In looking at popular music, it has become clear that the issue of cultural ownership has come to rely less on cultural artifacts representative of individual expression and free identity, instead relying more on the capitalistic benefits of commodification. The idea that the mass-mediated culture industry markets popular music as an economic product to the public, commodifying it in the process, is nothing new. Herbert Schiller, following Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s basic approach (1993), has distilled Marx and Gramsci for the late-20th century (what he terms the “industrial-capitalist era”) when he recognizes the “relentless and successful efforts [of the culture industry] to separate these elemental expressions of human creativity from their group and community origins for the purpose of selling them to those who can pay for them” (1989: 31; emphasis in original).

The ways in which popular music is disseminated by the cultural industry are well documented: commercial radio, major record labels,
O'Connor, Alan. 2002. Local scenes and dangerous crossroads: Punk and corporate record store chains, MTV, traditional music press, and arena concert tours all contribute to what Susan Willis (1993: 366) identifies as a homogenized industry whose goal is to make money. Independent rock and the culture that has sprung up to support it is one answer to this industry, as Allan Moore (2001) notes a primary reliance on independent record labels, independent fanzines, independently owned and operated record stores, and independent venues. The indie scene (cf. definition of ‘scene’ in O'Connor 2002: 226; note that my continued use of ‘independent music scene’ and any variation thereof refers to this definition) that sprouted from the seeds of punk rock in the late 1970s has come to replicate the corporate music industry in many respects, including economically. It is perhaps because of this that Schiller sees independent media existing necessarily as a smaller version of the overarching cultural industry when he states that “the determining factor in the large majority of decisions about what products and services are made [by independent media conduits] must be commercial profitability” (1989: 43, emphasis in original). This implies a homogenization of independent media as well (albeit not on the same scale as the global cultural industry). Nicolas Garnham, in his discussion of the forces at play in media’s use within the global public sphere, acknowledges this when he asks “whether the increasingly global flow of cultural goods and services is creating a series of cosmopolitan cultural identities at the expense of more traditional national or local cultural identities” (1993: 253).

This paper demonstrates to what extent Garnham’s question and Schiller’s argument are applicable to independent music scenes. As recently as last year, Alan O’Connor argues for the continued importance of local scenes (2002). John Goshert notes that “local production and consumption, as well as the geographic specificities in musical forms, style of dress, and political practice” are inherent qualities of independent music scenes (2000: 87). Oral histories of the British punk scene, the L.A. punk scene, and the Washington D.C. hardcore scene dismiss commercial profitability and cultural homogenization in favor of making artistic and political statements (McNeil and McCain 1996, Spitz and Mullen 2001, Andersen and Jenkins 2001). Ethnographies of teenage subcultures that revolve around musical scenes in locations as disparate as Montreal, suburban New Jersey, and Austin find individuals identifying themselves not simply in opposition to but completely outside of the commercial music industry (Leblanc 1999, Gaines 1991, Shank 1994). Additionally, descriptions of non-corporate music scenes outside the immediate focus of this study are also valuable in providing insight to the argument at hand (Cohen 1991, Finnegan 1989, Manuel, 1993). An investigation of informal economic networks and independent distribution follows a development of the formation of the scene as a community, or a habitus that relies on extra-musical factors as aesthetic signifiers of the cultural forces at play, of which the understanding of authenticity (or what is termed “integrity” within the scene) is an important part.

A note on methods: for this project, I have interviewed eight individuals who are involved in the production and perpetuation of this culture to gain their insights: band members, record label owners, and zine editors. I have also surveyed audience members at three different shows for a preliminary audience profile and qualitative assessment of independent resources. The surveys took place (and also I observed shows) at the Empty Bottle, a 250-person capacity independent venue in Chicago, Illinois. I have also drawn upon years of personal experiences, including (but not limited to) informal interviews, writing record and show reviews, deejaying at a college radio station, working at an independent record store, and playing in bands. I have seen no other study of this subculture that combines such personal experiences with audience opinions and the viewpoints of significant cultural producers.

Selected Bibliography:


The second application of community to musical life focuses on the significance of community as a romantic construct, that is, as a means through which individuals who lack the commonality of shared local experience can cast music itself as a ‘way of life’ and a basis for community. For example, the hippie movement of the late 1960s attempted to forge a sense of community through its commitment to political rock music as a source of social change. As Frith (1981) observes: ‘Community became something that was created by the music, that described the musical experience. This was the ideology that...’

Another term widely used by music researchers prior to the introduction of the scenes perspective was ‘subculture’. Andrew Mall, “Building nothing out of something: Constructing trans-local community through independent music subcultures”. Kristine Nielsen, "The Strange Case of East German Monuments: Iconoclasm, Iconoclash, and the Rest". Nick Oberly, "Becoming Posthuman, or What Does Code Want?" Adam Shapiro, "The Formation and Deformation of 'Form' into 'Information' or Does Media Theory Make Unwitting Platonists of Us All?" Laura Smith, "The Changing Face of War: Winning Hearts and Minds through Simulation, Imagery and Mimesis". Kirste