels, as well as their ability to sponsor other Portland bands on tour. He claimed, “I don’t care...I just feel like I started [the band] with a push and now it’s rolling down a hill, it has its own inertia... I just wanna keep taking all my favorite Portland bands out. If we were bigger, though, it would help them more” (Jarmen 2009).

Despite criticism, he claims his decisions are not based on commercial or monetary fame. In an interview he related “it would be great to make some money from our music, and just because we want our music to be recorded in a studio to sound better, doesn’t mean we have changed our values. And by being signed we are able to help take other bands out on tour with us. We just took Ian from Guidance Counselor on a national tour” (Hodges, Personal Communication, March 2009).

Ultimately, the level of independence from commercial influences in how local independent music is performed, promoted, and distributed differs between band and over time. Most interesting about Hodges discussion of Pyramidd’s amplified recognition on a national independent music stage is his focus on the increased ability

he has to take other Portland bands on tour with him, better enabling these bands to share their music with more audiences. This reinforces the idea of community relationships fostered by local music in Portland. Further, that their name change initiated a discussion of what it means within Portland's local music scene illustrates that other musicians and audiences believe they have a sense of *influence* over the meaning of music culture because it is created for and by them, the people. And, in addition to the dialogue about the name change in the community, Starfucker asked their fans to offer ideas for a new name, ultimately deciding on the suggestion "Pyramid," then finally, "Pyramidd." Despite being clearly influenced by commercial interests in their name change, the element of community involvement is still valued by Pyramidd – the music they produce currently is not *just* a commodity.

### **Local Resistance to Globalization through Local Music**

Throughout history, the development of powerful means of communication has coincided with the extension of democracy and at the same time attempts of ruling groups to control and dominate these communication means, sometimes resulting in crushing democratic movements in order to protect capital interests (Williams 1962). Established record labels and music companies have taken on the role in digital space of "filtration, selection, and recommendation" of musicians for the consumer market, recognizing they have the financial capabilities to out advertise unsigned independent bands and labels without significant financial backing, as well as confuse them in the legality of musical operations (Kretschmer, et al., 2001). With more than 8 million

bands on MySpace, promotion and marketing becomes an essential component in audience recognition of bands. To add to this point, the IFPI 2009 digital report states:

Along with all the dramatic change of the digital music revolution, however, there is continuity as well. Music companies, large and small, believe their primary role in all these new business partnerships is to remain the main investors in new talent and developers of artists' careers. The skills, expertise, investment capacity, creative understanding, and, above all, *ability to connect the artists work with their audience* [my emphasis] will remain the music companies role well into the future (IFPI 2009).

In other words, while MySpace helps local independent bands promote their music, they are up against the marketing strategies “major” record levels have developed to assure acts signed under their labels are connected with consumers over independent musicians and bands. The IFPI asserts that it is the role of record labels to help audiences make choices about what they consume when in actuality they have assumed the role as “magicians” to use advertising to obscure choice and redirect attention to a limited pool of musical choices (Williams 1983). Super profits and strategies to limit the democratic uses of the Internet by independent musicians and other users are justified by the global music industry with claims that it is providing a cultural product *demande*d by the public, when in actuality it is denying audiences choice by redirecting their attention to a limited number of acts through intense advertising and promotion practices (Williams 1980).

Independent musicians, however, continue to use platforms created by the music industry to promote their live performances and albums to larger bodies of people, and can do this with limited capital and within a shorter time frame than at any other time in history. Web-based communication platforms such as Facebook and

MySpace are what Storey refers to as “raw materials” of the global music industry that are appropriated by “the people” to distribute their cultural creations (Storey, 2004: 7-8). They also serve as vehicles through which local independent musicians can find audiences and then direct these audiences to places in which they can actively participate in local music culture (Gibson and Kong 2005). This threatens the global music industry, which relies on an advantage in manufacturing the material products, such as CDs, and the means of promotion and advertising to secure high profits from a limited number of musicians (Kretschmer, et al., 2001).

By using digital technologies and new communication systems, independent musicians challenge control over distribution systems, possible because the previous complex and labor intensive distribution networks have been replaced by a cheaper and more flexible web-based distribution system (Kretschmer, et al. 2001). This represents an interesting difference and dynamic between independent musicians and the global music industry. Both groups use “raw materials” (i.e., web-based communication and distribution systems) from the culture industry. However while the global music industry uses these materials to control audiences and consumer behavior, independent musicians simultaneously use these same materials to challenge the industry’s control over music distribution and promotion practices (Beer 2008).

Music has a significant role in the commercial global economy. The conversation about music in the culture industries is dominated by increasing revenue and market share, including strategies to create opportunities for “consumers” to purchase music, “investing” in new artists, economic and job growth, and creating a

global consciousness that music is not “free”, rather, it is a multi-billion dollar industry. While corporate labels, and organizations such as the IFPI that represent them, speak to the importance of creativity and originality, their underlying motivation is profit. The success of an album is not its impact on the cultural experiences of its audiences, rather the amount of revenue it generates. But local music remains vital. For some localities like Portland, the homogenization of music on a global level has catalyzed or reinforced the importance of local music as a way to create social identities and define communities (Gibson and Connell 2006).

Local music in Portland is a way to “assert human agency, to avert cultural homogeneity, to resist symbolically the wider order and capitalistic modes of production, and negotiate hegemonic ideologies” (Connell and Gibson 2006: 272). And in these uses it is also a way to reinforce people’s place in their community, build accessible cultural places, and link the image of the city back to their cultural values. Even when commodifying aspects of the music scene, including making CDs, charging for entrance into shows, or band members making silkscreen T-Shirts to sell, the use-value remains primary. For example, Guidance Counselor’s new album is available to purchase in CD or vinyl, but he also made it available online to download for free the first month it was released. Or Bangall from DoubleDutch asking a friend to draw her CD cover even though the CD was being released by a professional label.

The emphasis on community and the importance of local music to Portland’s cultural identity is especially evident in the documentation and promotion of the music scene. Carrie Brownstein, an NPR journalist and musician in the Northwest band

Sleater-Kinney, reported on her blog Monitor Mix that *Into the Woods* captures “the communal nature of Portland's music scene (and, by communal, I mean that it sometimes feels like a sweaty pig pile) and the often desolate and majestic settings in which people create here. There's a whole lot of spontaneity and inventiveness” (Brownstein 2010). In each episode, the *place* of music is emphasized, be it with images of Portland or musicians performing in their homes (or the road outside their homes), descriptions of their lives and jobs in Portland, and how they prepare for live performances. Virtual and commodified expressions of Portland's music culture like *Into the Woods* are often a way to link audiences to live performances – performances in place – which may be the most distinctive difference between Portland's music scene and the global music industry. It has a sense of place and in this place, community.



## Chapter 5

### Local Music as an Example of Residents Creating a Community “People Want to Live In”

Taylor Clark wrote a somewhat flippant article for *Slate* magazine in 2007 about why Portland is “America’s indie rock mecca” (Clark 2007). In the article, he takes readers on a “tour” of “lefty, artsy” neighborhoods on the east side where many musicians and bands live, evident by the routine sounds of musical expressions (Clark 2007:1). While he highlights the abundance of independent music making in Portland, Taylor devalues Portland’s music culture because, unlike Seattle’s grunge rock scene of the 1990s, Portland has no distinct “sound” or “scene,” and further, that bands come to Portland only after receiving some level of commercial success, citing the bands Modest Mouse, the Shins, and Pavement as proof of this assertion. He states that “virtually none of the bands can be considered Portland bands because they move here after gaining some level of fame...generally speaking, it’s rare to meet a young, creative Portlander who’s from Portland” (Clark 2007: 2). But, lost on Clark, these people chose to live in Portland and become Portlanders.

Indeed, Portland has been noted for attracting recent college graduates and other young creative people, but they came to Portland for a reason. For many, it was a conscious decision to live and work in Portland because of its “cultural and creative environment that takes intellectual life seriously but is supportive rather than cutthroat and has not locked in ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ styles” (Abbott 2001: 94). It is not as significant that many local musicians were not born and raised in Portland, contrary to

Clark's assertion. What is significant is that people come to Portland and form a band, or come to Portland specifically for its musical reputation.

In his analysis of why Portland is a "mecca" for independent musicians, he comes to a simplistic conclusion that it is easy to live in the city:

[Y]ou can venture into the public dressed like a convicted sex offender or homeless person and no one looks askew. It's lush and green. Housing is affordable, especially when compared with Seattle and San Francisco. The people are nice. The food is good. Creativity is the highest law. For young, hip Portlanders, financial success is a barista job that subsidizes your Romanian-space-folk band or your collages of cartoon unicorns (Clark 2007: 2).

He also adds that independent musicians enjoy living in or touring through Portland because of the passionate and eager audiences that come to shows. His explanation is too simplistic, and rather than ending his analysis on the city's musicians and audiences, I argue that analysis of Portland's local music culture must begin with them. The city's residents, regardless of whether they are originally from Portland and the spaces they create or transform for live music performances are primary to the existence and longevity of the city's local music culture. As suggested by Gibson, there may indeed be a reflexive relationship between landscape, affordable housing, public transportation, locally owned coffee shops and restaurants, universities and a community or city that has a notable and visible local music scene (Gibson 2002). However, people are responsible for creating alternative local cultural manifestations. Moreover, as documented by Gill (1995), Portland had a thriving local music youth culture that shaped the city's cultural activities and landscapes long

before the city was praised for its liberal and progressive land use planning, public transportation, and “creative class”.

A group of Portlanders – both musicians and their audiences – not only perform, consume, promote, and distribute local music, but they (re)create places to host musical expressions, and in turn, have built alternative culturescapes in the city. They have also created communication platforms like the Portland Show Guide and Into the Woods, or use “raw materials” from the cultural industry (i.e., MySpace; Facebook) to promote musical expressions, particularly live performances, to residents. The objective in promoting local music expressions is not to expand the market of potential consumers willing to buy products, but to increase the accessibility of local music and invite people to actively participate in the culture. It is Portlanders, the cultural places they have created, and their dedication to accessibility, community, and opportunities for active participation who make Portland’s music culture notable, not just that it is “lush and green” and with a “pretty good public transportation system” (Clark 2007: 2).

In conducting field research and interviews for this study, three main aspects of Portland’s music culture stand out. First is its *accessibility*. In interviews and field research, musicians and people organizing music events like Lost Gospel and PDX Pop Now!, continually eluded to the importance of making music accessible to residents. Accessibility is achieved through a variety of different channels. Beyond PDX Pop Now! and Lost Gospel festivals and events, which are low in cost (or free), all-ages, and organized to be community building events, local media such as the

*Willamette Week*, *The Mercury*, and Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB), and websites like the Portland Show Guide list local music shows and events, as well as write stories about local artists (i.e., *Willamette Week's* annual "Best New Band"). The Portland Show Guide allows anyone to post shows on the site, and it also provides Google Maps to the locations of each music performance. In my interview with Darren Bridenbrech of 40 100 1000 Locked Up Guns and Potlatch Presents, he explained that PDX Pop Now! is merely the "tip of the iceberg," and that there are countless opportunities to experience (and find out about) expressions of Portland's local music culture (Bridenbrech, personal communication, 2010).

As a researcher, I was also surprised at the accessibility of musicians for interviews and the ease with which I was able to find local music shows, particularly house shows. Whether I emailed musicians or bands or approached them at a show, *everyone* was willing to be interviewed. Even more, they seemed enthusiastic to share information about their band and practices for making, promoting, distributing, and performing music in Portland. This symbolizes an inherent lack of exclusivity in the city's independent music scene and this research may not have been so easily conducted among more famous bands following industrialized cultural practices.

Other examples of the scene's accessibility include the low to no cost of shows (most of which are accessible by public transit) and the number of media platforms through which performances are promoted through including MySpace, Facebook, The Portland Show Guide, *Willamette Week*, and *The Mercury*. Active participants in the scene make symbolic and visible efforts to include residents in the independent

music culture, the grandest example of this being the PDX Pop Now! festival. Local music performances are given meaning through the shared experiences of interested community members – both musicians and audiences – and the importance of the collective is evidenced by ways in which active participants strive to make the scene accessible.

The second aspect is the number of *places* music is played in the city. Places in which local music expressions are experienced in Portland represent shared space and exemplify that culturescapes within the city can be created or redefined to represent the cultural values and preferences of all residents (Sussman and Estes 2004). These places embody different cultural meanings for the city than the Rose Garden or Portland Art Museum because they are not the same “generalized ‘aesthetic’ products” found in every other city in the country, and they symbolize one different way the city has been claimed by its residents (Zukin 1998: 829).

As discussed, many of these places are residences, but there are numerous locally owned and run venues that host local musicians. This study highlighted several places in which musical expressions occur – Rontoms, the Green House, and Lost Gospel events that temporarily transformed public spaces into places for musical performances – but there are many others that merit further examination. For example, The Artistry, located on southeast 43<sup>rd</sup> and Division street, is a house that hosts all ages events by local musicians and artists; Dekum Manner, a house located on North Dekum street that has soundproof walls so not to disturb neighbors (or attract the police) during live performances; The Woods, a former funeral Parlor located in the

Sellwood neighborhood in southeast that was recently renovated into a restaurant and music venue; or Work/Sound, a warehouse venue on southeast 8<sup>th</sup> and Alder street that collaborates with writers, artists, and musicians “in the production and presentation of artworks, and exhibitions and events, that challenge the boundaries of conventional practice while encouraging broad public appreciation and access to the arts and contemporary culture” (PDX Stump 2009).

The last aspect inherent in Portland’s local music culture is the *resistance* by active participants against global trends to industrialize and homogenize culture. Independent music making is not completely separate from the structure and practices of the global music industry, and Portland bands produce commodified cultural products in the forms of CDs, T-shirts, and charging for entrance into shows. However, community and accessibility remain focal points of the culture, even in its modest commodified forms. The goal of musical expressions in Portland is not one of profit maximization but one of connecting musicians to audiences as a way to reinforce each others’ role in the community, building accessible cultural places that are representative of people’s cultural values, and linking the image of the city to its residents. In a world where the cultural opportunities in cities are often standardized, mass produced, and homogenized, independent music culture in Portland is used to help define the city as something “else,” a place where residents create cultural alternatives (Zukin 1998).

This study has examined the ways in which local music culture in Portland is a democratic form of cultural consumption that influences the image of the city, its

culturescapes, and how some people claim rights to the city. In doing so, it also identifies the need for further research. As noted earlier in this chapter, there is an opportunity to further study places that have been built or transformed to accommodate musical expressions, including mapping the alternative culturescapes in the city, which are focused on the east side of the Willamette River.

Second, this project did not create a succinct demographic profile of the young Portlanders who participate in the city's independent music culture, and it could be argued whether or not such a profile is necessary. Participation in local independent music cultures may not be, as Bennett and Peterson (2004) put forth, defined as much by demographic indicators such as race, gender, and income level, as it is by values, including DIY and DIT ethics and building social and community identities. That being said, there are a number of exceptions to this generalization, for example, Riot Grrls, a female dominated cultural development sparked by the punk scene's exclusion of women (Schilt 2004) or hip-hop music cultures in inner city ghettos (Smith 1997). Nevertheless, contemporary independent music cultures are created by people who might consider themselves outsiders or excluded by mainstream popular music culture, which leaves social space for shared identities (Leonard 2007).

Moreover, could not everyone be considered outsiders to mainstream popular culture? According to Adorno, mainstream popular music culture and its products are produced by the cultural industry, which removes human agency and creativity from its cultural expression. The role of people, in the interest of the cultural industry, is to be blind consumers (Adorno 1975). In this analysis, products of the cultural industry

have no relevance to people's daily lives beyond the illusions that advertising creates, which makes us all outsiders (Williams 1980). Independent music culture offers more space for participation from different social, economic, gender, and ethnic groups who can together create shared meanings (Leonard 2007).

Last, Connell and Gibson (2006) dedicated a chapter of their book to analyzing how local music cultures transcend geographic borders through digital communication technologies and bands (even independent ones) going on regional, national, and international tours. Many bands interviewed for this project have gone on self-funded tours across the region or United States and performed in local independent venues in other cities, and all promote their music through digital communication platforms that transcend geographic borders. Moreover, Portland venues host independent bands and musicians from cities around the world. I have seen both Camera Obscura from Scotland and Pyramidd from Portland perform at the Wonder Ballroom in North Portland drawing in large and overlapping audiences. The Nurses from Portland played at the Doug Fir only a few months before El Perro Del Mar from Sweden performed. Portlanders support local musicians but leave space for outside musical experiences, just as local bands identify themselves as "Portland bands" but still have a desire to perform in locations outside the city. Portland is not a self-contained city, and neither is its music culture (Connell and Gibson 2006).

The independent music scene is one representation of cultural alternatives that exist in Portland. These cultural alternatives create alternative, non-homogenized spaces. Alternative cultural expressions, including independent music, exist in other



cities across the country, but because they do not follow a set formula and rely on the active participation and collective agency of the community, in each city they are distinct. I have identified various opportunities for further research of Portland's local music culture because its existence is an important part of the city and is one answer to Ozawa's question as to how Portlanders "organize ourselves spatially and restore our sense of community" (Ozawa 2004:1).

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## Field Observations of Local Portland Independent Bands

Dunes. Performances by Guidance Counselor, Syrup, and Thunder Quest. 21+. October 9, 2008.

Wonder Ballroom. Performances by Starfucker, Explode Into Colors, Strength, Dirty Mittens. All-ages show. February 14, 2009.

Green House. Performances by Junkface and The Raggedy Anns. All ages show. March 7, 2009.

Aladdin Theatre. Performance by M. Ward. All-ages show. March 9, 2009.

Lost Gospel. Mounted Patrol. Performance by Horse Feathers. All ages show. March 13, 2009.

Dekum Manor. Performances by Church and James Rabbitt. All-ages show. April 10, 2009.

Rontoms. DoublePlusGood. Breakfast Mountain. 21+. May 24, 2009.

Holocene. Boy Gorilla Showcase featuring Ghosties, What Skulls Can Tell Us, and Jordan Bangall of DoubleDutch. All-ages show. June 2, 2009.

Green House. Performances by Guidance Counselor, Fake Drugs, Southern Belle. All ages show. June 6, 2009.

Rotture. Rude Dudes and Nathan Detroit. 21+. June 26, 2009.

Rontoms. Performance by Corey Ficken (no band name). 21+. June 28, 2009.

Rotture. PDX Pop Now! All-ages. July 24, 2009.

Rotture. PDX Pop Now! All-ages. July 26, 2009.

Artistry. Performances by Explode Into Colors, White Fang, and Wampire. All-ages show. July 31, 2009.

Backspace. Performances by Atole and Jeffrey Jerusalem. All ages show. August 9, 2009.

Doug Fir. Performances by Le Loup and the Nurses. 21+. October 25, 2009.

Laurelthirst. Tom Jones. 21+. November 19, 2009.



## Appendix A

### In-Depth Interview Guide

- Briefly re-describe the topic and why band/individual was asked to participate
- Collect band background information:
  - When/where (city) the band was formed
  - How band was formed
  - Style/genre of music
- Tell me about your first live performance. Where was it located, how did you promote it, and what happened? Listen for mentions of:
  - Multiple promotion methods (i.e., social networking sites, [www.pcpdx.com](http://www.pcpdx.com), text, newspaper)
  - Type of location (i.e., house show, local venue, open/public space) and why this location was chosen
  - Mention of audiences responses to music being performed
  - Collaboration with another band
- How have your performances changed or not changed since the first performance you just described? Why?
- (If mention of playing house shows) Why do you play house shows? Listen for mentions of:
  - More accessible (location, people, cost)
  - Collaborate with multiple bands
  - Standard/common in Portland
  - Others?
- (If mention of performing music in public space) Ask questions related to:
  - Gaining permission to play in space (why/why not)
  - Significance of that performing space
- When you perform in house show or shows in public spaces, do you think music has significance in those spaces? Does it change what those spaces mean to you? How is it different (or not) than performing in spaces specifically designed for music?
- What characteristics do you think make up Portland's local music culture? Listen for mentions of:
  - DIT/DIY
  - Democratic
  - Accessible
  - Entertainment vs. Culture
  - Demographic characteristics of people who go to shows
  - Role of audience

- How does music you make differ (or not) from that of musicians signed under one of the 'major' record labels? Listen for mentions of:
  - DIT/DIY
  - Democratic
  - Accessible
  - Entertainment vs. Culture
  - Demographic characteristics of people who go to shows
  - Role of audience

## Appendix B

### List of Venues According to Portland Show Guide ([www.pcpdx.com](http://www.pcpdx.com))

#### North Portland

- 2135 N. Blandena
- 5228 N Albina House
- 5323 N. Mississippi
- Black Rose Infoshop
- Camel House
- Camp Rainbow
- Deli
- Disjecta
- Ducketts
- Gemini
- Ghost Realm
- Gotham Tavern
- Green House
- Honey Pot
- Hop
- Jam Force 1
- Kenton Club
- Liberty Hall
- Michigan House
- Mississippi Pizza
- Mississippi Studios
- Negative Cook
- New Bike Hospital
- Overlook Park
- Pink House
- Ponderosa Lounge
- Salad House
- Sea Shanty
- Slims
- Station
- Thu Piss Palace
- Waterhearter
- Waypost
- White Eagle Saloon

#### Northeast Portland

- 17<sup>th</sup> & Alberta
- 2211 Ne Holman St
- 4623 Ne Mallory
- 5252 Ne 19<sup>th</sup>
- 8<sup>th</sup> & Emerson
- Abyssal Behemoth
- Airplay Cafe
- Alberta St. Pub
- Bear Hug
- Beulahland
- Bike Hospital
- Bitchin Summer House
- Blu The House
- Boneyard
- Brews Brothers
- Brick Shithouse
- C. Rev
- Cathedral Park
- Circadia Art Center
- Crazy Catlady House
- Crystal Bathroom
- Da Punx Palace
- Dead End House
- Dekum Manor
- Doug Fir
- Dunes
- East Burn
- Elevated Coffee
- Emerson Street House
- Expansion Mansion
- Fleetwood Shack
- Garfield House
- House 31
- In Other Words Bookstore
- Ivy House

- J and L Block
- Kennedy School
- The Know
- Laughing Hourse Books
- Laurelthirst
- Lavish Vegan Buffet
- Local Lounge
- Lucky Inn
- Megaton House
- Milepost 5
- Music Millennium Eastside
- Pink Room
- Pirate Ship
- The Ranch
- Red Room
- Report Lounge
- Rodney House
- Rontoms
- Rumpspankers
- Slouch Vegas
- Smyrc
- Sticky Situation
- Stomp House
- Strangeways Secret Vegan Café
- Studio 1627
- Thug Mansion
- Tiga
- Tonic Lounge
- Village Ballroom
- Wail
- Wonder Ballroom
- Artistry
- Bagdad Theater
- Baller Tower
- Banana Stand
- Bar Of The Gods
- Bcs American Saloon
- Bears And Molecules
- Blood Bank
- Blue Monk
- Branx
- Burgerville
- Carolinas
- Chaos Café
- Cleveland High School
- Cosmo Lounge
- Crush
- Crypt
- Docs Club 82
- Dominics
- Duffs Garage
- Dukes Country Bar and Grill
- Dukes Landing
- Eagles Lodge
- Egyptian Room
- Eugenios
- Five Points
- Flip Side
- Flying 15 Motorcycle Club
- Goodfoot
- Grand Avenue Café
- Green Drop Garage
- Green Noise Records
- Halfway House
- Hawthorne Burgerville
- Hawthorne Theatre
- Hollywood Theatre
- Holocene
- Hungry Tiger Too
- Jade Lounge
- Jolly Roger
- Ladds Inn

### **Southeast**

- 2536 Se 38<sup>th</sup>
- 420 Se 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue
- 43rd & SE Clinton
- 6108 Se 46<sup>th</sup> Ave
- Aladdin Theater
- Amys House
- Angelos
- Arcadia

- Langano Lounge (Jarra'S)
- Mansion
- Mantel
- Meat Factory
- Mount Trashmore
- Mt. Tabor Sideshow Lounge
- Mt. Brolympus
- Mt. Tabor Legacy
- Mt. Tabor Theatre
- Muddy Waters Coffeehouse
- Oak Haus
- Palour
- Plan B
- Powell Bowl-O-Rama
- Press Club
- Pub at the End of the Universe
- Red and Black Café
- Reed College
- Reynolds House
- Roadside Attraction
- Roots Organic Brewery
- Rotture
- Side Door
- Tanker
- Twilight Bar and Café
- Twin Paradox
- Vino Vixem Wine Bar
- Whisky City Rock Bar
- Woods
- Work/Sound
- Works at Washington High School
- Yrotcaf Taem
- Zombie House

#### **Northwest**

- Backspace
- Blitz – Pearl
- Camellia Lounge
- Cinema 21
- Dixie Tavern

- East
- Groove Suite
- Ground Kontrol
- Jimmy Maks
- Mission Theatre
- Roseland Theatre
- Satyricon
- Slabtown
- Someday Lounge
- Spectre Entertainment Group
- Tiger Bar
- Tube
- Union Hall
- White Stage Building

#### **Southwest**

- Ace Hotel
- Agnes Flanagan Chapel at Lewis And Clark College
- Ash St. Saloon
- Berbatis Pan
- Buffalo Gap
- Club 915
- Club Calabash
- Crown Room
- Crystal Ballroom
- Dantes
- Ella St. Social Club
- Fez Ballroom
- Jackpot Records
- Kelly's Olympian
- Lola's Room
- Macadams
- Oregon Zoo
- PSU Smith Ballroom
- PSU Park Blocks
- Punx House
- Red Cap
- Rock Bottom Brewery
- The Tillicum
- Valentine

## Appendix C

### Human Subjects Approval



Human Subjects Research Review Committee

Post Office Box 751  
Portland, Oregon 97207-0751

503-725-4288 tel  
503-725-3416 fax  
hsrrc@lists.pdx.edu

March 24, 2010

To: Rebecca Ball

From: Nancy Koroloff, HSRRC Chair

Re: Approval of your application titled, "Cultural Consumption and Identity: Local Autonomous Music Making and the Cultural Geography of Portland" (HSRRC Proposal # 101260).

Dear Rebecca,

In accordance with your request, the Human Subjects Research Review Committee has reviewed your proposal referenced above for compliance with DHHS policies and regulations covering the protection of human subjects. The committee is satisfied that your provisions for protecting the rights and welfare of all subjects participating in the research are adequate, and your project is approved. Please note the following requirements:

**Changes to Protocol:** Any changes in the proposed study, whether to procedures, survey instruments, consent forms or cover letters, must be outlined and submitted to the Chair of the HSRRC immediately. The proposed changes cannot be implemented before they have been reviewed and approved by the Committee.

**Continuing Review:** *This approval will expire on March 24, 2011.* It is the investigator's responsibility to ensure that a Continuing Review Report (available in ORSP) of the status of the project is submitted to the HSRRC two months before the expiration date, and that approval of the study is kept current.

**Adverse Reactions:** If any adverse reactions occur as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Chair of the HSRRC immediately. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending an investigation by the Committee.

**Completion of Study:** Please notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Research Review Committee (campus mail code ORSP) as soon as your research has been completed. Study records, including protocols and signed consent forms for each participant, must be kept by the investigator in a secure location for three years following completion of the study.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact the HSRRC in the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects (ORSP), (503) 725-4288, 6th Floor, Unitus Building, 4th & Lincoln.

Cc: Gerry Sussman