

Digital DIY in the Central Sydney independent music scene

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Brief overview of the scene

The Central Sydney independent music scene is a close-knit community of largely middle-class, like-minded individuals, including musicians, DJs, enthusiasts, venue owners/managers, pub/café/restaurant owners and managers, record label/record store owners and employees, gig organizers, radio announcers, journalists and bloggers based in and around the inner city and inner west Sydney – which, for my study, I frame as Central Sydney.

Musicians involved with this scene refer to themselves as “independent” musicians. As a part of my larger doctoral thesis, I attempt to deconstruct the notion of “independence” or “being independent” experienced by the local independent musicians involved with this scene, analyzing it from economic, policy and technological perspectives. The findings presented in this paper are more aligned with the technological aspects.

For this paper and based on findings from my fieldwork, the Central Sydney independent musicians refer to themselves as “independent” because they are not contractually supported by major record labels, and so are not obligated to produce commercially viable music, while they possess certain affordances in the form of economic, cultural and social capital. Independence within this location-specific context is more about a do-it-yourself DIY ethos rather than genre. This ethos refers to experiencing varying degrees of economic, creative, and aesthetic independence, by being entrepreneurial and self-managing one’s own music careers.

Originating from Australia’s rich history of Oz rock and punk, live music performances are the main outlet for Central Sydney independent musicians. Live performances generally take place in pubs, clubs, bars, and live music venues at least twice a week, usually on Fridays and Saturdays, but some venues also host live music on weeknights like Wednesdays or Thursdays. Attendance at these live gigs usually ranges between 50 to 200 people, depending on the venue capacity and popularity of the bands playing.

Another key feature of this Central Sydney independent music scene is its social aspect. The majority of the research participants explain that local musicians become part of this music scene by attending and socializing at live gigs, and at any given night, the majority of the crowd are either musicians themselves or involved with this scene in varying capacities.

The advent of innovations in digital music and online communication technologies has recently become essential for the mobilization of this local independent music scene. These digital tools provide agency to the local independent musicians to self-manage their own music careers, while replacing some of the traditional functions associated with mainstream music industries, via practices which I refer to as “digital DIY”. This term seems appropriate since this independent scene originated from the Australian punk movements of the 1970s, and scene members are essentially using digital music technologies and online social media networks to perform similar cultural DIY practices used by their punk predecessors, albeit in an online environment.

In line with the overarching theme of this conference, technological turns and digital revolutions have significantly changed music production, distribution and consumption practices associated with the popular music industries. This, in turn, has also shaped such practices in local independent/alternative music scenes, because the latter exists as a reaction or extension to the former according to multiple scholarly texts informed by a plethora of historical narratives on independent music. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to elaborate on this notion of digital DIY and how it contributes to location-specific meanings of independence or “being independent” within the Central Sydney independent music scene.

Research Approach

Strategies of inquiry implemented in this study include semi-structured interviews of 15 individuals involved with this scene, supplemented by field notes from participant observation, and relevant textual analysis. The selection criteria for recruitment of research participants included individuals between the ages of 18 and above, who are involved with this local independent music scene, who I identified implementing the “purposive” (p. 15) and “snowball” (p. 16) sampling methods (Denscombe, 2003).

The interviews with research participants were conducted in some of the quieter local cafes and pubs around inner west Sydney in 2017, using a stock voice-recording app on my smartphone. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes, which were then transcribed, serving as the primary data for this research. Anonymity of all participants was respected throughout the transcription process. These interviews were supplemented with participant observation at live gigs and impromptu anecdotal conversations with scene members at scene-related events.

I conducted participant observation at over 25 live gigs, located in the inner city and inner west areas of Sydney, between 2017 and 2018. During the early stages of my fieldwork, I discovered that there are particular institutions such as venues, events, media outlets, independent record labels and shops, and organizations, which provide continuous and essential support to this Central Sydney independent music scene. I followed the activities of these particular institutions from 2017 till 2018, as part of my fieldwork.

Also, associated “public documents” (Creswell, 2009, p. 180) such as relevant lyrics, music, photos and information from websites, social media, newspaper articles, magazines, posters, flyers, radio and television programs were identified for textual analyses, which was I also conducted in between 2017 until 2018. A summary of some of the details of the participants of my study are presented in this table.

Summary of participants’ demographic information

	Participant pseudo names	Year of Birth	Age	Gender	Formally trained Musician	University educated	Years involved with the scene
	Joanne Davies	1958	61	Female	Yes	No	30
	Don Mathew	1960	59	Male	No	No	27
	Bob Sage	1963	56	Male	No	No	35
	Bryan Adams	1967	52	Male	No	Yes	25
	Clay Molasses	1969	50	Male	Yes	Yes	25
	Vincent Giovanni	1970	49	Male	No	Yes	30
	Katy Killjoy	1971	48	Female	No	No	15
	Jack Nicholson	1973	46	Male	No	Yes	11
	Steve Johnson	1973	46	Male	No	Yes	19
	Shaun Raven	1976	43	Male	No	Yes	20
	Shania Payne	1977	42	Female	No	Yes	12
	Raymond Reiss	1983	36	Male	Yes	Yes	10
	Bart Simpson	1985	34	Male	Yes	Yes	13
	Aziz Bushra	1986	33	Trans-woman	Yes	Yes	10
	Lizzie McGuire	1987	32	Female	Yes	Yes	10

History

Tracing its origins, I discovered that the Central Sydney independent music scene originated from Australian pub rock and punk scenes from the 1960s and 1970s. Like their predecessors, cultural DIY practices still exists within this contemporary scene. The majority of the participants of this study, especially the ones who organize gigs and play the role of scene intermediaries¹, state that they design, produce and distribute their own posters/flyers, often design their own album artwork and distribute their records at live gigs and via mail orders.

Digital DIY

According to Hracs' (2015) findings from his empirical study involving independent musicians of Toronto conducted in 2007-2008 (p. 463), the emergence of contemporary independent music production aligns with the advent of the internet, digital migration and technological revolution which gave rise to the new, digitized popular music industries. Concerning key features of this "new" music industries as coined by Hesmondhalgh and Meier (2015), Hracs (2012) discuss the role of technology democratizing music production and distribution (p. 442), which in turn, provide agency to a new generation of political and commercially ambitious independent musicians (Hracs, 2015, p. 466). These musicians mobilize innovative digital music and communication technologies to produce high-quality music recordings, promote their shows, distribute their music and merchandise using online platforms, not only subverting the mainstream music industry infrastructures but also circumventing established independent networks (Hracs, 2015, p. 466). As a result, Hracs (2015) explains that digital music and online communication technologies transformed the independent music model from an alternative, niche-centred approach to a dominant, far-reaching platform for musicians (p. 466). Much like the original DIY ethos and rise of punk in the 1970s, digitally-driven DIY was initially hailed as an exciting opportunity for artists to assert control over their careers and to retain a larger share of the profits (Hracs, 2015, p. 466). Similar digital DIY practices are visible in the Central Sydney independent music scene.

According to 43-year old research participant Raven, a 20-year veteran of this scene whose comments resonate with those from the majority of the research participants, explain that "independence" according to their experiences, refers to having control over their art and music careers, made possible by the multiple functionalities afforded by the internet.

Within this local independent music scene, opportunities for monetary returns are limited. Research participants Reiss, Davies, Adams, Payne, Nicholson are not interested to produce music that matches the identifiable sonic aesthetic of mainstream music genres, or radio-friendly songs – that suits a particular station's format and personality. So, they are not interested to produce commercial music while others, like Molasses and Bushra, would not mind commercial success, as long it happens organically, without significantly losing their creative independence. The general vibe I got from the research participants is that since the music genres they engage with are not particularly considered mainstream, they are after all part of an independent music scene, their music-related ambitions are not commercial.

Non-commercial aspirations for their music also mean members of the Central Sydney independent music scene must support themselves through other avenues of income. All the participants of this study, except for Bushra, Molasses, Davies and McGuire who are full-time professional musicians, have separate careers in a wide range of industries through which they support themselves and are involved with music semi-professionally. Furthermore, Simpson, McGuire, Payne, Raven and Adams explicitly mention that whatever money they earn from their music, through opportunities such as performing live and selling merchandise, CDs, vinyls and digital

¹ There are also some "cultural intermediaries" (Bourdieu, 1984) who regulate the Central Sydney independent music scene, functioning as scene intermediaries, gate-keepers and taste-makers. Bourdieu introduced this term in his famous book *Distinction: A social critique of the Judgement of Taste* where he discusses about the new petite bourgeoisie, that is, the newly educated working class French youth of the 1960s, who grew in size and influence from the mid-twentieth century (Negus, 2002). When asked about examples of these scene intermediaries, the research participants identified musicians, gig organisers, booking agents, venue managers and owners, independent record label owners, media personalities, or any combination of the above and of different genders, who are responsible for regulating the scene although not through heavy-handed policing, but more as contributing to its agency and mobilisation. Furthermore, Raven, Adams, Simpson, McGuire, Molasses and Davies regularly organize live gigs, session-playing opportunities for their peers, and promote local talent as well. Radio announcers Mathew and Killjoy also use their roles in local FM radio channels to promote local talent. When asked about the criteria they implement to judge musicians/bands, Raven, Molasses and Davies explained that they value authenticity, which in their words, are a combination of talent, creativity, experimentation, being local (that is, being based in Sydney or actively performing here), professional work-ethic (like how sincere and dedicated they are to their craft, showing up to booked gigs on time and delivering sets appropriately within the allocated time-frame), and recurrent social engagement (which include attending, socializing, performing, and volunteering at live gigs and other related functions) and of course, longstanding involvement with the scene.

downloads, usually feeds back into supporting their semi-professional music careers. Example: Gold Coast-based band These Four Walls' crowdfunding strategy.

So, interviews with the research participants reveal that being independent denotes experiencing varying degrees of creative and aesthetic autonomy achieved by being entrepreneurial and self-managing their own music careers. These participants utilize digital music technologies and online social media networks to do-it-yourself and circumvent some of the traditional functions of established institutions of the by-gone era. This key finding is informed by the following well-articulated quote, by research participant Adams, 52, involved with this scene for over 25 years.

In line with Adams' comments, most of the research participants implement digital DIY practices to replace traditional functions of managers, producers, recording studios, booking agents, promoters, distributors, marketing and PR representatives, record labels and stores. Instead, they record music on their computers using digital home studio technologies, use email lists, Facebook and other social media platforms to promote their music and live shows, distribute their music via Bandcamp and other music sharing and streaming sites, produce and share their music videos on YouTube, design, produce and distribute their own artworks, record sleeves, and posters, and even order online CDs and vinyls to be pressed from third party companies.

Involved with this local independent music scene for over a decade, Simpson, 34, explicitly discuss DIY philosophies within the scene, and that contemporary local bands tend to book their gigs and tours. Sometimes these gig and tour deals come directly from the event/festival organizers, whereas other times it may come via their independent record label. Furthermore, he explains that bands signed with independent record labels often opt to manage bookings and tours themselves, with their label only looking after distribution and marketing. As emphasized by both research participants Bushra and Simpson, online social media allow these local independent musicians to be in direct touch with their fans as well as their colleagues, booking agents, venue managers, gig organizers, record shops, journalists, bloggers and sponsors. Through online social media networks, they share their music and activities, communicate, and collaborate, as well as support each other in a variety of ways – including cross-promoting live gigs, buying each other's digital music and merchandise etc. Digital DIY not only allows members of this local independent music scene to be in control of their music promotion and distribution strategies but also allows them to portray their personalities. This Facebook status by a local independent musician Simeon, who is the founder of the progressive math rock band SEIMS serves as an example.

So, scene members now have more control over where their profile and music should be featured. For example, digital DIY allows them to choose which artists they want to tour and play gigs with, on which radio stations like 2RRR, FBi or Triple J should their music be featured, and which street press such as The Music and BRAG (or any other media outlets of their choice) should their stories be featured on. They can do so by simply contacting and sharing their music with appropriate contact persons from these institutions. Also involved with this scene for over a decade, 33-year old Bushra mention the importance of being in touch with influential bloggers who serve as digital scene intermediaries/gate-keepers/taste-makers.

While discussing digital DIY in his way, Raven refers to the shrinking gap between professional versus amateur musicians. As mentioned before, the democratizing impact of digital DIY is problematizing the dichotomy between professional and amateur musicians. Furthermore, Simpson comments that at most of the local live gigs he performs, "about 80% of the crowd are either musicians or related with music in some capacity." Personal connections between performers and fans made possible by digital DIY, specifically via online social media networks, signify the blurring boundaries between music producers and consumers. Both these notions regarding the porous distinctions between professional/amateur musicians and music producers/consumers resonate with key characteristics of the contemporary, highly digitized, "new" popular music industries.

Simpson, Adams and Bushra explain that digital DIY allows independent musicians involved with the Central Sydney independent music scene to travel to other similar independent/alternative music scenes, both in Australia and around the globe. Specifically, these independent musicians communicate with each other through online social media networks and digitally exchange music. This digital poster promoting local independent band SEIMS' tour of Australia and Japan serves as an example. Instead of transcending over to the mainstream, which was a familiar trope of independent/alternative artists of the past, contemporary Central Sydney independent musicians traverse multiple trans-local scenes comprising of like-minded, niche-oriented musicians sharing similar music-related ethos and tastes, made possible through successful cultural flows via the internet.

Conclusion

Digital DIY adds another layer to what independence or being independent means within the Central Sydney independent music scene. Circumventing traditional functions associated with mainstream music industries (such as managers, producers, recording studios, booking agents, promoters, distributors, marketing and PR representatives, record labels and stores), and traversing across trans-local scenes, digital DIY allows higher levels of creative and aesthetic autonomy.

Technological affordances via digital DIY problematize dichotomies such as professional versus amateur music-making practices, as well as producer (that is, music performer) versus consumer (audience member at live gigs who is either also a musician, or involved with music in some capacity).

More in control of their music careers than ever before, these local independent musicians can not only promote and distribute their music via online platforms but also present their unique personalities through their practices. Opportunities to portray their persona are important within the contemporary volatile atmosphere of online social media networks, where performers can gain or lose a massive number of followers within a blink of an eye, based on their comments or actions (Orlando, 2019).

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