When Subcultures Become Careers: Working in Indie Rock

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

WHEN SUBCULTURES BECOME CAREERS:
WORKING IN INDIE ROCK

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
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PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY
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For Tim
The pay sucks and it’s hard to move up.
- Kim
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Music is integrated into people’s daily lives. Even when listening isn’t intentional, we hear music on television, radio, in stores, and even in elevators. When thinking where music comes from, most people think of the musician, rather than the workers behind the scenes who make it possible for the rest of us to hear it. This dissertation explores the careers of these workers in one small slice of the music industry, specifically Chicago’s local Indie rock.

This research addresses three main questions: 1) How do people make careers in Indie rock? 2) How might the Indie subculture and the industry influence and affect one another? 3) How do gender, class, and race function in this industry? To answer these questions, I conducted twenty-six interviews with industry workers, focusing on their careers and their daily work. Studying the work and careers of Indie rock workers addresses an unexplored gap between the music subculture and the industry that supports and is supported by it. Further, Indie rock as a subculture professes principles that can and sometimes do conflict with the goals of a profit-seeking business. I explore how workers conceptualize and negotiate these conflicts on a daily basis. Finally, I interrogate the egalitarian Indie ideal with respect to gender, class, and race through the experiences of its workers.
In his 1982 book *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker saw art worlds as a network of cooperative occupations, and I approached this dissertation with the same understanding. Just as Becker did not take the artist as the center of analysis, I do not consider this a sociological study of music or musicians, “but rather the sociology of occupations applied to [musical] work” (Becker, 1982: xi). Following Becker’s lead and embracing the Hughes tradition of field study of professions (Abbott 1993) this research puts focus on the careers of those “behind the scenes,” meaning those who engineer music recordings, publicize recordings and performances, coordinate and support live performances, and others who form the network of workers who make up the business of music. There has been and continues to be plenty of work in the sociologies of culture, media, and art that looks at art as a cultural product, and in this project I do not attempt to analyze the music itself at all. This is a sociological investigation of the work and the workers behind the cultural product, rather than the product itself.

**A Word about The Word**

I use the term “subculture” throughout this project, recognizing that some would disagree with this usage. While my (non-sociologist) informants most often referred to Indie as a community, they also used terms such as scene and subculture, blissfully unaware that using either would likely result in a protracted argument among sociologists. The best and most accurate term I found to describe the field I investigate here is “music-based subcultural community” (Daschuk 2011: 606). This term acknowledges that though music is central to this group, it is also a subculture with its
own set of values, standards, and ideals that are espoused and (at least aspire to be) upheld by a community.

Debates about the use of the term subculture (Fine and Kleinman 1979, Bennett 1999 and 2010, Blackman 2005, Shildrick 2006) sometimes call for its complete disuse. Bennett suggests the term has become a “theoretical catch-all” (Bennett 1999). The focus of my research in this project, Bennett would argue, would more accurately be called a “neo-tribe.” Subcultures, he asserts, describe a working class youth reaction to structural changes (Bennett 1999: 600) and have rigid parameters that exclude the possibility of extending past youth.

Describing these parameters in her article “Growing up Punk,” Davis claims that to call the punk scene a subculture would imply that anyone who participates in “the mainstream world and its institutions” (she mentions careers, family, marriage) (Davis 2006: 64) would by definition be excluded from the subculture. She argues that studies of aging punks should “use ‘scene’ instead of ‘subculture’ to avoid presuming that ‘all of a participant’s actions are governed by subcultural standards’ in reaction against a static mainstream culture” (Davis 2006: 65). I disagree and think it is still useful for the area I studied. While I didn’t presume anything about informants’ actions, many did abide by or at least profess subcultural standards and principles at the same time they participated in “the mainstream world” perhaps because their careers were actually part of the subculture. Davis does include this kind of arrangement in her ideal types, calling them “career punks” (Davis 2006: 67); they find ways to stay involved in the
scene, often through support work. The support work Davis refers to is the focus of this project. However, as discussed in chapter five, some mainstream conventions may not necessarily be conducive to working in the industry, depending on one’s position. Taking seriously all of the perspectives on using the term subculture, I maintain that it is a useful and correct term for this project.

**Indie Rock as a Subculture**

The focus of this project, Chicago Indie Rock, supports and is supported by a specific music subculture with a clear lineage and a specific physical location. Movement into and within the business relies on networks that can be exclusionary and homophilic (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), so understanding the subculture and the informal networks through which workers came to be involved in the industry was a central concern for my analysis.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms “punk” and “Indie rock” seemingly interchangeably, consistent with how my informants used them, and capitalize Indie to distinguish it from other independent musical genres, of which there are many. The interchangeable terms I use reflect the close ties between what some might consider different styles, genres, scenes, communities, countercultures, or subcultures, but below I will argue their relatedness. Indie rock is a small industry that shares some characteristics with the larger mainstream, but maintains a set of procedures, values, and objectives that sometimes reflect and other times oppose the larger industry
(Gosling 2004). I will show how it does both through exploring the careers and experiences of the workers within it.

Though punk could never be considered “under-studied” in the field of sociology, punk and its legacy has traditionally been approached as youth-based with generational rebellion as a main component (Moore 2010, Bennett 2006, Epstein 2002, Hebdige 1979) rejecting some social norms and parental authority (Thornton 1995), and therefore a temporary phase of life soon outgrown. This research recognizes that this is a subculture within which some can and do spend their entire lives. I expand on recent research on participants in the punk scene who gain legitimate roles as they age (Bennett 2006, Davis 2006, Andes 1998). Bennett’s 2006 ethnographic work on aging punks fills a gap in the literature that considered punk as only a youth movement, noting the disparaging tone of fans who retain their punk identity past their twenties. Indeed, this project uses much of Bennett’s work on fans as a frame for workers in the industry, approaching informants as workers rather than subculture participants, recognizing that “gaining legitimate roles” for my sample means paid employment in the industry. Therefore, Indie Rock is an industry in which some may spend their entire careers, in addition to their lives. My terms are tentative (some, may) because in this study I cannot say for sure. None of my informants are yet near retirement age, though several stated that they anticipated staying for good, while others felt they were nearing the end of their involvement in the industry.
Ryan Moore’s 2010 book, *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis* explored postwar music and youth subcultures and their intersection with political economy and social structure using a Marxist theoretical framework (Moore 2010). Moore’s assertion that “punk was the signal that [rock and hippie counterculture] were exhausted and co-opted in the new social context of the 1970s” (Moore 2010: 8) is useful for understanding the perspectives involved in the subculture, and as a result, the industry. Punk was an attempt to subvert the previous countercultures that had been co-opted by advertising and mainstream culture. Indie Rock, as a direct descendant of punk (Hesmondhalgh 1999), held the same promise.

Credibility is a theme I found woven throughout my interviews, and at different times described either honesty in business dealings, or possession of subcultural capital. Those involved in Indie Rock gain subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) in part by rejecting mainstream media like Thornton’s club kids do, but also by expertise in musical knowledge (though not necessarily playing music) and holding true to Indie principles. In the same way that Peterson shows us that country musicians need an authentic background story, usually involving abject poverty (Peterson 1997), Indie record labels and musicians gain credibility and authenticity in part by eschewing profit. I show how those behind the scenes adhere to these ideals as well. Credibility, in the form of subcultural capital, is of utmost importance even for promoters and talent buyers.

While sexuality was not necessarily a focus for my study, Mimi Schippers’s investigation into the way this specific industry challenges the existing gender order
helps to inform understanding of the pool of participants in the subculture from which workers in the industry are drawn. Schippers studied musicians and audiences in what she calls the “alternative hard rock” scene in Chicago, which is an earlier incarnation of the subculture, with yet another label, that I am studying. Shippers’ study is about sexuality in this scene and its attempts to reject the sexism of mainstream rock (Frith 1983, Groce and Cooper 1990, Weinstein 1991), which sometimes “reinscribe[s] the hegemonic sexual order” (Schippers 2000).

As promised, below I situate the Indie subculture to show its relation to punk, which also helps to understand why this project, following the lead of its informants, conflates the two. In his 1999 article, Hesmondhalgh confirms Indie’s relationship to punk, noting that Indie “has its roots in punk’s institutional and aesthetic challenge to the popular music industry” (Hesmondhalgh 1999: 34). He also argues that the term Indie itself is highly significant, because, “no musical genre has ever before taken its name from the form of industrial organization behind it” (Hesmondhalgh 1999: 35). He goes on to explain, using two independent record labels as a map, how indie has become more commercialized and mainstream in Britain, and explores how the politics and aesthetics of the genre are affected by this mainstreaming.

Also pertinent to the main research questions is the Indie/punk subculture’s complicated history with regard to class, race, and especially gender. Articles about early British punk give men the most attention, leading to the belief that women were only minor participants. All-male bands are acknowledged as pioneers, and “oh, by the
way, there were some women, too” seems to be the attitude, despite many influential women performers and a significant female presence in audiences. Film footage from Chicago punk clubs (which in the earliest days were usually night clubs or gay bars that had a weekly “punk night”) in the late 1970s show gender diversity among audiences, though fewer women than men on stage (Regressive Films 2007). There were also nonwhite audience members and performers, particularly in racially diverse cities like Chicago.

The Do It Yourself (DIY) ethos of punk made it accessible to those with fewer economic resources, making class less salient. The aesthetic did not require buying new or expensive clothing, and attending shows was fairly inexpensive. To play in a band, formal training was completely unimportant (if not sneered at), and the cheapest possible instruments, sometimes borrowed, would do (around the same time, rappers eliminated instruments and venues altogether, instead relying on rhythmic vocalization and unauthorized, free public space performance – the ultimate in cost-free musical expression).

As punk became more widely known in the early 1980s (often covered in the popular press with the moral panic that accompanies every emerging subculture once its presence is noticed), audiences grew in numbers and narrowed in diversity. Because part of the appeal of punk was finding an identity distinct from the mainstream, the music started to become harder and faster, and shows more violent both because the aggression of punk appealed to those who wanted to be aggressive (and punk offered
that opportunity), and to some extent, to limit its appeal in the larger culture. By the mid-1980s, what became known as hardcore punk dominated the scene, and white men began to overtake both the bands and the audiences (Regressive Films, 2007, Fatal 2012, Azerrad 2001, Schilt 2003).

By the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, punk women, having been marginalized within the punk subculture of which they had always been a part, began to create their own scene by self-publishing zines, forming bands, and putting together bills featuring women musicians in what became known as Riot Grrrl (LeBlanc 2008, Marcus 2010, Dunn 2012, Downes 2012, Schilt 2003). The style and sound were clearly punk, but lacked the violence (at least physically) that began to characterize hardcore shows. Lyrics criticized the male-dominated punk scene and were intentionally feminist and anti-racist (though still a very white scene), “with extremely personal lyrics that dealt with such topics as rape, incest, and eating disorders” (Schilt 2003:7). Like punk, both the hardcore and riot grrrl scenes were independently run through informal networks and independent distribution channels, unsupported by large music conglomerates (Oakes 2009).

The hardcore scene was shrinking throughout the 1980s, and somewhere in the mid-‘90s, went so far underground that most shows took place in basements of homes rather than the 100-1200 capacity venues that they had been occupying, and for the most part stays there today. Riot grrrl-associated bands who stayed together remained independent, and began to incorporate into what was classified as alternative,
underground, college rock, or punk into what we now call Indie rock, bringing with it many of its principles and foci. In Britain, pop charts were filled with artists previously called “post-punk” but now described as Indie (Hesmondhalgh 1999). I argue, however, that while many of these British bands had limited success in the United States, they never topped American charts and were mostly heard on college radio stations. Now, fifteen years after Hesmondhalgh’s article, many of these bands (he names Blur, Oasis, and Pulp as examples) are well-known in the U.S. as part of the post-punk canon under the category of “Britpop” (Hesmondhalgh 1999: 38). While Britpop may have a presence in many of my informants’ record collections, it is not central the tradition of American Indie that I explore here.

Currently, Indie bands and audiences have mostly returned to the gender makeup of early punk, with plenty of women in both, though not strictly equal. The legacy of riot grrrl is present both in the sense that some riot grrrl-associated musicians are currently active in the Indie subculture, and through the many women participants in the subculture who grew up with some familiarity with the music and politics of riot grrrl. Though there is some racial and ethnic diversity in Indie, it never quite recovered the broad but small audiences of the 1970s. Big Indie music festivals like Pitchfork in Chicago and SXSW in Austin book nonwhite bands, but both the stages and the audiences remain overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, white.
From Subculture to Career

Informal networks are the backbone of the Indie Rock industry. Though some informants got their first industry jobs (such as at record stores) by sending in a resume, every other job that informants held in the industry was obtained through informal networks. Drawing on Kanter’s (1977) description of the “shadow structure” of an organization, McGuire (2002: 303) examines how gender inequality manifests in informal networks. However, both are considering informal networks within organizations where people are already employed. This research is relevant when thinking of the entire Indie industry, including the subculture, as an organization. The unofficial channels through which informal networks function are arguably critical to workers’ success in an organization (Ibarra 1993, McGuire 2002). Looking at interaction patterns in an advertising agency, Ibarra argued that gender inequality in power distribution was largely based on gender-segregated homophilous networks, and the ability of individuals to “convert attributes and positional resources into network advantages” (Ibarra 1992: 422). I will show that formal networks in Indie, such as official employment agreements, are almost always established first through informal networks formed as participants in the subculture. As discussed above, both these informal networks and the subculture itself are white-dominated. While this may help to explain the relative lack of people of color within the industry, it does not tell the whole story, nor does it account for gender inequality.
How people become artists has been explored sociologically (Bielby and Bielby 1996, Bourdieu 1993, Tuchman and Fortin 1984, Wolff 1988), with researchers showing that social structure precedes and creates circumstances conducive to creativity or talent (Ravadrad 2009). This approach is useful for exploring how social structure, particularly with regard to race and class, makes it possible for workers in to participate in this industry.

To help guide my analysis of the inequality I found in the industry, I put focus on processes and patterns (Acker 2006), (Williams 2012), (Martin 2001). Most pointedly, I looked to Joan Acker’s “Inequality Regimes” (Acker 2006) for an intersectional approach to the study of organizations, considering as organizations both the industry and the individual businesses within it. Inequality regimes are “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities in organizations” (Acker 2006: 443). This research aims to hold to the purposes Joan Acker proposed, “looking at specific organizations and the local, ongoing practical activities of organizing work that, at the same time, reproduce complex inequalities” (Acker 2006: 442).

Though the structure of the industry is not as formalized as the corporations often studied in sociology of work literature, still salient to this project are Kanter (1977) and Connell’s (2002) structure-based frameworks, particularly Kanter’s concept of “homosocial reproduction;” supervisors filling positions with others from the same race, class, and gender background (Kanter 1977). The informal networks within the
subculture that can lead to paid work show a great deal of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001, McGuire 2002) as well, possibly making homosocial reproduction even more likely than in other businesses.

Following Dana Britton’s suggestion for understanding gender inequality in organizations, I use the term “male or female dominated” to denote the gender makeup of a role or an organization, and “masculinized or feminized” when, through informants’ understandings, there is evidence that a job relies on traditional notions of gender when describing the personality traits, responsibilities, and skillset required for the position (Britton 2000: 430). I found that many jobs that were particularly dominated by one or the other gender were also gendered. But as Britton points out, it can be tricky to pull apart whether gendering produced or was produced by structure, “occupational gender segregation and gender inequality are reproduced by a dialectic between gendered organizational structures and the situated performance of gender by individual workers” (Williams 1995 and Pierce 1995 in Britton 2000: 431).

**Significance of Study**

This dissertation draws upon and contributes to the literature on work and gender, race, and class. Though considering the Indie music-based subcultural community is crucial to the understanding of workers’ careers, this project is not the study of a subculture.
**Chapter Summaries**

Chapter two explains the methods I employed for this research. I give special attention to the challenges I found while gathering data, both in finding informants and dealing with semi-public figures. Chapter three describes how my informants got into the Indie rock industry. I show that they go beyond a typical teenage fascination with music to making it the focus of their careers, and often their whole lives. I also show how personal networks are the primary way that informants begin and progress in their careers, and that learning-by-doing is a common experience.

Chapter four shows how credibility is constructed, gained, and lost in Indie rock, as well as how it structures the career paths of those in the industry. Credibility can mean either honesty or adherence to Indie principles, or both. However, adherence to Indie principles and the priority of music or business determine an informants’ path as Music Capitalist, True Believer, or Worker. Furthermore, those workers whose careers do not progress as well as they would like can become disillusioned with the business and consider leaving, despite their commitment to Indie principles.

Chapter five explores the workers in the context of the job itself; what kind of hours informants work and where, along with their income and the relationships involved in their careers. Informants discuss the kind of sacrifices they make to maintain careers in the industry. Chapter six takes an intersectional approach to workers’ experiences related to gender, class, and race. I give consideration to how these experiences both structure and are structured by the industry.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

The central questions guiding this research are: 1) How do people make careers in Indie rock? 2) How might the Indie subculture and the industry influence and affect one another? 3) How do gender, class, and race function in this industry? To answer these questions, I undertook a series of life history interviews with workers in the Indie rock industry.

From November 2012 until May 2014, I interviewed 25 people who hold paid positions within the industry, and one who had recently left it. I used snowball sampling with willing and recommended participants in the industry, with interviews resulting in more contacts. The first few interviews were with contacts I already had within the industry, through personal friends. Each of those informants gave me names of others, whom I contacted via email. I sent out 61 interview requests over the course of my research, and 35 people indicated willingness to speak with me. Of those 35, I completed a total of 26 interviews.

Interviews were face-to-face and took place at whatever location was convenient and comfortable for the informant. Sixteen informants chose to speak to me at their place of business, usually outside of earshot of any other workers, such as in a conference room or private office. Five of those interviews took place in a fully visible
location where fellow workers could hear everything we were saying. I was concerned that participants would not feel comfortable about speaking freely around their co-workers, and asked them to confirm that it was okay to speak freely in that setting, and they all did. I have no way of knowing how those circumstances may have affected the interviews, though I did not sense that their responses were constrained by their location. Four informants worked out of home offices, and I was invited to speak with them there. The remaining six chose coffee shops or restaurants away from their workplaces. Though I was not able to offer any compensation, when interviews were held in restaurants or cafes, I would always pick up the tab.

Once the interviews actually took place, informants were excited to talk about themselves. Aside from a few who are or had been prominent musicians, journalists, or businesspeople with plenty of experience being interviewed, most think of themselves as behind-the-scenes people who don’t get noticed. When I introduced the focus of my project to one informant at the start of our interview, she said no one had ever interviewed her before, “because no one wants to know about us. No one cares about us.” Others commented on how interesting they felt the topic was, and asked how I got interested in studying the area.

Interviews were semi-structured conversations, where I prompted the informant to discuss the topics and areas relevant to my research questions, focusing on the informant’s career, how it began, developed, and where they expected it to go. The
shortest interview was a very rushed 45 minutes, and the longest lasted two and a half hours. Interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and coded.

Throughout the completion of these in-depth qualitative interviews, I used a grounded theory approach to understanding the careers and lives of music industry workers. Because I was not testing a hypothesis, grounded theory allowed me to follow up on areas I’d previously not considered or of which I’d been unaware. According to Weiss (1994), qualitative interviewing also allows researchers to understand questions of process, and here I am attempting to understand the processes involved in becoming and remaining employed in this industry. I began by asking them to tell me about their current jobs, and continued based on their answers. I asked “how” rather than “why” questions, looking for what Weiss calls “critical incidents.” “How” questions are designed to elicit specific stories with concrete examples that allow the researcher material for analysis, but “why” questions ask the informant to, in some sense, remove themselves from the story they are telling to analyze their own actions and possibly those with whom they are interacting. I asked them to walk me through a prior day that was relevant to my questions. When informants spoke in vague generalities, I asked for examples. I also prompted for further explanation when a point was unclear, by asking them to “tell me more about that.” I did allow for some “why” questions when an informant was making a broad claim about the industry. I felt that listening to their perspectives made for a more thorough understanding of their position and the context of their answers.
There were a few questions that I asked in the same way every time, because how informants answered them was important to my understanding of their attitude about their work and the industry. For example, I asked each, “Do you think of yourself as a business person or a music person?” This question was designed to gain an explanation of the orientation of each informant from their own perspective, the answers to which are the basis for chapter four.

Because it was also important to understand participants’ personal lives, I asked a few questions about their living arrangements. My demographics sheet (Appendix B) was in front of me during the interview, and when any of the answers came out during the interview, I would write them in. If particular characteristics had not been revealed during the course of the interview, at the conclusion of the interview I asked directly the year they were born, with whom they lived and that person’s occupation, if they had children, and their race. I did not ask informants to give me exact salaries to avoid making them uncomfortable. Rather I asked if each “made enough money to support” themselves.

I attempted to recruit as many women as men in the industry, but those who turned me down were more often women who cited a lack of spare time as the issue. When men declined to be interviewed, they offered no explanation. One woman, a music journalist, said that between her three jobs and two small children, she would not be able to carve out an hour to speak to me. She did offer to answer some questions via
email, but her answers were short and not useful, making clear to me that interviews were the right choice for this project.

Both personal and company names have been changed to protect confidentiality, and informants were informed of this when recruiting, and again when signing the Informed Consent form. Because interviews were confidential, I would not mention anyone else I interviewed without permission. I was also mindful of the fact that building and maintaining careers in this industry are very dependent on networks and name recognition, and was very careful to maintain confidentiality when contacting potential participants. Some informants simply named people I “should” speak to, but they had no relationship with that person and believed that their name would not help me at all. In those cases I would contact the potential interviewee and rather than write that “So-and-so mention you,” I wrote that “your name has been mentioned.”

Maintaining confidentiality was important both for ethical research practices and to protect informants. As the industry is a “loose collective of occupations,” (Weiss 1994: 19) there were times that I heard two sides of a disagreement, neither with any knowledge that the other had spoken to me. In one particular case, an informant shared sensitive information about circumstances surrounding another informant’s being fired without knowing that by that point I had interviewed the person who had been fired, and had an upcoming appointment with the person who fired her. In these instances, I worked to maintain neutral reactions, particularly when informants were telling me “secrets” about people I knew. Likewise, because many informants knew or worked
with each other either at the time of the interview or at some other time, it was essential to ensure that I didn’t discuss what others had told me.

For those interviews held at the workplace of the person I was speaking with, I was able to observe some activities in those spaces, but no one office granted permission for me to formally observe operations. Even if I had been granted permission, in venue offices especially there are people coming in and out of the offices quite a bit during a typical day. Obtaining written consent from each of these, as IRB protocol dictates, would have been difficult if not impossible.

**Challenges**

Though in the end I feel that I had enough data to complete this project, finding interviews was a painfully slow process at times. Sixteen of my email requests received no response at all. There were months at a time when I could not find anyone willing and able to speak with me. During the summer months, my schedule and mobility were wide open, but I was told that it was “concert season” and it would be more difficult to find people who were available. When the summer was over, I taught classes three days a week, but gave potential informants their choice of the evenings on my teaching days and all day on the four other days per week that I would be available. Even with this kind of flexibility, nine potential participants never responded to my scheduling email after their initial indication of positive interest.

Additionally, my status as a researcher rather than a journalist was poorly understood. I bumped up against the notion of my being a reporter on a number of
occasions, and was sometimes treated with suspicion. I stated clearly in the first sentence of my recruitment email that I was a doctoral candidate working on my dissertation, however, in five cases I was referred or forwarded to the publicity staff. In these cases, the difference between getting an interview and not getting it lay in the prospective informant knowing and trusting someone I’d already interviewed. I was, as Small describes it, “vouched for” (Small 2009: 14). In one example, I sent an email to Katie, who forwarded my request to Bridget, her company’s publicist, and copied me, noting that “press inquiries are handled by our publicist.” Bridget replied to Katie’s email that I was “a student writing a paper” and that she herself had already done an interview with me. Katie responded right away that she would set up a time with me. Diane told me that she would never normally agree to an interview, but was swayed by her best friend Winona who had spoken to me the previous week and told her I was “good people.”

Small also mentions that snowball sampling, because informants are likely to be part of the same social network, may “translate into greater openness, producing deeper interviews, but [Small] has not seen anyone demonstrate this proposition” (Small 2009: 14). Based on my interviews, this certainly seemed to be the case. Though my sample is small and not generalizable, interviews with my own personal friends were longer and far more candid than those few interviews that I was able to get by cold emails without a referring person. Tony was an informant who opened a lot of doors for me, despite having left the industry 18 months before. I did not initially consider
speaking to him because he’d left, but eventually decided that his perspective could be useful, especially considering that several informants mentioned him, wondering aloud about why he left an envied job as a widely respected talent buyer to become a schoolteacher. Tony and I grew up in neighboring suburbs and though he was several years younger than me, we shared many mutual friends and had briefly met on a few occasions over the years, which I believe made him feel more comfortable speaking with me and inviting me into his home despite my recruitment email that said only that “several people have mentioned [his] name.” Not only was he deeply informative and candid (perhaps because he no longer needed to be as concerned about reputation), Tony’s name became what I called my “magic word;” Every person to whom he referred me (six in total) agreed to an interview, usually saying something about how fondly they regarded him. In my interview with Diane, she said, “Tony is sorely missed in this business. He really classed up the joint.”

At the conclusion of my interview with journalist Lester, he suggested my consent form, with its promises of confidentiality, put people on edge and gave the impression that I was “digging for secrets.” It was clear that as an experienced interviewer himself, he was giving me advice he thought would help me, and seemed puzzled at the very idea of an Institutional Review Board when I explained why I could not take his advice.

One informant, Selma, was very concerned with what I wanted to know, and asked for my questions in advance. To assure her of confidentiality I sent her the
consent form along with the questions beforehand, but rather than signing the hard copy immediately at the interview as everyone else did, she took the consent form home with her, mailing it to me later on. The process of getting her to agree to the interview and set up a time took a total of seven months. When the day of the interview finally came, I arrived at the agreed upon location a few minutes early and found that she had gone to lunch just before I arrived. About an hour later, she arrived and I ended up spending more than two hours with her, and getting to interview Allen (her husband and club co-owner) at the same time, allowing me to hear interesting disagreements between the two of them about the business and the industry. At the conclusion of my afternoon there, I also had an interview appointment set up with Anton, their talent buyer.

Interviewing semi-public figures posed a different set of challenges along with potential for richer data. Of the twenty-six informants, most had never been interviewed before. However, four of them, all men in their forties or early fifties, were fixtures in the industry and experienced interviewees and generally more quick to agree to an interview than less famous informants (but difficult to schedule – Pat postponed our interview five times over six months before it finally took place). Especially challenging with these informants was that their answers felt canned and carefully crafted, like they’d used them over and over again, and I felt I was not getting useful information. However, their more public profiles allowed me some entry into
conversations that I may not have been able to have without the knowledge gained through having read about them beforehand.

Agent and owner of a Chicago-based Indie talent agency that has recently gone national, Simon agreed to an interview right away (though I had no referring individual), but emailed me links to four different articles written about him, and asked that I read them beforehand so as not to repeat questions he’d already answered elsewhere. The articles were useful for me in that I was able to begin the conversation with friendly interaction by mentioning my familiarity with his small hometown on the East Coast, which seemed to put him at ease and offered an entry point for talking about his early musical experiences, which had not been covered in the interviews he sent me. Venue owner Pat gave me answers I’d read from him in newspapers, almost verbatim. However, when I mentioned that my father’s business (where I worked on Saturdays throughout my youth) was in the neighborhood where he grew up, that I had visited the mall where he had his first job, and knew the high school that he attended, he talked in more detail. As an anecdote to explain his familiarity with the stretch of street where my father’s store was located, he mentioned a specific hamburger stand on that street that he visited every Saturday after buying records. This anecdote fleshed out how music was integrated into his teen years, and I don’t believe he would have mentioned it without that connection. Sam is known for giving brutally honest and sometimes unfriendly opinions during interviews, so I was both nervous and looking forward to hearing what he had to say. When I told him I was a sociologist, he seemed interested in
the topic and asked what kind of workers I was speaking with. I told him I’d spoken to a few publicists and he immediately went into a sort of rant about how publicists are counter to the whole idea of punk rock, which led into a fruitful discussion about his principles and how he believes the industry should work.

Because informants were part of a subculture and an industry, it was essential for me to understand that the topics I covered with them were often very personal, and paid attention to their comfort level. Like the income question, I tried to be sensitive to the personal relationships involved in the industry, as well as the strong feelings some informants held about such topics as race and gender. For example, in chapter five I discuss Patti, and her strong reaction to talking about gender in the field. Rather than risk discomfort and possible loss of potential new informants via referrals from her, I chose not to probe further when she became hostile about what she saw as overblown claims of sexism in the industry in order to “restore an effective partnership” (Weiss 1994: 82) in the interview. This kind of recovery was rarely necessary, however, as most informants seemed comfortable with me after a few minutes, whether through finding common ground or showing interest in their experiences, thoughts, and ideas. Some, in fact, didn’t want to stop. At the conclusion of our ninety minute interview, having exhausted all topics on my interview guide, Chuck said, “Aww, really? This is fun. You sure that’s all?”

In the next chapter, I will explore the ways informants came to be involved in the Indie rock subculture and then become workers in the industry.
CHAPTER THREE
GETTING IN

This chapter explores informants’ early interest and involvement in music, any educational experiences they may have had, and how they gained access to networks that can lead to jobs in the industry. Discussed in this chapter is how internships play into the career process and how informants gain expertise.

Development of Musical Interest

I’ve been playing music longer than I haven’t; my first band was when I was 13. For me it was like my first show was so good. It was at The Cabaret, and I was thinking at the time I want to know how this happens, how it works. How does this band get booked, how do lights work, and how does the stage work. I didn’t know anything, you know? It was around the time I started playing shows myself, and I liked learning all that. It felt like you were part of a secret society. Only a handful of people know how this works, and I want to be one of those people. - David

Music has long been a focal point of youth culture. With the development of mass consumption as a way of life (Miles 1998), music, movies, and magazines became the products teenagers chose to consume most beginning in the post-World War II era (Bennett 2000). In particular, the advent of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s created a specifically youth-oriented culture. The teenage appeal of rock ‘n’ roll’s rebellious sensibilities did not extend to their parents (Bennett 2000), which was, and is, part of what makes it attractive. This was something that was all their own. Future generations would
continue to maintain a distinct culture through new and novel parent-alienating trends in music.

Less a musical genre and more an identity and a style, punk emerged in the 1970s as a reaction to the mainstreaming of previous youth movements. More on punk and its relation to Indie Rock is explored in the next chapter, but most relevant for this chapter is research on youth cultures that have become multi-generational. Bennett (2006) and Davis (2006) both explore cultural practices of adults who have held onto their punk identity past the expected point. Bennett writes that although his informants toned down their appearance as they aged, punk became “a set of [ingrained] beliefs and practices” that shaped their worldviews (Bennett 2006: 226). Davis divides aging punks into ideal types according to how they negotiate punk identities into adulthood with varying degrees of success. Bennett and Davis therefore both show punk fans as multi-generational, and therefore can no longer be considered a youth-only subculture, but rather a music scene.

With few exceptions, the informants I spoke with were music fans on a different level from the casual listener, who though obsessed with music as teens, eventually abandon it as the center of their attention. These music fans were so passionate that they chose to make careers in music, rather than maintaining it as a hobby or an interest outside of their adult working lives. When they spoke about their interest in music as listeners, they became especially animated and interested.
I asked about their early experiences with music, what they liked and how deeply they were involved with it. Informants often used language more akin to describing an addiction than an interest or hobby when discussing how they felt about music, even early in their lives. Informants describe listening to whatever they could get their hands on, raiding parents' and older siblings' record collections. Once they were old enough to be out on their own, hanging out at record stores for hours after school and on weekends and attending concerts was common among informants. Many said that they would go to concerts every weekend and on weeknights during the summer and school breaks. Music, they said, was what got them through their teen years.

Bridget said that music was a major part of her youth, “I would say by the time I was 16, [my friends and I] were going to shows at least once a month. Which doesn’t seem like that much when you say it, but that’s like 12 times a year, and the average person sees a concert twice a year, according to a study we did at work.” Bridget’s concert frequency was about on par with other informants, and if Bridget’s data is accurate, that the average person sees two concerts a year, then informants are far more actively involved in music on a regular basis than the average person. This could help illustrate the difference between an industry worker and a casual music fan.

Pat had already learned about the social benefits of musical knowledge when he played records for his older sister and her friends as a pre-teen, “I’d play all this music for all these beautiful girls and they thought I was cute and I thought, ‘well this is working for me!’ which hasn’t changed all that much.” Considering his success and longevity in
the industry (as a venue owner for nearly 35 years), the concern his parents expressed over his obsession with music is now a funny family anecdote, “My parents were talking about how I’m so into my records, and how will I ever get by in the world on that? How will he ever make money? Who will ever hire him to do anything?” Like many parents, Pat’s could not conceive of music as a career path and hoped it would be a passing phase.

Many informants say that music changed the direction of their lives. In high school, music journalist Lester played in a band, which he considers one of the pivotal moments in his life:

It was the realization that my world was not Jersey City Catholic Regional School for Boys. Playing music with people like that of different sexualities and different backgrounds and listening to the Velvet Underground. There’s more to life. There’s a world of weirdness out there. This is how I wound up not being a sanitation engineer or a cop, like 99 out of 100 people that I went to grammar school or high school with.

Lester describes a sort of awakening to the possibilities of the world through involvement with music, which saved him from what he considered a dull, suburban blue collar existence. Some had ideas about other careers, but speak about working in music as if surrendering to what they really wanted to do. George’s explanation of how he came to decide he wanted a career in music, after studying first television and then banking, sums up several informants’ attitudes:

And then I just started getting into the music scene. I would see a concert every other night. That’s just when I knew I started loving music. I took a class called senior seminar, and it basically made me realize that my passion was not TV, it wasn’t banking, it was music. Then I was like, what do I go to school for – I do all this stuff for – I started working in music.
Ten of my informants studied journalism in high school and/or college, but were discouraged from writing about music, at the time not seen as a serious or worthy pursuit. For Mike, moving into a music career meant giving up journalism:

I was kind of enamored by music and live music, got a job at the mall record store, worked there throughout high school whether temporary, in the summer, holidays, or full time. I went to college with designs to write about music. I was a journalism major, sociology minor. The school was pretty discouraging when it came to writing about music. They wanted to push me to writing about agriculture in the small city and then move into the big city and write for the Tribune. I was discouraged, but I got a job at a record store down there. By the time I finished school, I worked at three different record stores.

Also discouraged by his teachers, Lester was insistent on writing about music, so rather than giving up journalism or music he became a thorn in the side of his high school journalism teacher. He so frustrated and irritated his teacher with constant questions and comments in class that he was given free rein to write about whatever he liked. His teacher told him, “Stop coming to class. Go interview your hero in your chosen field. Write it up. You’ve got an A. Just spare me the aggravation.”

Based on these quotes, continued involvement in music beyond the teen years can require dedication, as it is often dismissed by parents and teachers as an unworthy pursuit that should not be taken seriously. Perhaps because parents or teachers had a typical teenage interest in music that faded with time, they did not understand how strongly these informants felt about it.

**Early Involvement in Formal Networks/Jobs**

Five informants’ early jobs in the industry were as record store clerks. Pat, Oliver, Tony, Erik, and Mike all worked at record stores in high school, college, or as first jobs out
of college. These were often the only jobs they were able to get without previous
personal connections, which they gained while working at the stores. Record stores
afforded them access to new music and the opportunity to build networks with other
music fans, and people either working in the industry, or with industry connections.
Though low-paying jobs, often minimum wage, they held some prestige among other
teens.

Because of the focus on music in youth culture, those lucky informants who
worked at record stores as teens acknowledged that working in these music hangouts
had a “cool” factor not present in other retail jobs. They talked about being excited
about all the music that surrounded them. Pat described his job at a record store as
“feeding [his] music jones” and that one of the perks was being close to a ticket outlet,
which afforded him the ability to get in line first for concert tickets, before the mall
opened.

It took Oliver a few tries to get a job at a popular Chicago Indie record shop, but
even considering the several months he had to wait, it was atypical for that store to hire
anyone without “knowing someone.” He found that working at a popular indie record
store after college opened up a whole community to him, and led him to his current job,
which he considers a dream job:

When I first moved to Chicago after college I got a job at the record store, X
Records. While I was working there, my co-workers would ask who I knew to get
the job, but for me it was just dumb luck. I dropped off a resume when I was
visiting Chicago a few months earlier and never heard back. I found out later that
the manager just threw out my resume. When I moved here, I dropped off
another resume and they called to ask me to do a trial day. But then the person
that was going to leave didn’t leave so I didn’t get in. A few months later they
called to ask me to do another trial day, and after that I was offered the job. So
working there I got involved in this community. People who worked there were in
bands, I’d talk to them, hang out with them, go to shows. They would ask me to
DJ at their shows.

Oliver was working at the record store when Cassandra, a former employee that
he’d befriended, came into the store with her husband, well-known recording engineer
Sam. Oliver was starstruck at first, “It was like watching a cartoon. I couldn’t believe I
was watching this guy shop where I worked. Since I was in high school I thought this
dude was THE dude, you know. He was just the coolest. And I get a job in a record store
in Chicago and there he was in front of me.” Cassandra called Oliver a few weeks later
to ask him if he wanted to manage Sam’s recording studio. He said that he couldn’t
believe that she was asking him, and still seemed thoroughly bewildered that he kept
falling “ass backwards” into jobs that others coveted. He went into the studio and spoke
to Sam, who talked to him about music, and then he spoke to the departing manager to
learn more about the job’s responsibilities. By the time he left that afternoon, Oliver had
been hired. No one else was interviewed.

Tony worked at a popular record store in his suburban hometown while
attending college. The store had been a hangout for him during high school, and he
became a fixture there, becoming friends with employees, long before he was hired.
Shortly after Tony began working there, the store opened a small all-ages performance
venue behind the store. Because Tony had coordinated and promoted shows himself
(though he was never a musician) and was well-known as an active participant in the
punk/indie subculture in the area, he was hired to book bands in addition to his record store duties. The experience and connections he made, even at a small suburban club, afforded him some name recognition when he moved to the city and pursued other jobs in the industry.

Record stores are no longer as numerous as they were when these informants worked in them, so that point of entry into the business is not as common as it would have been twenty or thirty years ago. Those that remain are often specialized, several of which cater to Indie rock fans. Oliver, the most recent record store clerk of my informants, worked at a store that, while carrying all sorts of music, was best known as a resource for finding Indie rock. Nearly everyone working there was in a band or involved in the music scene in some other way outside of the store. Therefore, it would be more likely that someone working at a specialty store, as opposed to the now-defunct mall shops, would continue their involvement in the music business.

Unlike in more formalized professions, there are very few written job descriptions in the indie music business, and a college degree is not a requirement. Just about half of my informants hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher, and less than a handful are doing work that directly relates to their education. Most notably are those whose work relates to music but are in formalized, degree-dependent professions (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010), such as attorney Mark and journalist Lester. However, in the last decade, educational institutions have begun offering degrees in music management with the promise of giving graduates an edge in finding coveted music
industry jobs. One of the most well-known is a Chicago art-focused college that has recently established an Arts, Entertainment, and Media Management degree program.

Three of my informants, Erik, David, and Winona attended this Chicago college for their music/entertainment business degree, and only Winona completed her degree. Each said that the only thing that they gained from the program was network contacts, and one other practical skill. For David, it was learning how to write a business plan, and for Winona and Erik it was basic accounting. Like Oliver’s experience at the record store, David said that nearly everyone in his program was some kind of musician,

I was already booking shows back then, so they all wanted to hang out with me, and right there I had a bunch of contacts. But it’s a bummer because now I’m sixty thousand dollars in debt just so I could meet a few people which I could have just done on my own because I was already interning at the promotions company.

The college prides itself on using industry personnel with “real world experience” to teach courses, but informants complained about the lack of teaching skills among the faculty. Erik said frankly, “I was paying all of this money to be taught by people who have no idea how to teach. One teacher I had would cancel class about half the time because he was out until six in the morning doing his job at a night club. I didn’t do my final project, but he didn’t know our names so I still got an A.” Erik said that it didn’t take him long after enrolling in that program to realize that everything they were covering he already knew from experience, and that the information shared was sometimes even inaccurate, so he dropped out within a year. It became clear through these conversations with informants that the music business program was largely
unhelpful for them because, as David states, “The club management class instructor was a guy who did nightclubs with bottle service and DJs. It’s completely different from Indie rock; it functions totally differently.”

Among those I spoke to in charge of hiring others, none felt that college degrees in music or entertainment were useful for learning about the industry in any practical way, even though three of my other informants taught courses in the very same program. Their motivation for doing so was to earn extra income, and for Lester it was his primary source of income. Surprisingly, none of the former students or faculty knew each other so I was unable to trace any networks gained through formal education among my informants. Based on my limited sample along with other studies that have been done on the music industry (Frenette 2013, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010), the professionalization of music industry jobs has thus far had little effect on the indie rock scene, and colleges are unprepared to teach courses on the industry that are applicable to the indie rock way of doing business. The only informant to claim differently, Patti said that while the education itself is not necessarily applicable to the work, having a college degree is standard. She explains that she was not able to afford college, but got into the business as a very young person in Austin, Texas and made connections that allowed her to develop her career.

It seems like here (in Chicago) they go to really expensive colleges and their folks help them and they intern and all that kinda stuff to get a foothold in the business. I grew up really, really poor so that was not an option for me. No one was going to pay $20,000 a year for me to go to college. I was able to make an impression on people and people gave me a chance. I don’t know that people could do that anymore. There may be small labels out there who are funky
enough that they’d hire someone without a degree, but they’re going to pay you eight dollars an hour.

Patti points out a socioeconomic class component to gaining entry into the business that was not necessarily present when she began, discussed further in chapter six. As one of the older informants with a few decades of experience, the professionalization of the industry was not a factor while she was coming up in the business. As an independent publicist, she hires interns who are college students, and may therefore be more aware of and actively involved in the internship system than others in my sample.

While the courses at colleges may not have been useful for my informants, those who attended did find some use for the experience through college radio stations and concert committees.

Bridget, Susan, Pat, and Simon worked as DJ their college radio stations, and believe that doing so helped them build networks. College radio, even from its early days in the 1920s (Waits 2010), is known for being ahead of the mainstream. These stations were early adopters of punk, new wave, and indie rock, and were often the only radio place where interested listeners could find this kind of music. Even the term "college rock" denotes music outside the mainstream.

Beyond letting students gain experience on FM radio or serving as a social club for students who aren’t into sports or Greek culture, college radio is still one of the easiest entry points into subcultures ignored by mainstream media. It provides college students and teenagers bored with the pop music that’s played everywhere else with a window into a secret and more honest world. It isn’t just for the young, though; college radio is for anybody bored by the artless sounds
and repetitive playlists of commercial radio. - (Martin, Garrett. “College Radio is Dying and we Need to Save it” Salon.com June 2, 2014)

Pat found his way into college radio DJing by starting out “doing the work no one else wanted to do.” While in college, Pat would hang around the station, offering to clean ashtrays and dump garbage in order to build connections with the DJs, which eventually led him to get a shift at the station, a process he repeated after graduating at another college station about one hundred miles away. To bring his favorite bands to his campus, he served on his university’s concert committee, building connections with agents and peers at other universities, and learning the finer points of the paperwork involved in booking and holding concerts. He said that he maintains those connections and still uses many of the skills he learned then, signing off on every contract that comes through the Cabaret’s office. Pat also found access to the new musical genres while interning at radio stations in college. He would investigate particular record labels based on which records he already liked. His independence and confidence in his taste is apparent:

Anything that came out on Sire, they’d send two, three copies and I’d say, “Hey can I have a copy of this Talking Heads record? Or this Ramones record?” And [the DJs] would be like, “Sure, kid. We’re going to be playing Journey over here. I don’t know what you want that stuff for. That stuff’s junk. That stuff’s not gonna last.” And I’d be like, “well I kinda like it.”

In telling me about this, Pat is making clear that not only was he aware of punk and new wave early on, but that he preferred it to the mainstream music of the time. Through this and other anecdotes, it’s clear that his knowledge of music and connections with musicians are points of pride for him. He was quick to give names of
bands that he has dealt with, particularly if he believes he had a hand in their success.

Pat tells many stories about the various bands he’s “helped to succeed” over thirty years.

The very first concert Pat booked himself in Chicago came about because he met the band R.E.M. during a gig in New York, and gave their manager his phone number saying that he would like to book them if they want to come to Chicago. At the time, Pat didn’t have a venue for a show at all. When the manager did call him asking to play in Chicago, Pat agreed and set about finding a place to rent. The concert happened, and though he made no profit and relied heavily on friends to staff the event, he was proud to bring this new kind of music to Chicago. Pat believes that without his help, this small band with a small following in what was then called “college rock” would not have come to Chicago, at least on that tour.

Aside from college degrees designed to prepare students for a career in music administration, formal internship programs existed, though rarely found among my sample. Because the industry relies so heavily on informal networks, interning is a way to make contacts in the same way that one would working at record stores or in college radio. Like other culture industries, the music industry in general has a surplus of potential workers from which to draw (Becker 1982), and it is no less true now than it was when Becker showed it in the 1980s. There is a large pool of interns in the music industry, the majority of whom never gain paid employment in the industry (Hesmondhalgh & Baker: 2008, 2011). In his 2013 study of music industry interns,
Frenette showed varying opportunities, and that “most music industry internships do not lead to paid employment” (Frenette 2013: 365). Frenette focused on mainstream music and large corporations, and according to my informants, Indie rock does not function the same way. However, the limited opportunities for paid employment appear to be similar in all music genres and scenes.

Despite the fact that interning was not a major part of the experience of my sample, Patti said that interning is important because:

> Without that you’re just a name on a resume. You don’t have the contacts that interning gives you. If interns are good and bust their ass for me, I’ll help them find jobs. I will utilize my network to help them find a job if they work hard for me. I don’t know if everybody does that, but I really, really make an effort.

Of those informants who had been interns, most were on the younger end of my sample. For those in their mid-thirties and older, interning was not as common when they came up as it is currently. Frenette notes that internships in all industries are becoming more commonplace: “In 2008, 50% of B.A. graduates had taken part in an internship program. In 1992, only 17% had” (Greenhouse 2010 in Frenette 2013: 365-6).

Of those who had interned, only three, Bridget, Mark, and George, ended up being hired by that company as regular employees. As mentioned above, this may be an indication of the increasing formalization of the industry in general, even down to small indie businesses.

Bridget was the only informant to be involved in a formal internship program through her university and is one of the few lucky ones to be hired in after her internship ended. Like her boss Pat, she was involved in her college radio station and
through her work there, Bridget was offered the internship that lead to her now-fourteen year tenure at The Cabaret:

One of the things I was very involved with [in college] was the campus radio station. I DJ’d, and I was the promotions director, which meant that I would call venues to see if we could get free tickets, and all that. And through that, I got to know a lot of people in the jobs I do now. But even then I didn’t realize that it was, like, a career path. And then one day, Zack, the guy who had the job I do now, asked if I would be interested in interning for the summer. I hadn’t even thought of it and didn’t realize they even had internships, so I was like ‘oh sure.’ So I interned for about a year and a half, and then I graduated and worked there part time that summer.

There is a social class component to unpaid internship programs, particularly those that are part of a formal program for college credit. In addition to being able to afford college, interns are workers who are able to work for free in hopes of eventually gaining paid employment in the industry. While many informants hold college degrees and come from middle class backgrounds, there are a few with only high school educations who worked in low paying, low status positions in lieu of internships. I explore the components of social class, along with race and gender in the music business in chapter six.

Aside from university-backed internships, there are many small companies that use interns. George got his start as an intern at The Cabaret’s sister club, Borderline, but his internship was hard won. After graduating college, he saw an announcement for internship openings at The Cabaret, a venue he’d always admired. He tells the story of emailing per the instructions on the website and never getting any response. He says, “I knew I wanted to work at The Cabaret, so I pretty much begged for an internship for
two years. Now I know that’s just how they work. They have a notice on the website, but they don’t do anything with it. I’ve never heard of anyone getting in there that way.”

George was eventually hired as an intern, but at Borderline, rather than The Cabaret. He was later hired as a regular employee and stayed there for ten years before leaving to take a job with a large concert promotions company, Worldwide Events. George’s begging method eventually paid off, but others gained access through friends who were working there at the time.

Promotions companies, who organize and promote concerts, and record labels, who distribute music to stores and increasingly sell it online, rely heavily on intern labor. Promo Pros, a two-employee company that has been in business for 15 years, came up over and over again during my interviews. Seven of my informants were interns or employees for Promo Pros at one time or another. Because I used snowball sampling, every person I interviewed knew at least one other person that I spoke to, and the former Promo Pros interns all came in the same cluster. It gave me the impression that Promo Pros ran through interns quickly, until Erik explain to me that the owner of the business uses seven to ten interns at once:

His whole company is run by unpaid labor. He breaks down the responsibilities to small details so no one person other than him can get the whole picture. He wants you to learn just enough to help him, but not enough to branch out on your own. It’s messed up because the better you are at your job, the less he is willing to let you do because he’s afraid you’ll go out and compete against him.

Nevertheless, each informant that worked with Promo Pros did indeed branch out on his (they were all men) own, and talked about how they function very differently
from their former boss. They describe him as paranoid and difficult to work with, and say that what they learned from their time at Promo Pros was actually how they did not want to do business. More about how reputation and credibility function in the industry is discussed in the next chapter.

Revealing the attitude that many employers have about interns, and what may help to explain why more of them don’t gain paid employment where they intern, I asked Mike, who has two to three interns at a time, if he would hire them as employees to replace him if he left his current job as talent buyer, and he said that he wouldn’t, say that “there are people at other companies that I would bring in.” While interns are valuable as labor, especially for companies with thin profit margins, they are not necessarily taken seriously as job candidates, which could explain why so few informants were hired at the companies where they interned. They do, however, gain contacts and experience which is essential to being hired somewhere else.

**Informal Networks and Subculture**

This project seeks to understand the music industry in Chicago as what Weiss (2004: 19) refers to as “a loose collectivity.” Most informants are acquainted, but not necessarily as closely linked as if they all worked for the same company or organization. Rather, the business is composed of a network of cooperative occupations (Becker 1982). Further to that, all but a few informants referred to the subculture of Indie Rock as a community, which includes those who have jobs in the industry as well as those who do not. Because it is a relatively small subculture, one would often see the same
people at concerts and at bars frequented by members of the subculture. I witnessed this at a bar next door to The Cabaret after a concert featuring a reunion show of a favorite local punk band that was particularly active in the late 1980s. Cabaret employees and concert attendees were acquainted socially long before that night. They all came from the same social networks, and many have known each other for more than twenty years based only on having attended the same concerts beginning in their teens. I have not been active in the subculture as an adult, yet that night I looked around to see familiar (but older) faces that I had seen weekend after weekend as a teenager.

Though there is some variation in the channels and methods to finding paid employment in the music industry, none of the workers I spoke to were hired by answering a job advertisement, though as George explained, there was a notice posted on Borderline’s website that was seemingly ignored by the hiring personnel. Workers tell stories about being approached to intern or invited to apply for jobs. The application process was often nothing more than a short chat. Those who did the hiring relied heavily on the recommendations of current employees and/or claimed they had “a feeling” about a job candidate, rather than the candidate’s resume, if they even had one (very few of my informants actually had resumes at all). Promo Pros did bring in some unpaid interns without personal contacts, allowing people to come in and interview after phone calls or emails. All of the former Promo Pros interns I spoke to already had experience in putting together concerts before gaining the internship, usually in their
small hometowns as teenagers. They sought an internship with Promo Pros because they knew of the company by being involved in the subculture, rather than seeing a help wanted ad or through a college internship office.

Pat has owned The Cabaret for more than 30 years and talks about the early days at his club, when he would ask his friends to help out in various positions, for little or no money. He said when the club first opened it was staffed entirely by his friends. Pat recalls how he hired a talent buyer, a coveted and influential position, simply because a club owner in another city called directly to recommend him:

One guy came from Streetside, the club in Minneapolis. He was in love with some girl; he was moving to Chicago to be with her. I get a call from the owner of Streetside and he says, “My guy’s moving to Chicago. You’ve gotta hire him.” And I was like, “You’re right. I should.” I had a job on the spot for him.

The recording engineer I spoke to, Sam, is almost always hired by bands (that is, bands book studio time at Sam’s studio specifically to work with Sam as opposed to the other recording engineers) who have never met or spoken to him, but know his reputation. Similarly, Sam hires his employees and interns through friends both inside and outside of the music business, as he did when hiring Oliver.

Like Oliver, George, and Chuck, informants all said that they were well familiar with their employers long before they were employees. The Cabaret was mentioned by nearly everyone I spoke to as iconic for indie rock in Chicago, and everyone had been there multiple times, even if they had a poor opinion of the venue and/or Pat. Those from the Chicago area reflected on attending concerts there as teens and young adults, expressing that they thought it would be cool to work there and like George, pursued a
job there for years before getting in. Chuck, the box office manager at the Cabaret, was a regular fixture at the club from his early teens, as were Kim and Bridget.

Katie, a talent buyer who had recently been promoted from talent buyer’s assistant at The Cabaret, hired her friend Jim to take her old position. She said they had been close friends for years and worked together informally promoting parties, so when she needed to find someone to replace her, he was a “natural choice.” When I spoke to Jim, he said that it was his understanding that she “knew what she was getting” from him. Katie had been hired as the assistant a year before, when the man who was the buyer at the time decided he was going to leave the company to pursue a job as a talent agent. He’d known Katie as a DJ, and worked under her at a record label before she (though it turns out, only briefly) took a job outside of music. He also knew her as a regular at the club, and called to offer her the position without a job posting, interview, or application process. She mentioned again during our interview why she was hired: “I have this job because I have the industry stuff (her background in DJing, party promotion, and record label jobs), but I’m also Cabaret super fan. I’ve been coming here for 15 years, been here every weekend.” She trained with him as his assistant for that entire year, and when he left, she moved up and hired Jim as her own assistant.

Katie’s boss Pat told me that this is how it works. He said, “I hire from within. The box office guy might want to be a buyer someday so I hire him in as an assistant buyer, um, I haven’t actually had to have an open call for a buyer for maybe, I think for 20 years. I mean, I sort of, I find the right assistant and then that person eventually moves
up.” Considering that several of Pat’s employees have been with him for more than a
decade, it can be a long road to travel. It’s notable that Pat thinks of this process as
“hiring from within” rather than as an apprenticeship program that it seems to
resemble. We could also take this statement further, because it is just as true that Pat
hires from within particular informal networks.

Chuck was another regular at The Cabaret during his teen years. Attending shows
nearly every weekend, he became friendly with the employees, who referred to him as
“Little Chuck.” At 18 Pat hired him to help out around the club doing a variety of jobs.
Sometimes he worked the coat check, other times he stood at the door checking tickets.
He left after a few years to take a job in retail, but continued to hang around, frequently
attended shows at The Cabaret, and remained friendly with the employees. About a
year after leaving The Cabaret, Chuck was attending a concert there when he was
approached by Pat, who asked him if he would be interested in coming back and taking
the box office manager’s position. As Chuck’s closest friend and ally at The Cabaret, Kim,
currently held that job, he said he felt torn knowing that she would be getting fired and
he would take her place. His feelings became less ambivalent later that evening when he
had an argument with Kim, which led him to let Pat know he was interested in her job.
Six weeks later Pat fired Kim and hired Chuck.

Most other informants were brought in by friends, often hired without
interviews. Some made appeals to their friends to “get [them] in,” and with the
exception of Chuck in the situation above, all of them said that they didn’t hesitate for a
moment when the opportunity came up. It’s common for employees to ask a new employee “who they knew that got them in,” in an attempt to trace networks and learn about alliances.

Kim said that it can be difficult for new promoters and clubs in Chicago because of the established network:

They're instrumental in setting up the Indie Rock Chicago network as we know it. But they also make it really difficult for anything to change. And when you get into the weirdness that is the relationship between all of these venues, radio stations, buyers, and promoters, like everybody that's not in that group is to some extent viewed as a usurper. Like, because like ‘who are these people making moves in our town without our consent?’

When Kim named who exactly she was speaking of, each one was a white man between the ages of 35 and 50, all active in the local industry since their teens or early twenties. Sal, a radio music show producer, said that he found it easy to work with the network of buyers, venues, and promoters in Chicago, and that it was always friendly:

I’ve worked with almost every major venue holder here. You name them. I’ve probably worked with them at some point. There is a very high level of camaraderie here where I can do an event at one venue and I won’t get any guff from the others. They may say we’d love you to do something here, but there’s never any infighting. If I need something from somebody at one place – I have a contact somewhere else, that person will help guide me to that other place. If I wanna do a big event that doesn’t work for that venue, they won’t try to jam it in there. They’ll say “why don’t you work with this person?” The level of camaraderie here is kind of a precedent. It’s a big city but very small circles.

Unlike Kim, who is a marketing person for a club that is outside of the group she refers to, Sal works for public radio, and events he might hold at venues would bring publicity, visibility, and people to the clubs he chooses, so it is to their advantage to help
him whenever possible. This could help account for the differences in how each perceives the established businesses and their owners.

**Gaining Expertise**

Less than half of my informants were currently playing in bands, but the majority of them had been at one time or another. Those who were not, Pat, Mike, Diane, Simon, and Maria, told me that working in the business was a way to be close to music without being musically talented. A few said that it was their early experiences as musicians that gave them some of the skills and knowledge that they now use at work. Kim was in a band starting early in high school, and in college had a job as a clerk in a box office for a large ticket broker. She was hired at the Cabaret after a close friend of hers recommended her for the job. She spoke to the manager of the club, and began working as security the following weekend.

I did a lot of management stuff for my band, business-wise and like just making sure that shit got done. Then promoting the shows; I would make the flyers, I would pass out the flyers, I would talk to other bands about doing shows with them. I’d set up the consignment deals with record stores to sell our tape. I set up the studio time. Stuff like that, management stuff. Then I worked at the ticket place (an outlet of a major ticket retailer), which isn’t the music business, but it gave me a lot of insight into some of that stuff. And then after I left that and I started doing security at The Cabaret.

Kim’s experience with her band gave her some knowledge about how the industry works, and though she wasn’t using it as security at The Cabaret, she has used it in other positions she held there as well as her current position as a marketing manager for a venue. Another former musician, Mark, found that the connections he gained in a
nationally touring punk band helped him find first an internship and then a paying position in the industry.

I went to school, kept playing in the band. We started recording and playing a lot, decided I wanted to get into the industry, so I got into a distributor as an intern at an indie label. I did that for a while, and got hired by the indie distributor. I worked there for maybe three or four years. Then I graduated college and got a job at another label.

Mark has since had a lot of jobs in the industry, and now holds three different jobs all in or related to music. He’s a manager at The Cabaret, an attorney representing bands, and teaches music industry law at a college. He says none of this would have been possible without the industry connections he made first as a musician, working at record labels, and later running his own label.

Patti began working at a bar to help with the family finances when she was 14. She said that growing up in Austin, Texas, she was around music all the time, but working at a bar that also held performances gave her a look into how shows come together. By 19 she was hired to handle publicity and assisting in talent buying for a major venue in Austin.

Recording engineer Sam is a musician who learned his trade by recording his own and friends’ bands. He was turned off by the overproduced sound of mainstream music, and carved out a place for himself as a sought-after record producer by appealing to other musicians who felt the same as he. He has never been a regular employee in the industry, but has been contracted as a recording engineer before opening his own studio.
Like Kim, David learned about booking by putting together shows for his own band. Informants usually learned about written contracts later in their careers, with the exception of those who worked on their college concert committees. Most deals were handshake or verbal agreements, and some attributed these as common due to the DIY ethos of punk/indie discussed in the next chapter.

The most common way industry workers gain expertise is by trial and error. Informants were often unaware that the job they were doing was an actual job that people did for money. Hundreds of miles apart and at different times, the stories of several informants were strikingly similar. At surprisingly early ages, these informants talk about “making it up as they go along” and not realizing they were “reinventing the wheel.” Like those in the old guard, they carved out a place for themselves where they saw a need. They wanted to see particular bands or have their own bands play, and figured out how to coordinate and promote shows. They had little to no guidance from experienced promoters, but learned by doing and making mistakes. David talks about trying to figure out how it works with the owner of the small all-ages club he booked as a teenager,

At that club in the suburbs, and I would be in the bathroom with the owner counting the door cash, and we’d be standing there like, “Okay, what do we do now? How much do we pay the bands? What are our expenses?” We had no idea what we were doing.

Tony said that for the first handful of shows he put together in his Chicago suburb, beginning when he was about 17, he didn’t know that he was supposed to make
any money, “We didn’t even think of that. We just wanted to have a show. Our philosophy was to pay all the expenses, and give the rest to the bands. I learned later that you have to keep some of the money to avoid paying out of pocket for flyers and stuff.”

One informant, Diane, actually opened an all-ages venue at the age of 14 in her small suburban town, citing a need for kids to have a place to see live music in a town that was devoid of activities for teenagers. She proposed to the town administrators that she use an abandoned warehouse space that was owned by the town for this purpose. Because she was too young to sign a lease, Diane’s father signed an agreement that they would rent the space for a dollar a year.

Like Tony, Diane didn’t think about making a profit:

There were no lights, so we had to do shows on Saturday afternoons. We had to get the plumbing and electrical up to code. When we finally held shows, we would charge four dollars a head, and set the capacity at 100. My dad would handle the door, collecting the money and keeping the count. We were always sold out, but every cent I made on the shows went to fixing up the space. I didn’t know I should be taking anything for myself from it. Bands played there for free because I’d ask them. I’d say, ‘I know you’re in town playing at such-and-such larger venue Saturday night. Could you come by and play a set for free for some kids in the afternoon?’ And they would! We had the Bosstones and Blind Melon right before they got huge.

Diane didn’t have anyone guiding her on how to put together concerts. She looked up band information in the liner notes of records (the internet was not a common tool yet) and called their record labels on the phone. Winona’s story was strikingly similar, though she was a decade later and in a bigger town 250 miles away from Diane, showing how little the Indie way of doing business seems to vary from
location to location. The biggest different between the two was that Winona, being a decade younger and later, was able to use the internet to contact bands and rent out venues. Both Diane and Winona earned reputations for their work among bands and agents, and their little all-ages shows began to cut into the business of the larger venues, and both were eventually contacted by those larger venues, and hired as talent buyers and promoters while still in high school. It was in those jobs that these young promoters learned about the standard practices in the business. Without having had built their reputation on their own, these opportunities would have been a practical impossibility.

Mike was 19 when he began booking shows in his southern college town with bands he wanted to see by asking a bar owner if he could book the bar’s unused performance space, giving the proprietor a cut of the cover charge. Like Pat, Mike carved out a literal space to alleviate his frustration with touring bands that would pass over his town due to lack of places to play.

This chapter shows that in order to make music your job as opposed to the hobby it is for many young people, early experiences are crucial. Careers in the music industry are built on networks gained as participants in the subculture that lead to paid and unpaid early jobs, such as in record stores or in college extracurricular activities. Informants gained expertise in a variety of ways, however many of their stories were similar. Along with unpaid internships, playing in bands and putting together shows as young people afforded informants valuable firsthand experience along with network
connections that helped them find other jobs in the industry. In the next chapter, I will explore more in-depth the Indie Rock/DIY ethic and practices shown above.
CHAPTER FOUR

CREDIBILITY

In the last chapter, I described how my informants got into the Indie rock industry. I showed that they go beyond a typical teenage fascination with music to making music the focus of their careers, and often their whole lives. I also showed how personal networks are the primary way that informants begin and progress in their careers, and that learning-by-doing is a common method.

In this chapter, I explore the different ways workers approach the business and how these approaches structure the industry and the careers of those within it. I will show how I classified informants’ orientation based on their answers and what others said about them. Closely connected to both the networks in the last chapter and the principles involved in the paths of this one, I explore how credibility and reputation contribute to Indie rock careers.

What is Indie Rock?

Indie rock as a genre is not necessarily audibly distinct from other genres. It is not a musical style that can be instantly picked out with a style of chord progression or drumming; it doesn’t have the distinct twang of country or bluegrass, or the vocal style of opera. Rather what distinguishes Indie rock is its ethos, which demands independent
control over one’s music, unmediated by any outside force. “The individual is able to envision an idea, produce it, and then distribute it to the public without intervention (Fonarow 2013: 52). As a close descendant of punk rock, the do-it-yourself ethos is a distinguishing and ever-present component in Indie Rock (Bennett 2001). Indeed, nearly every informant I spoke to used the term “DIY” at some point during the interview. As noted in the introduction, the terms Indie rock and punk were used almost interchangeably by informants.

There is no cut and dried answer that would define Indie rock to the satisfaction of each and every informant, let alone every industry worker. However, there are a few principles that were consistently mentioned, whether in a positive or negative way, which make clearer that Indie rock is at its core, an outsider identity. You are not one of the big guys; you are the little guy who is interested in expression through your art. Michael Azerrad’s 2001 book, Our Band Could Be Your Life, documents the early days of what he calls the American Indie Underground, explaining how it sprang from punk in attitude and distribution. Indie record labels, like punk labels, were often one-person operations unlike the giant corporate entities from which mainstream music came. Indie rock, it could be argued, is more akin to other indie media than it is to mainstream rock. Kaya Oakes’s 2009 book, Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture, draws together indie culture in several different media, including literature, crafting, and
comics. Oakes describes indie culture in cities around the United States, distinct by region but held together with the same principles.

Like other music genres, “authenticity” is an important factor for a musician. Richard Peterson explores how authenticity is performed in country music, which includes the backstory of a musician that is in line with the genre’s aesthetic (Peterson 1997). In Indie rock, non-musician industry workers as well are subject to questions of authenticity. Are they knowledgeable about music? Do their business practices reflect a clear priority of music over profit? Hebdige claimed that the punk youth style he studied in the UK could only be authentic expression as long as it remains undiscovered by the market (Hebdige 1979). But in this study, I speak to people following in that same tradition who make this expression their business. Therefore, simply by the practice of making it a business enterprise, it could be argued that any authenticity would be undermined. For the section on credibility within the subculture, and because so much of what I heard from informants was about authenticity, sometimes sounding as if it came from the mouth of Theodor Adorno himself, a neo-Marxist critical theory framework is useful for this chapter. Adorno and Horkheimer’s work on the Culture Industry (1944) claims that mass culture is supply-driven and standardized, designed to keep the masses content and passive, along with creating the false needs necessary to fuel capitalist growth. Adding Marcuse’s assertion in One Dimensional Man (1964) that countercultural movement is co-opted at such a quickening pace that truly resistant
movement cannot grow, and you have the very basics of punk/indie principles.

Combining this ideology with a capitalist enterprise is the source of many disagreements and differences in approach within my sample of informants.

There are plenty of debates about the origins of punk and its meaning and role, starting most notably with Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* in 1979, and responses to his claims. The class makeup of early punks is even debated; Hebdige claiming punk was a working class response to the socio-economic decline of Great Britain, and others, such as Clarke (1981) claiming it an “invention of middle class artists and fashion designers” (Clark 1981 in Bennett 2001: 66). For the purposes of this project, the origins of punk are not important; rather it is the philosophy, borne from the English working class or not, that is salient in this context.

A common refrain in Indie rock is the idea of “selling out” which is the idea that if musicians start to make a lot of money, they will change their sound for broader appeal. Therefore, it is not possible for a musician to make money and maintain authenticity. Likewise, businesses within the industry are treated with suspicion if they are particularly profitable. In the old record label system, with the network of publications (both DIY zines and more widely distributed magazines) and touring, it was possible for a small label to sell a lot of copies of a record. Now, with so much exposure on the internet, getting music out is easier, but selling it is harder. One music journalist recently published an article about licensing music for use in advertisements titled, “How Selling
Out Saved Indie Rock” (Hopper 2013). Hopper explains that because record sales and touring alone can no longer support most musicians, advertising has replaced album sales as their primary income source. This is a controversial issue in Indie rock. Some argue that musicians should be able to support themselves making music, and because the old ways no longer do that, licensing is an effective alternative to the old record label model. Others would argue that licensing one’s music to a corporate entity is “selling out” and the antithesis of Indie principles. The argument is that the very creation of the music is then altered to be marketable, created to be sold rather than to express, and that musicians will no longer produce music that expresses any controversial view for fear of not being able to sell it. This is the essence of the supply side Culture Industry as Horkheimer and Adorno explained it. In short, you cannot be an outsider while hawking mobile phones.

Because of its emphasis on authenticity, and the idea that anything authentic cannot be profitable, the subculture and the industry that comes out of it is one that is suspicious of wealth. It became clear that every person I spoke with was aware of this suspicion, because the variation in their responses indicated differences in how they justified and explained their respective high and low incomes. Though I chose not to speak to musicians as informants, these kinds of controversies reflect disagreements among my sample about the purpose of the business, which in turn informs their ethics and orientations.
Credibility and Reputation

Credibility is an important factor in any business, but according to my informants, in Indie Rock, “credibility is everything.” There were two ways that informants interpreted the question of what credibility is, and what would ruin it. One way was to connect credibility with honesty and reliability. Another interpretation of credibility is about subcultural capital; one’s authenticity and how closely those practices fit into the indie ethos.

The first way credibility is ruined is dishonesty in business practices such as stealing money by overcharging on expenses, underreporting the head count when a band was being paid a portion of the door, or not delivering on a promise. Mike said being “unfair to bands” would ruin his credibility, or “being shady with dealings with agents.” Losing this kind of credibility is how careers are ruined. Credibility is constantly being earned and lost. Showing how closely tied and well-aware industry people are of each other and the importance of their reputations, six different informants mentioned the same man, Richard, who they describe as being unethical in his dealings. After many years booking for a number of small venues, Richard lost his booking contracts and is now a talent buyer for a small suburban venue well outside of what informants considered important or even relevant. “He would charge a band $300 for janitorial and production, even though he shared that expense with the venue, so he was really only paying $150 and pocketing the other $150, things like that. His dirty dealing caught up
with him and finally everyone could see what he was up to,” said Erik, “so he got exiled
to the ‘burbs where no one has to deal with him. But seriously, he should have been out
15 years before that. But that’s what happens when you’re an asshole. Karma catches
up to you.” Richard no longer has credibility, which has all but ruined his career. He did
not respond to my requests to interview him.

Aside from dishonesty, the second way that informants interpreted questions
about credibility was how closely a business or an individual adheres to Indie principles,
and how much subcultural capital they may have. Being associated with anti-punk
principles, such as being closely associated with large corporations or consistently
booking mainstream bands, would have a negative effect on the reputation of that
person. Losing authenticity or indie credibility is not as damaging to one’s career,
because one can work in other genres of music without the second kind of credibility.
But without a reputation as an honest and ethical person, no amount of indie credibility
is going to save your job.

Selma tied credibility into honesty, reputation, and community in the quote
below when I asked her how her club gained credibility:

We are honest and if there was ever things like discrepancies with money, we
would always go in favor of the bands. One time we had a situation where our
capacity was decreased, and we thought ‘shit, what do we do now?’ We didn’t
have a guarantee or anything but we knew that the capacity decrease would
decrease what the band would get. So we (the owners) decided to put $800 in
the pot to start for the band, and then they’d get a portion of the door on top of
that. It’s a very small world, so bands all talk to each other.
We run the club just like it was our house. We offer them food, ask what they need. We welcome people, and the word got out, and bands like playing here. We have credibility because we are credible people. We don’t lie or cheat or steal. That’s just who we are. There are places where the door guy will steal. It’s all about the people. It’s the community.

By telling me they would go “in favor of the bands” Selma gives a guideline that aligns with the priority of music over money, reflecting indie principles, as well as honesty in business dealings. Pat’s employee Bridget reflected the Indie credibility issue when she said that the most damaging thing that could happen for The Cabaret’s credibility is “if the owner sold [the venue] to something like Worldwide Events, you know, that would destroy the credibility of the company I think. And it’s not as though he’s not asked every single week. He’s sort of holding that line.” Pat “holding that line” is about keeping the venue not only independently owned and operated, but Indie in that it is not associated with a large corporate entity that would likely not be as discerning about what kind of bands would play at The Cabaret.

When dealing with musicians who hold tightly to the punk/indie ethos, being a business person or even being perceived as one, can also cost someone actual business. There are bands that refuse to play clubs owned or booked by Worldwide Events. The venue where Kim works, Trackside, has a contract with Worldwide Events to book concerts there. The contract is not exclusive, however, so Kim is also able to bypass Worldwide Events and book shows or other events herself or with other promoters, as long as she informs Worldwide Events that she is “holding” the date for an event.
Trackside’s relationship with Worldwide Events has affected the Indie credibility that
Trackside previously had (DeRogatis 2012). Kim gives an example of a time that she had
to use her own personal credibility to save a show for her venue, while another
promoter tried to get the show by discrediting Kim’s Indie credentials. Below she
explains how she defended herself when a band’s agent wanted to move their show
elsewhere because the agent heard that Trackside was owned by Worldwide Events:

Listen, I understand their concern about not wanting Worldwide Events to make
any money off of them you know I get that, and I respect it. I had to promise
them that I do not work for Worldwide Events. Worldwide Events will not see a
penny from any of this and at one point told her, “I will swear on a stack of
Minor Threat records as high as the ceiling.” [An owner of a competing club] was
trying to get that show and started telling the agent that I was lying about not
working for Worldwide Events, and when I got the show anyway he started
badmouthing the band saying that they’d sold out because they were playing a
Worldwide Events room. You know, because he wasn’t going to see any money.
Luckily the mutual friend of mine when he spoke to the agent again he said,
“listen, if your band only wants to play for people based on ideological grounds,
then they should only be playing shows with Kim. Because [Kim] is this super
feminist, pro-queer, anti-capitalist socialist asshole.”

In an industry that relies so heavily on networks, both business and personal
credibility is of the utmost importance. In this quote, Kim shows that her personal
credibility won the show for her venue, and illustrates why employers would rather hire
her than someone they don’t know based on a resume and an interview. Her employers
knew of her reputation when she was brought in by the talent buyer than she worked
with during her time at The Cabaret. In this story, their decision to hire her paid off, and
the network system worked. Another way Kim showed her Indie credibility is by telling
the agent that she is willing to “swear on a stack of Minor Threat records.” Minor Threat was a punk band in the early 1980s, known for their vocal support of DIY principles and strong advocacy for an independent underground music scene (Azerrad 2001). By naming Minor Threat, Kim is using her subcultural capital to show that she understands the band’s priorities and fits into their ideology.

Classifying Informants

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) cite several discussions about the tensions and contradictions in the business of cultural production such as art vs. capital, and culture vs. commerce. These were tensions I found in this project as well, and relate back to the critical theory approach to understanding the dominant philosophy in the industry. The essence of these tensions can be explained by classifying informants according to their motivation, which determines how they approach their careers. Workers can be broken down into two groups, Music Capitalists and True Believers, based on these motivations and approaches, which show how informants negotiate a changing industry structure. These classifications are not meant to be absolute or mutually exclusive. All informants are both music people and business people by definition, because each person has a paying job in the music industry; otherwise I would not have invited them to participate in this study. However, there is a divide between the orientation of these participants that determines how they think about and go about their jobs and in the larger picture, their careers. When I was about a third of the way through my interviews, I started to
see patterns that indicated participants had different outlooks about the role of music in our culture and the most honorable way to pursue it, and that these patterns were a good indication of the path each has taken in their careers.

A lot of the business people really want to believe they are music focused, but they’re totally not. You can tell by how they do things. They don’t really understand each other, and they have problems with each other. –Erik

My classification of each informant is based on my overall impression during the course of the interview, as well as the questions I explore more deeply above. Because, as is the nature of snowball sampling, many informants know or work with other informants, I heard anecdotes shared in interviews that contributed to my assertion. Qualities I took into account were their enthusiasm and clear indications of excitement when talking about music in their own lives, and whether and how they spoke on the importance of music in our culture as a whole. I also took into account the kind of language that they used, if they believed the content of the music itself was part of a political or social outlook, and whether it had any effect on their own business practices. The different interpretations of the question of credibility discussed above also plays into the orientation and understanding of each person’s role, and therefore their path.

To get at the heart of the matter, one of the questions that I asked every informant was, “Do you consider yourself a music person or a business person?” and listened to them explain the reasons they think they are one or the other. I was trying to find out how they saw themselves and their roles in the industry, and this question
helped determine their orientation. Put another way, are they music-obsessed people who made their careers in the business because it was the best way to be involved with music, or are they entrepreneurs (or aspiring entrepreneurs) who happen to have become involved in the music business? No informant answered simply one or the other; they all expounded on their answers. However, the question was interpreted differently by different informants. Some interpreted the question of “music person versus business person” as asking about job competence and others as “musician-focused versus venue-focused.” The majority did interpret the question as I originally intended it, which was for each informant to explain their own personal priorities and motivations. Of course all interpretations are completely valid and important to the study, and are taken into account particularly when exploring the work itself.

When informants interpreted the question as being about competence, I would listen to their answers, prompt for any necessary follow-up, and then rephrase my original question in a way that would make clearer what I was really trying to find out. Altering the question to fit the jobs on the particular informant, I would ask some variant of, “Which more important to you: to have bands that you really like that maybe only have 100 people show up to see, or to have sold out shows with a band you don’t think is very good?” or “Tell me more about your motivation for getting into and staying in the business.”
The first interpretation, about competence, would prompt stories about experiences with people who didn’t handle business properly because they are musicians and not business people. Several informants seem to believe that artists cannot be competent in matters of business. To illustrate what it means to him for someone to be a “music person,” David told me about playing a gig with his band at a venue where the doorman left the bag of cash he collected at the door in plain view while he went into the mosh pit, resulting in it being stolen. Another music person he mentioned was a promoter who would regularly drink so much at the shows he put together that he was too drunk to settle when it was time to pay the bands. These stories show that David thought of “music people” as being focused on enjoying the show rather than doing their jobs.

But as I wrote above, the heart of the question is about from where one’s motivation comes, and those who interpreted it in this way talked about priorities as an indication of whether one was a music or business person. They described questions of authenticity. Within the genre and subculture of indie rock, to define oneself as a business person, as only a few did, is considered a fault because a business person is concerned with making money over producing or presenting a valuable cultural contribution. Though some informants, such as Mark, felt that “selling out” was no longer the cardinal sin it once was in indie rock, many others still held fast to the belief that profit was such a powerful and corrupting force that any successful musician must
have done something underhanded at some point in order to gain that stature. Even such profit-eschewing people as Sam are assumed by those who don’t personally know him to be very wealthy because he is well-known (when in reality he barely makes ends meet). Prioritizing profit over artistic expression is completely counter to the ethos of Indie rock.

Along with the “music person or business person” question posed above, another way I tried to understand the motivation of informants was to describe to them a scenario where they would be offered a well-paying job with benefits like health insurance working at a large, corporate music company. Generally, their responses would be positive if they were Music Capitalists and negative if they were True Believers. There were some exceptions and qualifiers, such as job security and unrealistically high salaries. Lower ranked workers especially, discussed below, had lots to say about this scenario.

No single one of these factors alone determined how I classified them, but they were usually consistent with one or the other orientation. I discovered that everyone I spoke to talked about Indie principles, so that couldn’t be the only criteria. For example, if an informant spoke extensively about art as an important cultural contribution and cited DIY guiding principles along with a disinterest in considerable profit, I would classify them as True Believers. One who discussed music purely as a business, showed
great interest in business expansion, and never discussed guiding principles would be someone I consider a Music Capitalist. However, few cases were that simple.

Brian, whom I met near the end of my series of interviews, actually brought up this idea unprompted:

You have two types of people in this business. You have the A group over here, who just want to hear and be a part of great music. Over there you have group B. They just want to make money and music just happens to be the way they do it. They really don’t understand each other, and it causes problems because their priorities are different. I’m in group A for sure. I only do the business stuff so I can keep the music going.

Brian’s categories are simpler than those I describe, but his basic assertion that there are two types of people is the impression I got over and over again during interviews. According to Brian’s definitions, group A is made up of True Believers, and group B are the Music Capitalists.

The Music Capitalists are focused on the business aspects of the industry. They enjoy music and may even be musicians themselves, but primarily think of themselves as business persons who work in the music industry, rather than music persons who got into the business to be involved in music. Music Capitalists anticipate being able to adapt and grow in the industry, and move into different positions according to the needs of the industry along with their need for personal advancement. They turn their interest in music into a career, and they generally earn more money.

I used to say music guy. But now I think I’m more of a business guy, and I hate it. Every time I look at a show, I’m like, I wonder how much those lights cost or how many people are in this room – I’m gonna say seven hundred. Then I’ll ask
people – I wonder how much tickets were – it probably cost this much. That’s all I think about now. I mean, there are shows that I truly love – and I don’t think about that – that I book. But there’s not a second I don’t think how can I make you money right now. I think I shifted. I used to be a music guy. I think I would say when I turned 28-29, I started being less of a music guy. I wish it was a little earlier that I changed that.

George “hates” that he’s a business guy. The quote illustrates that the business aspects of concerts detract from his enjoyment of them. Others, like David in the first chapter, finds it exciting to know the ins and outs of how shows are put together, and it adds to his enjoyment. George, as explained in the last chapter, was a moderately successful musician who worked very hard for years to get an internship at Borderline, where he ended up working as a talent buyer for more than a decade before accepting a position at Worldwide Events. He is well aware of his former boss Pat’s attitude about his current company, and does show a little bit of disappointment that Indie integrity and a good salary with benefits are incompatible with good Indie Rock. He stops short of saying that he “sold out” when he took the job at Worldwide Events, but he does acknowledge that others would say so. Yet his last sentence reflects that he wishes he’d have shifted to being more business-oriented earlier in his life so he could have gotten further along in his career and avoided putting in so many years in hopes of being promoted to chief talent buyer at The Cabaret. A few months after I spoke to George, I learned that Worldwide Events promoted him to chief talent buyer in a smaller Midwestern city where he is the biggest fish in the live concert pond. His acceptance of
this position shows that he is interested in career progress more than nurturing or being part of the Indie community in Chicago.

Mike told me he was “never a DIY guy. I was always the guy who enjoyed the music but was more into the business side of things. That’s what interested me.” Mike is well-known because he’s been the buyer for two smaller but prominent venues for fourteen years, and everyone who spoke about him regarded him as an ethical businessman. When I asked what else he might like to do, he said, “I’m comfortable right now, I like it here and I can come and go as I please. But if there’s ever a time I think I’m done here, maybe I’ll get together with some other people and make my own mark [by opening his own club], or I could run an agency or something. I’ve put feelers out there in case that happens.” Mike’s attitude about the music and preference for the business side, along with his possible future plans made him a clear Music Capitalist.

Mark is another musician-turned-businessman. He is not only a promoter, but he owns a talent management company, a small record label, a one-man law firm specializing in entertainment law, and teaches college courses on entertainment law. He helps bands license use of their music for advertising, television, and movies, as well as helping them incorporate. I was curious as to how a former punk rock musician negotiated the anti-corporate, anti-commerce ethos of punk with Indie Band, LLC.

ASv: How does the licensing stuff square with the indie principles?
Mark: It’s changed a lot. It used to be you were selling out if you were in a commercial or anything like that. Now I don’t know. The attitude has completely changed.

ASv: How did that change?

Mark: I think they view it as good exposure. Money – yeah, because record sales aren’t what they used to be. It’s something I think about a lot. I’m not sure exactly what changed it, but it’s not viewed as selling out anymore. It’s good exposure. I don’t have a good answer to that. It’s something I’m trying to figure out. I talk about it in my classes all the time. A lot of my students are college age now – don’t remember when it was selling out. I told them it used to be seen as a sell-out, and they don’t believe me.

It’s still entertainment, I guess, but a lot of corporate companies getting set up. That actually helps the bands. I’m setting up new business models for bands. Instead of like, “Hey, go sign to a label and then get dropped, and your life sucks.” I set up a new LLC, get private investors, doing copyright ownership, getting funding.

ASv: For a band?

Mark: Yeah. I do that with a lot of bands. It’s sort of the new business model that I’ve been working on. It’s been pretty successful with the bands we’ve done it with. You get private investors. You can bypass the labels. Then I have relationships from management and all that where I can get distribution. We raise money, get a distribution deal, hire a publicist, and go to town; instead of giving up all your rights to a label, you set up an LLC. It’s more of a partnership. We’re doing a lot more of that. We’re changing the way of a lot of the management.

Though licensing music and making bands into corporations would not fit into the Indie ethos, Mark believes that by circumventing the big business parts of the music industry, he is actually taking the power away from corporate interests and putting it into the hands of the artist. He believes that in legally protecting musicians as well as
helping them support themselves financially, he is actually prioritizing music. Mark’s approach is his strategy to survive in a changing business; a response to the tension of Indie and capitalism. Though this is a True Believer sentiment, I maintain that Mark is on the Music Capitalist path because he is adapting and growing in the industry based on its needs, rather than holding tight to a set of principles as the True Believer is. Mark’s strategy in a changing industry structure shows that it is more important to him that the music survive and he make a living in it than it is to uphold the Indie ethos. His negotiation of the changing industry also in turn changes the industry itself. Incorporating bands is his contribution to the corporatization of indie rock, in the most literal sense.

The concept of selling out is either redefined or rejected completely by the Music Capitalist, but not so for the True Believer. Kim explained the difference and conflicts between a True Believer and a Music Capitalist while discussing a Miles, a former co-worker who like George, left The Cabaret after many years of holding the coveted chief buyer position to work at Worldwide Events. Kim makes clear why she considers Miles a Music Capitalist, and illustrates the tension present between the two paths:

He's got really good relationships with agents. Because he'll book their shitty bands! But like, you know, he's made those shitty bands money. And he gets very irritated with the rest of our holier-than-thou attitudes, because he's just like 'this is a business. We do need to make money.' Which is why he's a good fit at Worldwide Events. Because Worldwide Events doesn't really give a shit about bands. They give a shit about bottom lines and money. I've seen the paperwork over there, and it's all spreadsheets, man. It's all bottom line. (emphasis mine)
Kim says here that Miles is focused on making money to the detriment of the music. She is clear that she believes he books bad bands because the shows will make money, and that he is defensive of his choices (she imitated his condescending tone) in the face of “holier-than-thou” (punk/Indie being the orthodoxy) attitudes that he believes contradict the purpose of a business. As a True Believer stuck in the Worker path, Kim disdains Miles’s and his employer’s primary concern with money. She is saying here that making money is inconsistent with good music. Kim is a True Believer.

To Pat, music means everything. He loves music like I do. We both feel that it is important to have good shows with great bands; that it means everything to some people because we are those people - people with large record collections that argue with other people with large record collections; that think there is something fundamentally important about music that must be encouraged and helped and protected. – Kim

The True Believer is the music-focused industry worker. While most workers got into the business because they wanted to be involved in music, True Believers profess guiding principles, usually based upon what they believe Indie rock (or in some cases they use the term “punk rock”) means. They talk extensively in philosophical terms about what the music means to them, and reflect their idealism by using words like “community” and “DIY.” It is impossible to separate the True Believer’s attitude from the punk/indie ethos, because they all cite it when they explain the difference between business-focused people and themselves. They believe that not only is it important to prioritize music over money, but there is nobility in doing so.
This is not to say that they aren’t ever successful in business (some are profitable, others skate the thin edge of financial ruin, and some just break even), but they do profess that the business end is secondary, in some cases expressing that they make financial decisions based on what will be good for the community overall – that is, booking a band that will bring in a lot of money that can then be used to fund more specialized, less profitable events. True Believers are emphatic about differentiating themselves from Music Capitalists and larger corporations. They express disdain for the Music Capitalists, and believe them to be unethical or mercenary. Venue owner Pat said frankly, “All these bigger companies, they’re into it for the money. They’re not into it for the music. We are about the music.”

True Believers aren’t necessarily focused on Indie Rock as the purest and most noble genre of music, but it is very common for them to use the language of punk/indie rock to describe what’s important to them and how they think about music and the music business. Several True Believers employed the term “DIY (Do It Yourself)” to describe their approach to the business and the nature of the bands and their shows. DIY, in various interviews, was used to describe a style as much as the process. It is unfiltered, minimally processed, a bit rough.

Pat used the term several times in his interview, “What I still love about music today and why I do what I do, is that it truly is do–it-yourself. It’s DIY. Indie equals that. You go to these tiny clubs like The Oasis on a Friday night, you’ll see young artists, young
musicians putting their hearts on that stage with little or no hype, little or no money.”

Bridget, Pat’s employee, said, “You would never get hired to work at my company unless you had that sort of DIY, independent spirit. Um, we talk about it all the time. It is really at the core of what we are about.” (emphasis mine)

That the Cabaret “talk[s] about it all the time” is not difficult to see, based on my interviews with the owner and four of his employees. At the same time, the Cabaret is the largest of the small Indie venues, and cannot even open the club without significant cost (electricity and HVAC, security people and bartenders, etc). Therefore, any show that is not anticipated to sell a certain number of tickets, in order to cover the costs, would not be booked. Exceptions may be made by Pat, who talks proudly about booking shows that lost money, but became more popular later and came back to the venue to play a show that made a considerable profit. He considers this evidence of his taste and that he is a good predictor of what is going to become popular.

Opinions about the predictive powers of Pat’s musical taste vary wildly among his employees and former employees. Katie and Jim, both newer employees, spoke in glowing terms about Pat, while Bridget, an employee of 14 years, and Kim, a former employee of eight years, were less reverent. Katie upheld Pat’s musical expertise when she said, “You can put on the deepest cut on earth, and Pat will know what it is. Every time. Absolutely.” A year before I spoke to Katie, Kim said, “Pat is a huge music fan, for sure, but he also likes to play like he knows more than he does. At The Cabaret, they
have like a giant open office space where there's like five or six desks, so Pat can hear whatever anybody else is listening to, and he'll be like ‘Oh, what's that?’ and later on, with others, he'll act like he found it. [laughing] He'll be like ‘Oh yeah, I've been bumping this for a while now.’” As a publicist, Bridget seemed to choose her words carefully, and during the interview never said Pat’s name or the name of the club, but there were some indications of dissatisfaction with the way Pat runs the business and treats employees, discussed below. Kim, on the other hand, was outwardly critical of him but pointed out his good qualities, as shown in the opening quote for this section.

Sam had very strong opinions about what punk was and is, and was much more articulate about what DIY means in practice, “Essentially what punk rock demanded of you is to be self-sufficient and provide your own avenues. For anything of interest, you had to provide your own way in. And anything you wanted to happen, you had to make happen yourself. I feel like I still do things that way.” Tony was just as enthusiastic, and even more explicit, “In order to be a community, everyone has to contribute. If you’re not doing something, you are a bullshit consumer. And passively consuming is the opposite of what punk is about.” The spirit of critical theory is strong in both Sam and Tony. Sam does not sign any contracts, relying purely on handshake deals:

I try to do business in the way that I try to do everything in my life – that is on a personal basis, taking responsibility and demanding responsibility from the people I deal with. I don’t use a lawyer. We don’t use contracts - none of the trappings of conventional business. When I make an agreement with somebody, that’s me as a person making an agreement with somebody as a person. It’s not me as a businessman obliging my business to fulfill some obligation and
satisfaction of the contract. It’s me saying “I, Sam, will do this for you” and me expecting that person to hold up his end of the bargain.

What is unusual about Sam’s business philosophy is that he is an established, globally recognized studio, yet does business the same way as the kids doing their DIY shows at the local VFW hall. This is key for understanding the subculture from which these workers come, and a major division between the True Believer and the Music Capitalist. While true believers will use contracts (Sam is one of very few established people that does not), the philosophy behind their use is notable for understanding motivations. By all accounts, Sam holds steadfast to his principles in all of his business dealings, inspiring both admiration in the subculture as well as some frustration from Oliver, who as the manager of the business, is responsible for balancing the finances. He said that one of his big issues is that,

Sam refuses to charge a cancellation fee when bands book time. We reserve that time for them, and if they don’t show up, we just have an empty studio and no income from it. When I bring it up to Sam, he just says, “We don’t charge for work we don’t do. That’s not punk rock.” (emphasis mine)

Though Oliver is on the True Believer end of the continuum, points like these give rise to tensions between his beliefs and his role as the manager of a business. These tensions arose in venues as well; Indie principles are not necessarily ideal for keeping a business afloat. However, Sam’s studio has been in operation for nearly twenty years, and though it only breaks even most months, his stature and reputation have yielded consistent bookings most of the time.
True Believers Selma and Allen got a few friends together and bought The Oasis, a bar that Selma’s father frequented, in the early ’90s. They wanted to preserve the down-to-earth atmosphere of the bar and get to see the kind of music they loved. The Cabaret’s capacity of 1,500 was too big for a lot of the indie musicians Selma and Allen favored, but The Oasis’s capacity of 150 guaranteed the kind of intimacy that they themselves wanted in a show. Selma and Allen both hold full time jobs in careers unrelated to the club, and say that they receive no income from owning the club. They say that the club’s income is just enough to cover its expenses, and that profit has never been their motive. “All of the stuff about running the business, we learned as we went along. That’s typical of the DIY/indie rock/punk rock milieu. We loved music, but we weren’t musicians. So we have a club.”

Allen and Selma argued about the mission of the club during their interview with me. Selma became frustrated with Allen for ignoring practical business policies in favor of what she called “ethereal ideas.” Allen said that his club is more like a community than a corporation, and that they argue constantly because a community is more democratic, and that their motivation has never been profit. Despite Selma’s displeasure with Allen’s idealistic and impractical approach to the business, she maintains that it’s not about making huge profits, because both have well-paying day jobs, rather it is about breaking even in order to keep the business afloat and maintain the club as a community gathering place. The Oasis often hosts non-concert events such
as poetry or comedy performances and even bingo games, which they believe contributes to making the club part of a community.

Selma and Allen have two silent partners, but Allen’s enthusiasm for music is reflected in what Anton, their talent buyer, told me about their attitude towards profit when I asked about how he makes decisions about what to book:

The owners absolutely want it to be my decision, they don’t care if the bar is empty, and there’s an amazing show going on for 10 people. Personally I can’t live with that. You know, I want great shows to happen. But if it’s a bar of full of 10 people, then the people that I know are hurting are my friends behind the bar getting tips.

Anton’s background was in comedy performance rather than music, but he understands the mission of The Oasis, as explained above. However, he is concerned about his co-workers losing money, showing the ability each person has to live by principle over practicality. Kim explains a similar attitude from the owners of the venue where she works, Trackside: “I can’t imagine any other business where the business loses $10,000 in a night and they would be like ‘yeah, but it was a fucking awesome show.’” As I will discuss in chapter six, there is also a class component to the attitude of the owners of Kim’s venue, as well as Selma and Allen’s. They have a comfort with the possibility of losing money that denotes ability to survive despite some failure.

Kim contrasts this attitude with the attitude of corporations who handle booking for large venues, “Worldwide Events is soulless. They see all music as a commodity. It’s a widget to them. Sure, they have people working there that don’t feel that way, but they
are straight bottom line.” Kim’s statement here is strongly reminiscent of Pat’s statement about the same corporation being “in it for the money.” Kim worked for Pat at The Cabaret for nearly a decade before he fired her. Both True Believers, Kim has what she calls “complicated feelings” about Pat and The Cabaret. She talks about feeling betrayed by Pat after so many years of being a dedicated and involved employee, even as she acknowledges his importance in the industry and in her career. She mocks his self-importance and his name-dropping, at one point referring to him as, “Mascot of Chicago Indie rock,” but says that he is a music fan and knows that deep down music is the reason Pat is in the business. She respects him as a True Believer, which is a common theme in my interviews. True Believers know who in the industry is among them, and even when there are conflicts, they appear to maintain respect for each other, as well as disdain for Music Capitalists. Kim thinks that large music corporations, run by Music Capitalists, are exploitative:

I have to sometimes work with powerhouse agencies like CAA or William Morris. I don’t believe that those people love music. I think they like prestige and money. They are looking to make millions of dollars on music, which is like a criminally undervalued commodity that everybody depends on.

Kim does refer to music as a commodity, but in the same breath talks about how “everyone depends on” it. To her, music is a necessity of life, not a way to make money. She went further with the idea that music is undervalued by saying that she sometimes thinks the industry should go on strike to show how important music is in people’s everyday lives, “No music on the radio, in stores, on television, nowhere. Maybe people
will start to realize how important it is.” Though it is about value of a product, Kim’s regard for the importance of music is very much in the True Believer vein.

Lester, a music journalist, said that he is a music person for sure, but he was forced to learn the business side to make a living with a wife and child at home. He talked about incorporation and other business practices, but drew the line at sacrificing any integrity in order to make money. He explains how maintaining this integrity once cost him a coveted job at a huge national magazine, which may also illustrate the divide between the True Believer and the Music Capitalist. As a young journalist, he wrote a negative review that was pulled by the publisher. A newspaper reporter caught wind of this and asked Lester about it. Lester offhandedly commented that the publisher was only interested in promoting bands that would make him money, which got Lester fired. He balances his music focus with what he calls “real-world logic,” “It also costs money to create art, and it costs money to do journalism. I’m enough of a capitalist, that if you work really hard and you are talented and you devote your life to something, you should get paid.”

True Believers or Music Capitalists can fall anywhere in the hierarchy of positions in the industry, but those on the lower rungs of the business without significant influence or meaningful decision-making capability are usually Music Capitalists with a few exceptions. Their bosses, who could be oriented either way, rely on these workers to do support work. Pat relies on them to be aware of new music and operate with the
company mission statement in mind at the same time he provides smaller salaries, believing that there is a higher calling to their work. Sam relies on bands who want the prestige of Sam’s name and the punk rock ethos that goes along with it behind their recording. Without these lower-ranking True Believers, the more established True Believers would be unable to function as they do.

Workers in the lower rungs are generally younger people who no longer anticipate being in the business for their whole careers, however their motivations for wanting to get out are different based on their orientation. Though many are True Believers, there is a category of lower-ranking workers who are more business-oriented. These workers enjoy their jobs for now and may have been in it only a short time, but do not intend to stay in the business because they don’t believe they can make a career of it. Their attitude about the work is that it is a “fun” job that they can do as younger people before they get serious and have real careers. They do not have the ambition of the True Believers who have not moved up significantly enough to make what they consider an “adult” wage.

Chuck is an example of a lower-ranking Business Person. He likes his job and the perks that come along with it, but he doesn’t want to spend his whole career in the business. He spoke in disparaging terms about the older workers (security staff and ticket counters) at the club, “Like, it’s a badass job and all, but I don’t drink and I want to have a life outside The Cabaret. I do not want to be here at 35 years old, like those guys
who basically live here, still staying out and drinking every night. If there’s no show I want to see, I do my job and go home.” Chuck’s statement reflects earlier understandings of subcultures as youth-oriented, and considers anyone involved beyond what he considers an acceptable age to be, in the words of Davis, “stagnant punks” without anything “new or vital in their lives” (Davis 2006: 66). Notably, Chuck’s entry into the industry was through spending most of his nights at The Cabaret and becoming friends with many of the same workers he now criticizes. That he no longer considers it a place to hang out after hours shows that he is not interested in furthering his career in the industry.

Low-ranking True Believers intended to stay in the business, but have not been able to make it in the way the more successful True Believers have. It may be notable that these workers are more often women and non-gender conforming people. Also note that the salaries they earn are well below the average for people of their experience and education, which I discuss in the next chapter.

In every case that I found them, True Believers in lower positions worked for True Believers, which may be in part may be the source of their disillusionment with the industry. Though not all True Believers are disillusioned by their bosses specifically (some are), the ideals of their bosses may translate into lower pay for his employees. True Believer Pat, according to some of his employees and former employees, thinks of working at The Cabaret as something of a privilege, and that his employees gladly settle
for lower pay because they are doing better events. Some commented that he becomes belittling or dismissive about employees who leave for corporate jobs because they can make more money. Though he didn’t say that explicitly in my conversation with him, the following quote illustrates that underlying attitude,

I think the people that work at Cabaret, they understand the mission statement. We have an environment that’s not corporate. They can make more money working for Jam, working for C3, working for Worldwide Events. But then, you’re working on the Ice Capades one week, you’re working on Justin Timberlake the next week. Then maybe one day you might get to work on Queens of the Stone Age. Might. So where you wanna be?

Yet Pat’s employees and former employees talk about needing to get out of the business because they don’t make the kind of salary that can maintain an adult lifestyle, now that free drinks and concert tickets no longer hold the kind of appeal that they once did. By the time workers get to their mid-thirties, their thinking seems to shift, particularly if they have lots of social ties outside the business. They see others their age buying condos or having children, and talk about how they just couldn’t support those kinds of lifestyles on what they make. Pat’s current longest-term employee Bridget said to me, “It’s not really possible to have the job that we do, to have a family. So I think that when people start to get to the age where they get married, want to have a family or buy a house or those sort of long term life goals, they have to leave the music business altogether.” Kim echoed this sentiment when she said she thinks she’s going to have to leave the business soon, “Only because I’m 36 and I have no health insurance
and I make very little money. And unless you reach a certain level of success in this section of the music business, I don't know what happens.”

This is where the True Believer becomes disillusioned, and also where Davis’s (2006) claims that punk must be considered a scene rather than a subculture come into play. I used their general demeanor about their jobs to determine how disillusioned they were. Katie spoke in glowing terms about going to work, “This is the first job that I’ve ever loved. I love my job. I never feel like ‘Oh, God. I have to go to work.’ I never have that feeling.” But Kim put emphasis on the problems involved with it. Careers that get past this age are either those of True Believers who have carved out a niche for themselves or of Music Capitalists who will do some work that True Believers might reject as selling out. However, there are sometimes very few choices for workers who have spent their entire adult lives working in the music business.

I don’t even know what else I would do. Like, when I lost my job, trying to figure, like I’ve got a ton of skills. But it’s really difficult to make that translate out of the music business, you know. But I like rock and roll, and I can’t imagine doing anything else. If I did anything else, I would be taking like the time out of life to go back to school. Like, and I would like have to go get everything. Like, I’d have to go get the first degree, and then the second degree. And I just don’t like see myself doing that. - Kim

This is going to be sort of depressing, but I don’t think my dream job really exists anymore in music. I just don’t think it’s possible probably to be in your thirties and make a decent living in music unless you are somebody who will inherent a club or something. Which, there will be a few people who will do that. Actually, my boss’ kids have started coming in over the summer to learn about the club. – Bridget
Kim and Bridget both started out as optimists and idealists about careers in Indie rock. Through each of their more than ten years in the industry, they have learned that it may not be possible for them to continue, and a large part of that is because they are unwilling to give up credibility to be successful, but lack the advantages that a True Believer like Pat had starting out.

I spoke to Tony, who had left the business by the time of our interview. Despite my intention to speak only to current industry workers, so many informants mentioned his name with regard to the shock they felt at his leaving the business that I felt it important to hear what he had to say about it, from the perspective of one who is no longer involved. At the age of 32, Tony left his comfortable and Indie-prestigious job as a talent buyer to become a middle school English teacher. He said,

By the end I was making about fifty grand a year, which was a great salary, but where could I go from there? I was never going to afford my own club, and I wouldn’t want to deal with all the shit that comes along with that anyway. I couldn’t imagine being fifty years old and still trying to keep up with what the cool kids are listening to. I didn’t want to actually become that old guy at shows who doesn’t realize just how not cool he really is, who is hanging onto his youth like a security blanket.

Unlike Bridget and Kim, Tony had a higher-ranking job, but like them, he knew that there was very little future for him in the business as he got older. Additionally, Tony’s concern about being “that old guy” is not hard to understand if one looks at Indie as a youth subculture. However, as discussed by Davis (2006) and Bennett (2006), it is possible to maintain a presence in the subculture (or scene) as one ages, often as a
respected authority. In the Chicago Indie rock subculture, certain musicians or longtime subculture participants are regarded as “Elder Statesmen” who tell stories of How it Used to Be, complete with accounts of long-gone dingy clubs and quirky record shops in what is now the tony Lincoln Park neighborhood (Regressive Films 2007).

The issues that these disillusioned workers discuss will be explored further in the next chapter on the gender and class components of industry attrition. Based on my sample, it seems that True Believers who become disillusioned are often women, who appear to have a more difficult time moving up in the business than do men.

What is most salient in these paths is how the industry functions along with them. One cannot tell a Music Capitalist from a True Believer based on just looking at them. In some cases, an individual can so tightly straddle two outlooks that different people can come up with different answers based on their own interpretation of the criteria. For some, selling themselves as a True Believer is important to their self-identity and their business, such as in the case of Pat. There are only a handful of True Believers, and classifying these was complicated by the fact that all informants knew how to talk about indie music and the industry to maintain their authenticity. The DIY script is well-worn and not difficult to espouse. An argument could be made for a certain degree of cognitive dissonance on the part of Music Capitalists who would call themselves True Believers, because they speak the language, and may have had intentions like that, but instead found themselves in one orientation over the other, sometimes without even
knowing it. Pat espouses Indie principles, and even justifies paying his employees poorly in those terms, both that they are music martyrs and that he can provide “more jobs to the community” by paying lower salaries. Pat professes the Indie-appropriate disdain for corporate interests and their value system (“money over music”), but rarely refuses to sign off on a show that is projected to make money. Despite his practices not reflecting his preaching, I’ve classified him as a True Believer, but I’m sure that many others would argue that he is a Music Capitalist. The opposite case could be made against Mark being a Music Capitalist.

This chapter has shown how credibility is constructed, gained, and lost in Indie Rock, as well as how it structures the careers of those in the industry. Credibility can mean either honesty or adherence to Indie principles, or both. However, adherence to Indie principles and the priority of music or business determine an informants’ path as a Music Capitalist or a True Believer. Furthermore, those workers whose careers do not progress as well as they would like can become disillusioned with the business and consider leaving, despite their commitment to Indie principles. As laid out by the Frankfurt school, the realities of the business can conflict with the principles of the subculture.

In the next chapter, I will explore what the work itself is like. What kind of hours do informants work? What is their income like? What is their quality of life, and what kind of sacrifices may they have made to work in this industry?
CHAPTER FIVE

WORKING, SACRIFICING

This chapter explores the workers in the context of the job itself; what kind of hours informants work and where, along with their income and the relationships involved in their careers. Reflected in Bridget’s quote below, a central idea that informants shared was the tension between the rewards of their careers and the sacrifices they make to be involved in the music industry.

You know, when everybody gets out of college, they all want their dream job, right. And there are a lot of people that want to work in the music business and there are only a certain percentage of jobs. So if you have an opportunity to work in the music business you take it. And you work for a very low salary because you know that there are a hundred people lined up behind you. So I definitely, absolutely sacrificed financially, taking a salary that’s still much less than I could make elsewhere. But it was something I felt passionate about, I wanted to work in the music business, and if you’re going to do it, it’s best to do it when you’re young and right out of college. And working for a small, independently-owned company is important to me. So that was another thing about why I was willing to take a lower salary than I’d get at a big company somewhere because it’s important to me to support small businesses that are important to the city. The company I work for was a place where I came when I was a teenager myself, to come see bands. It was where I discovered a lot of bands. It was one of the few places where bands who were not corporately managed could play. It’s been sort of important to the history of music in Chicago, and so I felt like that was a place where I could be a part of something that was really special and really meant something, rather than just going somewhere and punching a clock. And that for me was something that was really important. - Bridget

“Pleasure in work (Donzelot 1991, Nixon and Crewe 2004) is closely linked to self-exploitation” (in Hesmondhalgh and Baker: 117). The music industry is “ripe for self-
exploitation. Many believe that it’s natural to make sacrifices to achieve recognition” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker: 227). This naturalization of sacrifice that Hesmondhalgh and Baker found in their research was evident among my informants when I asked them if they’d made particular sacrifices to work in this industry. Everyone named something that they felt they sacrificed, most commonly income, time, and relationships. While most had either little or no experience in other industries, they were familiar with the lives of family and friends who chose different careers.

**Place**

Informants worked in a variety of environments. Most worked in offices of venues or studios, or in home offices, and often both. Those who worked in offices with others around them dressed casually and spoke informally, listening to music all day. Informants describe appreciation for the casual atmosphere of their workplaces and not having to wear suits or deal with a corporate environment, whether or not they had ever worked in such an environment.

Pat believes that part of what makes his days good is the casual office setting, “I get out of bed in the morning and I look forward to going to the office. I look forward to seeing my staff and I think they still enjoy seeing me. We have an open office policy. Everyone gets to play music all day.” Katie commented on the atmosphere of the venue office as well, “We are little bit more relaxed about stuff. We don’t have a dress codes or anything like that here. I will drink a beer with my bosses.” Though I did not
specifically ask about the atmosphere, these workers chose to mention it as a positive aspect of the job.

Winona said that she loves her job as a production manager, largely for outdoor festivals. She gets to be outside and around live music, which she considers an ideal arrangement. When she is not on-site at a festival, which is only about May through September, she works out of her home office, occasionally going out for meetings. Seven others officially work from home, when not required to be on-site for concerts or meetings. Informants expressed their appreciation for the convenience of working from home, but agreed that it had its drawbacks, such as being able to enjoy leisure time at home. Winona and Patti both said that it was a blessing and a curse, using the adage, “when you work at home, you live at work.”

**Hours and Time**

Working from home, and working outside of standard hours was very common among informants. Hesmodhalgh and Baker note that creative industry workers share, “Three key aspects: workers needing to be flexible with their time; workers not getting paid commensurate to the hours actually worked; and workers having to take on second jobs to make ends meet” (Hesmodhalgh and Baker 2013: 116). Each of these three factors were certainly true of those to whom I spoke. Sixteen of my 26 informants have second jobs, but even those who do not are required to be flexible with work time and work some uncompensated hours. Another common characteristic of industry workers
was a blurring of boundaries between work and leisure, both with respect to time and location.

Informants walked me through a day at work. Work hours and duties varied from person to person, but one thing that all of them had in common was that no one had a standard 8 to 5 office schedule. Though many worked in offices most if not all day, no one officially started the work day before 10:00 a.m. Christine Williams, in her 2006 book *Inside Toyland*, expressed surprise upon learning that she would have to be more flexible with her hours that she expected, because schedules varied from week to week (Williams 2006). Flexibility for Indie Rock workers was expected as well, but unlike retail workers who are usually limited to store hours, publicists, agents, and venue personnel could not rely on working only during set times, and often worked late at night, early in the morning, and on holidays. Workers generally did work outside of their designated workplace, and outside of working hours.

Reflecting a common change in office work for many industries, they read and answered e-mails, often numbering in the hundreds, at all hours of the day. Jim said that his workday starts before he’s due to the office at 10:00 a.m., “I do the first Facebook posts from home, so I look through my things and post before I come to the office.” Below, Kim tells me the same thing.

Particularly those who worked in venues were often required to stay at work until late into the evening to be present for concerts, attending to the needs of performers or getting head counts for end-of-evening payout. Concerts generally don’t
begin until after 8:00 p.m., unless it’s an “all-ages” show, which legally has to conclude by 10:30 p.m. on weekends and 9:30 on weeknights to avoid conflicts with official city curfew of 11:00 p.m. on weekends and 10:00 on weeknights for those under age 16. Only two venues from which I drew informants ever held all-ages shows, and neither did so exclusively. Workers could therefore be called upon to be available or present until after midnight, particularly on weekends. Weekends are work time for all but a few informants, and there are seasons that are busier than others. Venues have more shows during the summer when bands do more touring on the increasing festival circuit. For those who need to be present during concerts, this can mean a far longer work week during the summer than during the winter.

Winona’s work as a production manager is largely seasonal. Her work managing all aspects of street festivals means that she does not have any weekends off from May through October, “In the winter I’m still busy with all the planning work for the summer. I like having more time to myself, but I really love my job, so I like my busy season. My friends all know that they won’t see me at all during the summer.” Winona clearly naturalizes her sacrifice and links her self-exploitation to pleasure in work, and is an example of Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s quote above about creative workers and self-exploitation. Likewise for Katie, who commented on working over the weekend but still needing to be at the office on Monday morning, “Sometimes I’m here all weekend, but for the most part I never feel like ‘Oh, no. It’s time to get up.’”
Given hours worked per week ranged from 30 for Kim to 120 for Diane. Some informants gave an average because they had inconsistent schedules based on time of year or in the case of Sam and Oliver, how booked up the studio was for a particular week. Oliver said that some weeks when there are very few bookings he’s there only a few hours a day to deal with the phone and the books, but, “when we’re booked up, I’m here whenever a band is here.” In addition to running the office, part of Oliver’s duties is attending to any needs musicians may have. The studio has a few sleeping rooms for visiting musicians, something Sam believed was important to provide for those who could not afford a hotel. However, Oliver has to let them in and get them settled. On the day I spoke to him, he said, “I’ll leave here at about 6:00, go home and have something to eat, and then I need to come back at midnight because a band has a late flight and I need to meet them here.”

Kim’s scheduled work hours, when she had to be at her desk in the venue office, were noon until 6:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, so she initially answered that she worked 30 hours per week. However, like Jim above, Kim answers emails and posts concert announcements on social media (both part of her regular duties) every day during “off” hours, spending at least a few hours every morning at home on such duties. When I asked her to factor those incidents into her weekly work hours, she said that it would add about 20 hours per week, bringing her total up to 50. Because she is salaried she doesn’t need to account for that time on a time sheet, so she hadn’t thought of it that way before. Like Jim and others who do work at home in addition to at the office,
she was neither surprised nor unhappy to realize that she put in far more hours than she  
originally thought.  

Diane’s 120 hours per week figure include her “day job” booking community arts  
and entertainment activities for a municipality, along with her duties as a booking agent  
for bands. She said she averages about six hours of sleep per night, and the other 18  
hours every day, including weekends, she is working. She did point out that not every  
minute of every 120 hours were spent working, but that she is always on call, “I  
sometimes get calls at two in the morning from one of my bands (for whom she is  
booking agent) at a gig on the west coast with a question or problem. I can never turn  
my phone off.” When I asked how she felt about these kinds of hours, she said, “I’ve  
ever known anything else. I’ve been working in this industry for all intents and  
purposes, since I was 13.”  

Diane expressed anxiety about her upcoming trip to Mexico, her first vacation in  
seven years. Though she could not realistically work more hours than she already does,  
she said that she is even busier and getting more done to compensate for the time she  
will be away. I asked her if she ever thought of bringing in help. “I suppose I could hire  
an assistant or have an intern, but I’m too much of a control freak to have anyone do  
anything under my name.” Diane dismisses her insistence of doing all of the work  
herself as a personality trait, but her attitude is in line with the way the industry works;  
your career is wholly dependent on your reputation. If she were to hire someone who  
made a bad enough mistake, it could cost her business.
Aside from Diane, many informants do not have others who can fill in for them in case of illness or vacation, so their workload will similarly increase before or after an absence. Kim is the only full time employee at the venue where she works. She is salaried and her vacation time is elastic, but being alone means that her workload increases significantly before and after her time off, because no one can fulfill her duties while she’s away. She recounted that she had to put in several hours during her last vacation, “I went away for just three days, over a weekend when I wouldn’t have been at work anyway, and I had almost constant urgent emails and no fewer than ten phone calls to handle. I was in the middle of a forest three hundred miles away, and I had to keep driving into town and finding WiFi to deal with work. It was barely a vacation.” She commented on her upcoming destination wedding, “It would not surprise me at all if I got a phone call in the middle of the ceremony asking me about some contract or something.”

George works 60-65 hours a week. “I’m supposed to be here at ten. I’m usually here at ten. Sometimes it’s like 10:15 or 9. When I came back from being gone last week, Monday and Tuesday I was here at 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. I went home, and I worked ‘till, like 2 a.m. ’cause I was just so backed up.” Though George works for a large entertainment corporation, everyone around him is just as busy as he is, and therefore could not take care of his work when he was away.

Even those few who have an assistant need to work extra time before and after an absence. Katie was getting ready to go to Germany for a DJing gig for ten days, “I’m
expected to get everything in order for my assistant to take care of things while I’m away. I’m supposed to have the club booked eight weeks out, but I’ve got it done through the next four months.”

Because of the work hours mentioned above along with the significant amount of time that workers spend networking during their off hours, they often mentioned time as a sacrifice they have made to be in the business. Being part of the subculture even before working in the industry meant that the kind of social events they attended were related to their work. They attended concerts in their free time, and frequented bars either within venues or nearby. A bar next door to The Cabaret was a frequent hangout for employees of the Cabaret, and networking and ideas for deals were often done in the bar. Kim explained that everyone knew that Cabaret employees hung out at that bar, and that having drinks there was “like businessmen playing golf. That’s where the real business gets done.” She explained that the combination business/social time has been beneficial to her career:

The more you go out and the more shows you’re at, it definitely benefits you a lot. The majority of headway I’ve made in my career is because I’m fun to get drunk with. I’m fun in bars. I mean, obviously I’ve been able to back my shit up soberly. But a lot of it has to do with somebody just had a good time with me in a bar and I said something really interesting.

Kim and Mark were the only two that explicitly expressed that just hanging out at bars was crucially important to their careers, though I showed in chapter 3 that going out and meeting people socially was key for most of my informants.
Income

Employers have a sense that “everyone wants to work for them” which leads employees to accept lower working standards (Hesmondhalgh and Baker: 116). Lower working standards in the cases of my informants included the kinds of hours discussed above, the often-mentioned low pay, and for many, personal relationships.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker’s finding was reflected in a statement from Kim, a former employee of Pat’s, who said that Pat “seemed surprised that he has to pay people at all. He thinks just being able to work there is cool enough that people should want to work for free.”

Pay is low because there is a massive “reservoir” (Miege 1989: 83) of labor. Perhaps Pat’s unspoken surprise at having to pay people at all is not unreasonable, because there is never a shortage of interns at The Cabaret, or anywhere else in the industry that uses them. The kind of perks workers get include free admission to most concerts, alcohol, and occasionally getting to meet musicians, depending on their position. The appeal of perks like this may diminish the longer the informant is in the business, or the older they get. Kim explains, “I get free beer at work. That's part of my deal. I get paid in beer. Which would be awesome if was 24 but I’m 36, so no thanks.”

While some were on a salary basis, others’ incomes were based on contracts. Agents like Diane receive a percentage of the income the bands collect from shows she books. Sam charges a flat fee for engineering a recording. Winona works on a
contractual basis for a company that runs outdoor street festivals, and is paid by the job. Promoters take a flat fee per show they organize, plus a small percentage of the door.

As I explained in the methods chapter, rather than asking informants for specific salary numbers and risking discomfort during the interview, I asked if they made “enough to support” themselves, following up with questions about their household, such as if they have roommates or live with partners. Only three informants lived alone at the time I spoke to them: Diane, Mark, and Kim. Diane bought a building some years back, and her housing expenses are covered by renting out the other two units of the building. Kim gets help with living expenses from her parents, and attorney Mark is able to afford his rent on his own. The rest shared living space and expenses with partners or roommates.

Bridget explains her income by what it allows her to do. “I mean, I would never be able to buy a house. I wouldn’t be able to rent a two bedroom apartment on my income. I haven’t been able to pay of my student loans, I couldn’t buy a car right now. So, like I can support myself, but I live very simply.” Because she shares expenses with her partner, the two incomes together allow them this simple living.

In terms of benefits, most workers have some kind of health insurance coverage, often through their spouse. Some employers provided it, but they are often high deductible plans that make actually getting health care still out of reach on workers’ incomes. Bridget, who is unmarried but lives with her partner, says that her coverage is fairly useless for regular visits, “I have health insurance through my job. It’s really, um,
poor health insurance. Like, pretty much catastrophic insurance. I don’t really use it, because my deductible is like $1500.”

George recalls a time when he worked for the same company as Bridget did, and was very ill, and how it motivated him to take a job with a larger company with more typical corporate benefits.

I got really sick. And I was out for a week. I had to get an antibiotic. It was $350.00. They paid it at Borderline, but I had to front the money. Then they’d pay it after, like, two months. I think I had to pay $500.00 that week for an inhaler and all this stuff. I was just havin’ a lot of problems. I was just sick. My glands were bulging out of my neck. Part of the reason I left Borderline is I didn’t have good insurance. I didn’t have dental. I didn’t have eye. I didn’t have any kinda legal. There’s no 401(k). There’s nothing. It’s just all me.

Though he has fewer than half a dozen employees, and despite often lean months, Sam provides insurance for them, and feels very strongly that all employers should:

I feel that’s a fundamental responsibility of an employer is to provide health insurance for his employees. I don’t think it’s the sort of thing you can palm off on people who are not making a whole lot of money. When people don’t have a lot of discretionary income, they tend not to choose to get insurance because it’s an immediate costs with no immediate benefit. I feel like it’s my obligation to cover that for everybody.

Sam’s attitude about health insurance was very much in line with his strong opinions on how one should do business, and his seemingly endless interest in sharing them. Oliver, who handles all of the accounts for the business, said that Sam has told him that payroll and insurance come before any other bills so that even in lean months, employees are taken care of. As mentioned in the last chapter, it is a frequent source of
frustration for Oliver to balance the books when Sam, again on principle, charges below industry standard pricing for his services and does not charge cancellation fees.

Second jobs are commonplace. Patti told me that, “People are so desperate to work in this industry that they wait tables during their off hours.” Though only one specifically waited tables and another tended bar, a second and sometimes third job was a reality for more than half of my informants. Aside from the long hours informants worked at their primary jobs, seventeen of them held other jobs in addition to those about which they spoke to me.

Allen and Selma are the only informants whose primary careers are not in music. Rather, they both have full time careers outside of owning their club. Lester, Mark, and Mike teach courses at the same art college, Anton helps runs a small but growing business making jewelry with his spouse, and Chuck takes on shifts as a waiter. Sam, the owner of the recording studio, also generates income by playing poker professionally and playing in a band, “Any one of the three things that I do would probably provide me a really meager living, but I don’t think it wouldn’t be stable enough for me to do anything normal, like buy a house or have a stable income. I would be living very hand-to-mouth.” Other informants do contracted work for various events, publications, or organizations. Bridget says this kind of work “has become a significant part” of her income. Additionally, nine informants are also in bands, some of whom tour nationally or internationally, though only a few derive appreciable income from playing music. Katie and Jim are both also professional DJs. Even club owner Pat said that he has other
sources of income, “I’m involved in several restaurants and some other bars. I do not have The Cabaret serve all of my financial needs. Could not be done.” Pat has a stay-at-home wife and two teenage children, so his expenses may be greater than other informants, and it is therefore possible that if he had a lifestyle more like his employees and the other informants, that he would be able to support himself on The Cabaret alone. However, as I explore in the following section, many informants have held off on some standard life events, such as having children, because of the circumstances of working in the industry.

**Relationships**

Because Indie rock is both an industry and a subculture, informants are often socially acquainted before being employed in the industry. In addition to the atmosphere of many informants’ workplaces, working with friends and others with similar interests are another perk of the job. However, personal relationships outside of work were often named by informants as a sacrifice they have had to make. Friendships, romantic relationships, and having children were named as sacrifices made to be employed in Indie Rock.

Katie said that her first marriage broke up when she moved to Chicago to work, and her ex-husband did not want to move, “I’d say the industry was 60-75% of the reason our marriage ended and that I’m 36 and have no children.” Katie married her second husband just a few weeks before our interview. He is a musician with a well-paying day job outside the industry that provides them both with health insurance.
Though she did not explicitly say that she was planning to have a child soon, her statement above implies that she expects to, and finds it worth mentioning that, at 36, she does not. She also mentioned that she met her current husband because of their mutual interest and involvement in music.

Five of the seven women I spoke to said that they have delayed having children because they don’t believe that it would be possible to keep their jobs with their long working hours and low pay and take care of children at the same time. None of the women I spoke to had children, but four of the seven expressed a desire to do so. Four of the men were fathers, and none of the childfree men expressed a desire to have children, or that they were holding off on doing so.

Mark said that he almost never dates anymore, and has very few romantic relationships, “If I hang out with a girl, she wants to go out. But then I run into somebody I should know, so I should be networking, and I end up ignoring her. So it’s hard to have social time because my social time is actually work time. So it’s hard to balance those.” Mark’s sense that he should be networking instead of dating, even while actually on a date, shows that his priority is work over his personal life.

Diane said that she works too much to date, “The reason I am single and the reason I have like three friends and they’re all in music is because I work all the time. I sleep three or four hours a night on a good night. It’s not sustainable, I know that.” Diane appears to accept her lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, as necessary to stay in the
industry at the same time she holds herself accountable for it. Like Mark, her priority is work over a social or romantic life.

Bridget lives with her romantic partner, and doesn’t have the problems with time that Mark and Diane talk about. Rather she believes that she could not move forward to the next step in her life due to her income, “It’s not really possible to have the job that we do, to have a family. So I think that when people start to get to the age where they get married, want to have a family or buy a house or those sort of long term life goals, they have to leave the music business altogether, I think.” She noted the last three employees to leave The Cabaret, all for better paying jobs: one with a large music corporation and the other two outside of the industry.

Bridget’s quote above uses non-gendered language, but my research shows that this applies to workers in lower prestige, lower pay jobs. There are men on staff who have children, though they are in higher-paying and more prestigious positions. As mentioned above, Pat has teenage children. However, Pat has been in the business for more than 30 years, so his children came after he had already owned The Cabaret for many years, and was earning enough to support his family on his income alone. Of my informants, only four had children. Along with Pat, Ray had one child with his wife (who he works with as co-producer). Mike and Lester have one child each, both living primarily with their ex-wives.

The kind of work that workers do in the Indie Rock industry is similar to other culture industries, though the usually small staffs can cause workload and hours to be
sometimes overwhelming for underpaid workers. However, the drive to be involved in
the industry and the pleasure they gain from their work leads to self-exploitation and
personal sacrifice.

In the next chapter, I will take an intersectional approach to understanding the
processes and patterns of the industry as they relate to workers’ social locations and
experiences.
CHAPTER SIX

GENDER, CLASS, RACE

The last three chapters explored how workers make careers in the industry, the paths they take, and the sacrifices they make to be in it. The final chapter examines the gender, class, and race of informants, paying attention to how they shape the experiences of workers and the work they do, using an intersectional approach.

Intersectionality is an analytical strategy that shows that social factors such as race, class, and gender are not one-dimensional weights added on to each individual’s burden, but rather each one changes how each other one affects opportunities, and none operate independently of another. In an intersectional study, the questions are critical, the methods are worker-focused, and the knowledge is generated by actual lived experiences.

Barbara Reskin noted that, “assignment of jobs based on workers’ sex, race, and ethnicity is one of the most enduring features of work in industrialized societies” (Reskin 2000: 707). Williams shows that work assignments in the retail stores she studied, “reproduce race and gender hierarchies through the social organization of the work” (Williams 2006: 51). Despite the ideals espoused by those within Indie rock, as examined in chapter four, the division of labor is typical of the American workforce as a whole. Jobs with better pay and more prestige are most often held by white men; women are
usually found in devalued, poorly paid positions, and there is a relative absence of people of color and those with working class backgrounds.

**Gender**

There have been studies of women in music as musicians, but very little on the make-up of the industry as a whole. Studies done on other culture industries, such as television, show an outflow mid-career, especially for women. Hesmondhalgh and Baker note that among television workers, “women were either very young and working at junior grades or otherwise were much older and in senior, executive positions.” (2013: 147) Because the Indie rock industry is not structured in quite the same way as a large corporate entity needed for television, I could not make a direct comparison, but a few informants indicated that it was similar for their industry.

In their 1978 book on popular music, Frith and McRobbie (1978) comment on its gendered character. “The music business is male-run; popular musicians, writers, creators, technicians, engineers, and producers are mostly men. Female creative roles are limited and mediated through male notions of female ability” (Frith and McRobbie 1978: 373). Though that quote is older than half of my informants, based upon my interviews it is still applicable.

Conventional wisdom, along with some research done on the music industry as a whole (though not on this particular area), is that most common job for women in the industry is in publicity. Calling it the “publicity ghetto,” Gaar describes a gender divide,
“Men outnumber women as rock journalists, but the reverse is true in the field of publicity work.” (Gaar 1992: 352). Like in other industries, these limited roles (LeBlanc 1999, Reskin 1993, Gaar 1992) that make up the “pink collar” of the Indie Rock industry are devalued and poorly paid (Burk 2005, Reskin 1988, Hochschild 1983).

Reflecting this research, informants told me that the highest paid positions - talent buyers, managers, and business owners - were most often men. Women were found in publicity, hospitality, and marketing, making up the “pink collar” of the business. Among my informants, there is only one female talent buyer and eight male. For business owners with employees there were five men and one woman. Some of the women who did multiple jobs may have incorporated as LLCs, but they had no employees. An example would be Patti, who is a freelance publicist. She is contracted to do publicity work for various record companies and festivals, but has no regular employees and works out of her home.

Every informant but Patti confirmed the presence of the pink collar. She claims that publicists are,

Not usually women. I have a spreadsheet of publicists from all over the world, and a third of the most prominent publicists are men. At least half of the independent firms are owned by men. There is this perception out there that publicists are women. That they are cute little girls or whatever, but I don’t think that’s reality.

Though very strongly stated and insistent that there was no gender stratification, Patti’s quote confirms that indeed women make up the clear majority of publicists at 2/3. Also telling is her inclusion of the term “prominent” and “owned by men.” This may
be indicative of a “glass escalator” (Williams 1992) for men in a female-dominated role, and men who own publicity firms usually have a mostly female staff. Patti is also speaking to the job on a global scale, which may or may not be reflected in the relatively small subsection that makes up Indie Rock in Chicago. Using the phrase “cute little girls” to describe the perception of her particular role in the industry, Patti is attempting to distance herself from what she believes the stereotype is.

The rest of the informants who commented on women and publicity were consistent. Publicist Bridget said,

Publicists are usually women. I mostly deal with either indie publicists or publicists at labels. I can only think of one or two that are men. Publicity is female-dominated. I think it’s because of the same reasons that there are women that are secretaries, you know. They’re lower paying jobs, they’re less prestigious, you make fewer decisions, you’re seen as sort of a support to the buyers, and so that’s unfortunately how that kinda shakes out.

Though Bridget points out the similarities to other pink collar jobs, she does not attempt to explain how or why they become women’s jobs. Sam agreed with Bridget that publicity is female-dominated and added his opinion on why this may be, which is in line with Frith and McRobbie’s assertion that women’s responsibilities are based on men’s notions of women’s ability.

Although I would say that publicity in general is a very female-dominated job, particularly in music, so most of the publicists for bands or record labels that you meet, you know, they’re overwhelmingly women. I have no idea why. I think the caricatures that people have of shyster businessmen are all male. They are all male shyster businessmen. I think it might be – women might be more effective as publicists because they are innately – in a patriarchal society, men tend to think of them as more credible in that position. In a business scenario, women are given credit for being genuine for some reason.
Sam first said that he didn’t know why publicity is female-dominated, then started to say something about innate qualities, but stopped himself and rephrased to make clear that he felt that it was “patriarchal society” that influenced men’s perceptions of women’s abilities and reinforced hegemonic gender roles. On the other hand, Mark had a more essentialist take on why there are far more women than men in publicity,

You have to be nicer. Women are better at being nicer from what I’ve noticed, better phone skills, communicate much better; even written. That’s a huge part when you’re trying to sell a brand or sell a story. I think they’re better at it.

Again we see men’s perceptions of women’s abilities helping to determine women’s roles. Mark said he asks women in the office to proofread his writing because “they are better at it”, so it would be unlikely that he would hire a man as a publicist.

Women being “nicer” also fits gendered expectations of behavior, such as Barrie Thorne found in her book *Gender Play* (1993). Girls are expected to be nice, boys are expected to be tough. Though Thorne’s subjects were schoolchildren learning to negotiate these expectations, in this industry it is clear that many of these ideas remain. Publicists are essentially salespersons, requiring pleasant interaction with people and sometimes a degree of finesse. Talent buyers, discussed below, are more like gatekeepers. They choose who will play, set terms and create contracts for performances, and occasionally compete for shows with other venues.
Patti’s denial of gender stratification in the business did not include everything, and explained that radio promotions are an exception to what she sees as a changing business with regard to gender. She explains,

Radio station promotions people are mostly men. That’s why if you’re a woman and you’re not hideous looking, you can get a lot done in radio. Because it’s made up of a lot of cheesy motherfuckers that are just gross and will do anything for you. Radio is like the cheesiest area of the music business. It’s like dudes in golf shirts with satin jackets. Commercial radio is the last bastion of the old school gross dude music business.

Radio promotions personnel interact mostly with publicists. Patti saying that being an attractive (“not hideous looking”) woman in that role is an advantage could explain why it would be feasible that publicity firms might be more likely to hire women for that job. If radio promotions men are apt to “do anything for” women, it would be wise to hire a woman, or according to Patti’s stereotype, a “cute little girl” publicist. She hints at changes she sees in the business by saying these men are the last of a dying breed.

Like women publicists, male talent buyers are the norm. No one I spoke to knew of a woman that was currently a talent buyer for an Indie Rock venue in Chicago. Some spoke of one woman who was a prominent buyer from a now-closed small venue in the 1980s and ‘90s who retired from the business to have children with her musician husband. This woman had been retired for more than a decade, but her name came up over and over again, as if to prove that it is possible. There were passing mentions of female talent buyers in other areas of music, but always as the exception.
Katie is a talent buyer, though she books only DJs for the club, and not bands for the venue. However, she has only been a buyer for a few months at the time of the interview and her predecessor was a man, so it is possible other informants were not aware that she had taken over the job. She said she didn’t know of any other talent buyers that were women, either for DJs or for bands. Wondering about the pool of candidates from which employers draw, I asked her if there were any women she knew of that were interested in buying:

Katie: I don’t think it’s even considered a possibility. It’s a certain personality type. Kind of this weird balance of calm and assertive – neither of which we culturally attach to women.

ASv: Do you think that’s a personality type that you have that allows you to be in this position?

Katie: Mm-hm. Maybe even more of both of those then many of my male counterparts.

ASv: Do you feel like you have to be more of that?

Katie: It’s a balance because you go too far certainly with the assertive piece and there’s a cultural thing there. You go too far, and there are probably penalties.

Like Sam, Katie was careful to say that the personality type needed for the job was not innate, but “culturally attached” to women. She also mentions gendered expectations of behavior, and “penalties” for going outside them by being “too assertive.” Acker refers to this as “enacting power” in an organization in the same way men do, which puts women at risk of being labeled as difficult or unpleasant (Acker 2006: 447).
Katie is tentative with her phrasing, saying that there are “probably penalties,” implying that Katie herself has not “gone too far;” Kim feels that she has. Kim expressed frustration at the different treatment she has experienced herself as well as what she has seen. As an intentionally and self-proclaimed masculine-presenting lesbian, she said that for a long time she thought she was an “honorary boys club member” and had been exempted from different treatment based on her gender. However, she believed that she would have “gotten further ahead” had she been a man, and that she was not included in the most salient informal networks. The penalties Katie mentions above manifest for Kim as being labeled, and feeling that her personality is judged more harshly as a woman, “I'm seen as being very gruff. I'm a 'real ballbuster.' But there are men far harsher than I am that are still respected. At most it'll be like, ‘oh, yeah, that one's a character.’” Though a commonly used expression, that Kim is labeled a “ballbuster” as opposed to saying she is “tough” or “aggressive” may imply that she is seen as difficult, particularly for men. These informants’ statements echo Kanter’s assertion that hegemonically masculine traits are assumed essential for certain jobs (Kanter 1977:22). No woman informant explicitly said that she changed her behavior explicitly to act more “like a man” in the way Jennifer Pierce found in her work on women attorneys (Pierce 1995). However, echoing the experiences of women in all kinds of situations where they are the minority, Kim mentioned that she would sometimes “grin and bear it” when workplace conversations turned blue or when co-workers used slurs (usually about women or homosexuals, and Kim is both), so as not to
be seen as a prude or difficult to get along with. Because The Cabaret had no employee handbook or formal procedures to address employee grievances like a larger corporation often does, she felt that the only way to deal with her discomfort was to keep quiet. Kim has to an extent resigned herself to the way things are in the business, and summed it up like this:

I can’t make the music business be feminist. I just can’t. I might as well ask them to all be flying goats, you know? It’s just as likely to happen, because rock ‘n’ roll has historically always been an incredibly sexist and kind of macho deal.

Like others above, Kim backs up Frith and McRobbie’s assertion that music is male dominated calling it “sexist and macho,” and conjures Patti’s description of the “old school gross music dude.” However, Patti became visibly agitated when talking about being a woman in the industry, expressing an opinion and experiences that, much like her thoughts on the gendered division of labor in the industry, contradict those of the other informants:

Some of these women harp on and on and on about sexism in this business. I feel that my mother fought that fight in the ‘70s. I have never, ever felt intimidated or put down or any of that shit. Maybe it’s because people perceive that I won’t tolerate it, but it does not happen to me. It rarely happens to my interns and when it does, I fucking go off. I have been marching around in miniskirts and cowboy boots for years. I’ve never had anyone touch me that I haven’t wanted to touch me, I’ve never been condescended to, so maybe every other female out there has that happen but me, or maybe they’re so fired up about their feminist beliefs that they’re kind of overplaying it. And I also am a feminist, obviously. I think if you’re female you have to be. It’s just not something I’ve encountered. When people say the music business is sexist and male-dominated, I say the whole world used to be. We’re all advancing. I call bullshit on the whole sexism thesis because I can come up with a million examples of women in lots of businesses. There are a lot more men astronauts, but there are some women, too. I don’t face any special challenges because I’m a
woman. Not at all. I think if you present yourself in a way that demands respect, you will get it. And if you’re not getting it, you better fucking find a way to get it.

From the above quote, it was clear that Patti felt that significant progress with respect to gender had been made since the time that Frith and McRobbie did their study. However, this quote taken along with her earlier one on how publicists are perceived show that being taken seriously is salient for the way she thinks of herself and her profession, and she sees both the stereotype of “cute little girls” as well as women who “harp on and on about sexism” (the word “harp” itself having a gendered connotation) as threats her credibility and her ability to be taken seriously and gain respect.

It may be useful to note that Patti, though both heterosexual and feminine-presenting in appearance (she wore makeup, mentions wearing miniskirts), had a presence not unlike Kim’s. Both women’s speech was absolute and at times aggressive, and littered with generous amounts of profanity, which I noticed while going through the transcripts; both Patti and Kim used far more profanity than any other informant. Patti’s statement along with her demeanor again suggest that she considers emphasized femininity as a threat to being taken seriously, despite her strong opposition to the idea that the industry is a gendered hierarchy. Patti named only two women in her interview: the first was a music journalist who often writes about sexism in the business, who she mentioned specifically with regard to women “who harp on about sexism.” The other woman Patti mentioned by name was Kim, for whom she said she had a lot of respect. Their opinions about gender in the music business, however, were worlds apart.
I hoped to follow up Patti’s response with a question about the occasions with her interns that caused her to “go off” along with a clarifying question about what she felt it meant to be a feminist, considering her statement that sexism was fought and won by her mother’s generation. However, she was clearly upset and I didn’t want to push her further and risk cutting the interview short or losing referrals for other interviews.

Like her assertion that publicity is not dominated by women (despite saying in the next breath that it was 2/3 women), Patti’s experiences were not reflected in the rest of my sample. Seen above, other men and women in my sample did see and/or experience sexism and gender segregation in the industry, and women especially were really interested in talking about gender at work. However, a small minority seemed to immediately tense up when I asked about gender breakdown at their workplace. When I asked Mike about the gender breakdown of his interns, he answered very quickly and tersely that it was equal. It was clear that no one wanted to be seen as sexist and the only gender stereotypes, other than Patti’s description of radio promotions men and harping women, were positive ones. However, even positive stereotypes, like good communications skills for women, can constrain workers by limiting them to gender-appropriate roles.

Winona’s position as a producer at street festivals means that all vendors and employees need to go through her for assignments and with any problems or questions. She says more often than not,
People come up to me and ask where the producer is, and when I tell them it’s me, they pause like they’re trying to figure out if they should believe me, and sometimes ask again. I know I’m young (25), and I’ve been dealing with this a long time since I got into the business really young, but sometimes it pisses me off that they think a young woman couldn’t be in charge.

Winona’s experiences show the expected gender order of the industry; vendors and employees expect to be answering to a man, and don’t even consider that a woman of her young age might be the one in charge. At the same time, the fact that she is in charge shows that it is possible.

Class

As explored in earlier chapters, the network an individual forms early on helps them get in and move up. Twenty of the 26 informants were college educated and a handful could afford to take formal or informal internships, though often worked other jobs to support themselves while interning.

However, the foot in the door that internships and low-paying entry level jobs provide are limited by class (Hesmondhalgh and Baker: 116). It can be difficult to carve out a career, and those careers can be fragile, which also favors people whose families can help in lean times (Hesmondhalgh and Baker: 145). Such resources are more readily available for the middle class. As discussed earlier in the section on income, only three informants lived alone and did not share living expenses with anyone else. Kim’s dependence on her middle-class father meant that she was able to work a job that does not cover her expenses.
Patti’s description of the industry and its class components in chapter 3 was not necessarily in line with what most other informants told me about how they got into the industry. Patti, who is now in her late forties, believes that she could not have gotten into the industry now in the way she did beginning in the 1980s. She said that it would be difficult to get a foot in the door without a college degree, and those who do would work for small labels and make minimum wage.

There may be a simple explanation for the disparity, in that 21 of my 26 informants have been in the business for more than a decade, and only five were under age 30. Patti is speaking to what someone starting out today might experience. Of those five born after 1984, only Jim and Winona have college degrees. Of the whole sample, about 75% either identified their upbringing as having been middle to upper middle class, or I determined so based on factors given during the interview. For example, Sal mentioning that his father was a doctor, and the name of the upper middle class suburb in which he grew up, and Selma’s saying that her father was a laborer who worked for the city, putting her in working class range. Though not necessarily a determiner of class, only three informants, Susan, Selma, and Pat, grew up in the city proper. All others were either from Chicago suburbs or other states.

Having a workforce made up of mostly middle class workers is another form of homophily in the industry. Workers not only come from the same subculture, they often will have been raised with similar cultural understandings and values. Particularly when telling stories about childhood experiences with music, I heard plenty of similarities that
reflected a “concerted cultivation” upbringing typical of the middle class (Lareau 2003).

Finally but perhaps most obviously, the opening quote in the last chapter from Bridget, explaining what she wanted out of a career, illustrates that the ability of these workers to choose their career based on passion for music rather than necessity, showing a middle class value system. Hesmondhalgh and Baker would likely say that their middle class upbringing primes them for the self-exploitation that comes from pleasure in work.

Race

Of the 26 workers I interviewed, 21 identified as white, three as biracial, and two, Mark and Sal, as Indian/South Asian. Kim and Maria both described themselves as White/Latina, and Winona as White/Native American. This racial makeup is typical of the Indie Rock subculture, including the bands themselves. Because workers are generally drawn from the subculture, it is worthwhile to examine its racial makeup. Audiences for Indie concerts were overwhelmingly white, disproportionate to the population of Chicago, as were musicians.

Like questions about gender, a few white informants seemed to tense up if asked about the racial makeup of the industry, though not quite as often as men did when asked about gender. While the discomfort some informants seemed to feel when talking about race may have been about being afraid to say the “wrong” thing, the implication of most of the statements was that people of color were not interested in Indie rock, and therefore rarely look to work in the industry. Based on the audiences at shows and at bars frequented by subculture participants, this may be true. It should also
not be overlooked that Chicago is a mostly segregated city, and there are very few social spaces that are truly diverse.

Informants were quick to point out the largely African American-run hip-hop industry in Chicago. When I clarified that I am only looking at Indie Rock, I heard the name of an African American man that does some promotions within the industry. Like the woman who retired from talent buying, this man was the only example anyone seemed to be able to think of, therefore I heard it several times. It reminded me of the 1980s, when kids would name the same two African American punk bands (Bad Brains and Fishbone, in case you are ever asked and need to show some subcultural capital) over and over again as proof that punk is not an exclusively white scene. Bridget was not at all defensive when she said, “Every once in a while, you’ll have an attorney for a band that is an older African American man or something, but for the most part it is all white men between thirty and fifty.”

It is notable that the two men of color I spoke to both identified as South Asian/Indian, considering the “model minority” status that Asians have in the United States. It is possible Mark was not comfortable discussing race with me, as a white woman, because he waved away my questions about race and ethnicity, saying “I don’t really think about that stuff.” Both Sal and Mark, along with Winona, Kim, and Maria, were raised in mostly white neighborhoods, and in the case of all three women, had a white parent (Kim’s adoptive parents were both white). These informants were used to existing in all or predominantly white spaces, and may not have thought it notable.
However, asking why there are very few people of color in the subculture is not necessarily the right question, and as I explain below, not even an accurate premise.

Because most in the industry are white, it is worthwhile to look into understandings and perceptions of whiteness. In certain youth subcultures, white teens look for status and meaning in outsider identities that set them apart from what they perceive as the “bland” existence of whiteness (Wilkins 2008). Though Indie Rock audiences are not generally outrageous in appearance, like Wilkins’s goth kids, they are looking to build identities, membership, and meaning in their lives outside of the mainstream. Though all of my informants were adults at the time of the interview, they did come to the industry as participants in either the punk or Indie Rock subculture beginning in their teens (which they named was based largely on their ages; the older informants identified themselves as punk, the younger more often said Indie).

If we take the motivation to cultivate a more exotic or interesting identity via subcultural affiliation as a remedy to the banality of whiteness, I began to think about the possibility that, considering the histories and status of people of color in the United States, it is unlikely that seeking an additional outsider identity would appeal to already marginalized groups. Under a racialized system of oppression already set up for marginalized people to fail, there would likely be few selling points for a subculture whose very principles regard success as betrayal. Heath and Potter, in their criticism of the very notion of counterculture, claim that the kind of countercultural rebellion out of which many music-based subcultural communities come is a largely white one, and
toothless at that. Choosing an outsider identity for oneself is the domain of the privileged (Heath and Potter 2003). Within that line of reasoning, and looking at the mainstream music industry today, it makes sense that the privileging of poverty makes no sense to those for whom poverty is a real and constant threat.

However neat and logical that explanation may be, it ignores the limited but present body of literature on people of color within the punk subculture, one that, if acknowledged at all, is a side note. And again, looking at the audiences at shows, one could assume there is little interest in Indie among people of color, despite the claims that they do exist. Where were they?

After I finished my interviewing, I ran across a flyer for an Indie basement show (shows run by non-professionals in private homes or other locations only temporarily used to hold a concert) featuring exclusively punk bands of color. This chance discovery suggested that perhaps would-be subculture participants are holding alternative events outside of the typical venues. Mimi Thi Nguyen, women’s studies professor and self-described punk, wrote the following, which may offer some explanation:

I think what made racism in predominantly white punk or activist scenes more disappointing and hurtful than the racism one might encounter anywhere else is the fact that these people who are making your life miserable claim to be anti-oppressive, feminist, anti-racist. Naively, some of us expected more from our white peers and got let down harder. (Nguyen 2010)

Interest in Indie rock may not be as limited by race as industry people seem to believe it is. Rather, much like riot grrrl twenty years ago, marginalized would-be participants in the subculture have created their own spaces. Also like riot grrrl, ‘zines
(and now the internet) are major channels of communication (Nguyen 2012). I did not look at ‘zines because for this dissertation my focus was on paid work within the industry, rather than an examination of punk or indie as a subculture. It remains to be seen if these marginalized groups will eventually reclaim their place in the subculture and the industry as women did, or if the unique issues of race and ethnicity in the United States will provide an impenetrable barrier.

Like many industries, Indie Rock is stratified by gender, class, and race. Those at the top of the business with the greatest autonomy, authority, and income are white men. Women occupy devalued positions that rely on gendered notions of women’s abilities. Mostly common among informants was class advantage in the form of ability to lose money without serious risk of permanent financial ruin. Finally, the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the industry and the subculture suggest unaddressed issues of marginalization of people of color.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation was a learning experience as much as a contribution to academic research. Initially my ambition was to engage in ethnographic research to paint a complete picture of an industry, in the tradition of Howard Becker’s *Art Worlds*. However, I found that business owners in the Indie rock industry were not amenable to having anyone hang around their offices and observe the goings-on. As I established in chapter three, internships are sought after, therefore getting one that would have allowed me to engage in participant observation (as researchers often do) would have been very difficult to obtain, even if I had the time and financial means to do so. Still, the interviews I had with industry workers yielded some rich and interesting data from which I am able to draw some conclusions and make suggestions for further research in the area.

Looking at the previously unexplored gap between the subculture of Indie rock and the industry that supports and is supported by it, yielded a few findings. Working in Indie rock is treated by many in the industry as a privilege as much as a job. Workers pursued positions in the industry, often doggedly, as a passion rather than a means to making a living. Most workers were hired through subcultural social networks rather
than through job ads or employment agencies. Regarding their work as a passion and
the next step in their involvement in the subculture helped workers to accept with the
long and sometimes unpredictable hours, low pay, limited benefits, and sacrifices to
their personal lives that were often required. Many of these workers are educated and
could find work in other industries, but chose work in Indie rock. For some the
excitement and enjoyment they initially experienced were not the incentive that they
once were, and felt that the sacrifices were too great to make for much longer. These
workers were planning, or at least aspiring to, their exit from the industry in favor of a
career that would allow them some typical life markers, such as having children or
buying a home. As of this writing, nearly two years after my interview with her, Bridget
has left The Cabaret after fourteen years to take a publicist job with a municipality,
ensuring benefits and predictable working hours. At the age of 37, this will be Bridget’s
first full time job outside of Indie rock.

Several people with whom I’ve spoken about this research point out that the
hours and low pay are similar to those experienced by workers in non-profit
organizations. Indeed workers in those areas often cite similarly principled sacrifice.
However, businesses that make up the Indie rock industry are capitalist enterprises,
with an expectation of profit, however thin the margin. Though I don’t make the
argument here, one could be made that music capitalists exploit eager workers for
cheap labor and creative energy. I discuss workers’ sacrifices in terms of self-
exploitation following Hesmondhalgh and Baker, and because workers themselves, regardless of rank, describe feeling lucky to be in the business, even knowing what they give up to do so.

Credibility is paramount to the business, and is gained through manifesting Indie ideals in practice, such as valuing music over profit. Like the Protestant who works his whole life with the belief of a reward in heaven, True Believers’ strong convictions gave them a sense of a higher purpose to their work, and they expressed pride in staying true to Indie principles by not “selling out.” For them, Indie rock was a set of beliefs and a way of looking at the world that was as integral to their lives as religion, and they saw themselves as keeping the faith. Workers who left the business were seen as not committed enough, and worthy of derision. Music Capitalists, on the other hand, worked within a changing industry framework to seek profit over what they saw as an honorable but outdated ethos. True Believers who are successful in the long term have enough subcultural capital to survive on reputation alone, such as Sam, or were early adopters who had the resources at the right time to be able to buy a club, like Pat.

Though fairly successful in eschewing large profits, businesses within the subculture tend more toward the mainstream when it comes to race and gender. The Indie rock industry is gender stratified and, for the most part, racially homogeneous. Jobs are largely gender-segregated in ways similar to the mainstream United States workforce, and informants offered explanations for this consistent with those found in work that explores other industries. As a music-based subcultural community, Indie rock
is largely white, and the industry that supports and is supported by it is as well. Indie, as an oppositional identity to mainstream culture, holds particular appeal to white audiences as an alternative to what they see as the blandness of whiteness. However, people of color, feeling marginalized from the scene much as women did in the late 1980s and early 1990s, have created alternative spaces and dialogues that may eventually lead to a more diverse subculture.

It is within these alternative spaces that further research could be fruitful and add to the research I have done here. Studies could look at the underground of the Indie rock/punk subculture, including basement shows and zines with a focus on people of color. It is within this underground that there remains opposition in practice rather than theory. Not only to mainstream profits, but also mainstream cultural ideas of identity and roles, given that it is expressly people of color who create and inhabit these spaces. Perhaps the makeup of the underground of this subculture holds the promise of a truly egalitarian workplace.
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