

We're All in This Together: The Meanings Festivalgoers Attribute to Their Music Festival Participation

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Woke up this morning
I suddenly realised
we're all in this together
I started smiling
cos you were smiling
and we're all in this together (Lee 2005).

As an Aussie music fan, I religiously attend Homebake every year. In 2005, I took my sister and her friend to the festival. It was their first festival experience. I was excited about taking them because it was a chance for me to pass on my many years of festival going to a new generation. The day became a real family affair when we met up with my sister, her husband and a group of their mates. We sat in the shade of the fig trees that are dotted throughout the domain and watched the action on the main stage. In the early evening, after many hours of dancing in the sun, Ben Lee was due to perform on the main stage. My sister and her friend were looking forward to watching him, and never having seen him live before I was keen to check out his set. I danced and sung along to the songs with my sister, her friend and a few strangers that happened to be standing nearby. What amazed me about his set was how it brought everyone who was watching together. There was a feeling in the air of belonging. His music was uplifting and celebratory, especially when he played 'We're All in this Together,' and everyone sang the chorus in unison. Then, at one point in the song, he changed the words to 'Homebake: we're all in this together.' It just fitted the moment so perfectly, as we were all truly there for the same reason: to celebrate Australian music.

My research utilises a post-subcultural approach to investigate social networks and identity formation amongst indie music festivalgoers (Muggleton 2000, Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003). 'Sub-cultural' divisions, such as that of style, musical taste and identity, have become increasingly weakened and more fluid, as young people 'mix and match' various elements of music and style together (Bennett 1999, Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004, Polhemus 1997). My research applies Maffesolian thought, also called neo-tribal theory, to Australian indie music festivals and their audiences. This approach 'abandons modernist concerns with socio-structural identities' (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003), instead favouring the variety and fluidity of tenuous tribal structures.

The qualitative methodology undertaken for the study was a combination of 'one on one' interviews, focus groups and participant observation conducted with thirty-one festivalgoers at twenty-five Australian indie music festivals, including the Big Day Out (in Sydney and Auckland), Homebake, Livid (in Sydney), Splendour in the Grass (Byron Bay) and the Falls festival (in Lorne). My fascination and subsequent research on music festivals comes from many years as a festivalgoer. As the gap between the researched and myself was rather narrow, I needed to deconstruct my position as a festivalgoer and its possible effects on the research (Bennett, et al. 2003, Hodkinson 2005). I saw being a cultural insider as beneficial to my research as I had prior knowledge of the events and could easily gain access to the field and I knew how to behave once there. It also helped me develop a rapport with my interviewees as they saw me as someone 'in the know' (See Cummings 2006).

In this paper, I focus on how group sociality and identification are created during Australian indie music festivals. In particular, I argue that festivalgoers who attend Homebake, Big Day Out, Splendour in the Grass and the Falls festival are members of a neo-tribal grouping that I refer to as the festivalgoers. Drawing on empirical data from an ethnographic study of Australian indie music festivalgoers, I show how the meanings behind festival participation are about more than just a fun day out. Furthermore, I argue that it is through the demanding and intense experience of attending an Australian indie music festival that festivalgoers begin to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging to each other and to the greater indie music scene (See Bennett and Peterson 2004, Cummings 2005).

For Stanley Waterman, , “festivals are cultural artefacts which are not simply bought and ‘consumed’ but which are also accorded meaning through their active incorporation into people’s lives.’ He argues that festivals embody the representation of contemporary gatherings through spectacle and consumption in an era of flexibility (Waterman 1998:56). Similarly, Chris Gibson and John Connell argue that festivals are one of the ways in which individuals construct their personal and collective identities, as through participating in the festival, festivalgoers are able to shape and contest their field of meaning (2005:250).

From my interviews with Australian indie music festivalgoers, I found that for them, pleasure was the most important aspect of the festivals. As Brendan, a festivalgoer commented on what a festival means to him:

A fun day out ... A chance to see some bands that you probably wouldn't see... a chance to see different styles of music.²

Music festivals involve what Michael Clarke refers to as ‘transitory pleasures’ (Clarke 1982:xi). Festivals are infrequent and short-lived events that permit festivalgoers to indulge in temporality and pleasure. This is especially evident if attending a weekend camping festival like Falls or Splendour in the Grass which can involve festivalgoers travelling long distances. In order for the festivalgoers to commit themselves to a long journey there has to be an anticipation of pleasure. As Nicole a festivalgoer explains:

My favourite festival was Splendour in the Grass. I think it was the whole package of the holiday. We went up [to Byron Bay] and it was a great experience. We all went up in the kombi. It was Byron Bay. Who could complain? I loved the line up, I loved where we got too like we were standing really close [to the stage]. It was great fun. My cousins were up there who I never see so that was great. And I just remember it being so much fun.³

The pleasure gained from attending a music festival is not, however, the only meaning attached to it. Other meanings festivalgoers attribute to their festival participation include seeing bands, experiencing new music, hanging out with friends, meeting and hanging out with like-minded people, drinking beer and enjoying summertime.

Even if the festive pleasure is gained individually, this paper argues that attending a music festival is nevertheless an intensive and shared experience that links participants. There is a real sense of ‘we’ (as all festivalgoers) at music festivals rather than of ‘I’ (the individual at a festival having fun) at music festivals as Ben Lee’s lyrics at the beginning of this paper suggested: ‘we’re all in this together.’ This ‘we’ is a type which Maffesoli refers to as a neo-tribe or emotional community that are bonded together through their collectively shared thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences.

For Maffesoli, neo-tribes refer more to a ‘certain ambience’ or ‘a state of mind’ that is expressed through lifestyles that favour ‘appearance and form’ (1996:98). Neo-tribes are based upon ‘sentiment, feeling and shared experiences.’ They are an affectual form of sociation through which both individual and collective ideas are expressed (Hetherington 1998:53). Maffesoli argues that neo-tribes are characterised by sociality, which is “less about rules and more about sentiments, feelings, emotions and imaginations; less about what has been or what will be than what is- the stress is on the ‘right now’ and the ‘right here’” (Malbon 1999:26).

Maffesoli sees sociality as dealing with ‘the development of the organic solidarity of the symbolic dimension (communication), of the ‘non-logical,’ the concern for the present’. Sociality takes into account ‘everything previously considered frivolous, anecdotal or nonsensical’ (Maffesoli 1990:86)

In order to discover if neo-tribal sociality exists amongst the festivalgoers from their point of view, I asked the interview participants if they felt like they were a part of a musical community or scene (See Straw 2001). Many of the interviewees had not really thought about it before, but agreed that they did feel like they belonged to a group of music lovers or festivalgoers as opposed to clubbers. As Meg notes:

I guess I do cos I think cos there's the group of people who go to raves and like trance or dance whatever and like they go to the all night raves or whatever they are. But I don't think they ever could compare to an outdoor music festival with rock and stuff like that. I know they're got the boiler room and stuff and I know people that spend the whole day in the boiler room which just seems pointless to me. But I don't think they would experience music the

same way that I would. Like I would never enjoy going to a rave and I don't know if they would enjoy coming to Big Day Out. So I think I am part of the scene in that aspect that I get to go to music festivals and enjoy them and there are people who wouldn't want to come or enjoy them so we are kind of segregated in that way. And I belong to the festivalgoers rather than the ravers.⁴

The music festival, bands and a general love of music, serve as a common point of interest for the audience. Many of the festivalgoers are fans of the bands playing and go to see live music on a regular basis. For festivalgoer Heather, this was what made her feel like part of a music scene.

I suppose just because like for everyone there (at the festival) music is like a pretty important part of life and like everyone can strike up a conversation and you know you're got something in common and I think as well you kind of tend to have the same sort of attitude on life. You're not like all up tight and pretentious and I mean let's face it you can be one of those like horrendously wanky people that's just like 'I saw these guys like five years ago when you know they were just a garage band and they were so much better then' you know what I mean. But most of the time people are just laid back and there for a good time and everybody is just happy to have a bit of a chat.⁵

For the festivalgoers music is more than just something they share in common, it is an important part of their life. Music is what Big Day Out photographer Sophie believes enables the festivalgoers to create a shared temporal community or as she explains its 'the thing that ties people together':

Yeah I see myself as being part of the Big Day Out family...you sort of all come together and work on this one project and make it the best you can and everyone's got their own individual role, working as separate entities but you know you're together as a team. I think cos I have a love of music and all my friends are musicians or a lot of them are or are involved in the music industry there is a little crew or a family. I guess it could be like anyone if you had a local pub and you know that every Friday night everyone meets down there to have a beer at the end of week. It's sort of the same thing, like particular bands you go to, you know like everyone's going to be going to that show. You almost don't have to call anyone and you know you'll turn up and there everyone will be. It's definitely like a community, that one thing that ties you all together.⁶

Music is one of the key elements that bind festivalgoers together, however, from my interviews I found that there also appears to be a sense of familiarity amongst the festivalgoers as Meg commented 'you see the same faces.' In addition Meg believes there is also an innate understanding of how other people are feeling on the day or a shared 'emotional community' as she explains below.

It's usually hot at Homebake and Big Day Out ... Everyone just understands how everyone else is feeling and you know you can just look at people and they'll spill water on you or something like that. That's cool, that's something that you won't do on the street. That makes you feel like you're part of something cos everyone knows how you're feeling at that particular moment which is pretty cool.⁷

There are, however, limits to this shared sense of community amongst the audience. The festivalgoers indicated a sense of loss of community or authenticity at larger festivals such as the Big Day Out. This was related to the increasing commercial aspects of the festival which can create a different atmosphere because as Grace explained 'you will get just everyday Joes that just go there cos it's Big Day Out not necessarily because of the bands.'⁸ The increasingly popularity of these festivals has attracted a different audience in recent years, people who go to the event because it is 'the Big Day Out' and it's the cool thing or the 'in' thing to do.

The sense loss of authenticity by the audience of these festivals, relates to a nostalgia for the past as Rick describes below. He indicates in this quote that the Big Day Out is not like Sunbury or Glastonbury or other 'hippy' festivals for want of a better term. Further, he points out that as festivals change as they get bigger. In that they seem to diversify the music styles and become multi-focused, which too may create divisions among people.

Once you start going to festivals and you have to check your life at the door. Festivals like the Big Day Out... going back to when you just rock up in a paddock with all your drugs and you know and books and whatever for two or three days and you might actually meet some people and talk and stuff like that. When you start getting to those festivals where it's all organised around consumption and buying the add on products and stuff it's just not the same. It still can be good; you still see some great stuff. But the Boiler room at the Big Day Out, has been just brilliantly organised really well scheduled and really well done for a long time and it actually gives the festival another focus, that's really important.⁹

There is a positive outcome to the increased popularity of these festivals, however, as they attract 'bigger and better' bands as well as better infrastructure. Although, the spontaneous connection to other festivalgoers is claimed to be lost, as Sophie reveals,

Like Big Day Out now it's gone massive and I find that a little bit intense I guess and that idea of the spontaneity is not there anymore. Other things takeover from the spontaneity like there is a formula and it does work very well. You know it's a slicker production but with the slickness like they get bigger bands, better bands, you go and better rooms to see the bands in and it all runs smoother or differently I guess.¹⁰

Nevertheless, is this sense of community or connection really lost at larger festivals like Big Day Out? It may be the case that, at Big Day Out, it is harder to connect to people because there is so much going on and so many people. In my fieldwork experience, however, I found that people will still tend to have a chat with you even if it is only brief, as the commonality and community created through the shared festival experience is still present at these larger festivals. It is this commonality that enables the festivalgoers to strike up random conversations with fellow audience members. As Nathan said,

Nathan: I've shared a lot of experiences with people [at festivals] and meet people and that's how I meet them that's how I know them and that's why we're staying together. That's the only thing that we've got a connection with them so it's a scene or whatever.

Interviewer: When you're at a festival like Falls what makes it feel like a community?

Nathan: Well you talk to people and say did you see De La Soul they were heaps good and someone says yeah, yeah I saw them. And you just talk about what bands you're seen and it's like a good sense of community. Someone says have you seen such and such they were really good. That's what makes it seem like a community, everyone sees the same things or different things and talking about it. And sharing their experiences. Saying I was right at the front for John Butler [Trio] or we were at the back but it's still good.¹¹

There is definitely a sense of togetherness to be found among the festivalgoers. Tim sums up this feeling of togetherness perfectly:

Yeah I do [see myself as being part of a scene]. I always feel a connection whenever I'm seeing a band. Especially at night when the lights are coming on and the sun's going down you just look around and just see everyone having such a good time you kind of feel like you are kind of part of that bigger group. And then among friends as well a lot of the friends that have similar musical tastes.¹²

Overall, experience of participating in a music festival is more than just a fun day out for the festivalgoers. The festival sites provided an opportunity for the festivalgoers to gather with like-minded people and share the experience of being a member of the festivalgoer neo-tribe which was created through a shared sense of neo-tribal sociality. This sociality ultimately allows the festivalgoers to create the feeling that they are truly all in this together. Participating in the festival, I argue, is one of the important ways for festivalgoers to form temporal engagements and neo-tribal associations as groups provided the festivalgoers with a sense of belonging and identification as well as a sense of individual identity.

Notes

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² Interview with Brendan, a festivalgoer aged 25, 13 February 2005, Sydney.

³ Interview with Nicole, a festivalgoer aged 24, 27 February 2005, Sydney.

⁴ Interview with Meg, a festivalgoer aged 20, 5 March 2005, Sydney.

⁵ Interview with Heather, a festivalgoer aged 23, 4 February 2005, Sydney.

⁶ Interview with Sophie, photographer aged 35, 27 February 2006, Sydney.

⁷ Interview with Meg

⁸ Interview with Grace, a festivalgoer aged 23, 22 February 2005, Sydney.

⁹ Interview with Rick, a festivalgoer aged 38, 24 June 2005, Sydney.

¹⁰ Interview with Sophie

¹¹ Interview with Nathan, a festivalgoer aged 23, 12 February 2005, Sydney.

¹² Interview with Tim, a festivalgoer aged 23, 19 January 2005, Sydney.

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