Professionalism of Performing Musicians in Burlington, Vermont

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Professionalism of Performing Musicians in Burlington, Vermont

A Discussion of Art, Artistry, and Capitalism

Honors College Thesis

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

I came to this project with not so much a goal as a series of questions which had sparked years ago. When I was a junior in high school, my relatives, parents, and friends of my parents began to realize that music continued to be the single thing which interested me the most. As our conversations took on the topic of my career opportunities more steadily, I heard subtle comments about the difficulty of “making it” in the music industry and not-so-subtle reminders to think about a “real job” and “making a living.” A theme developed, which was that the music industry was a career black hole unless you broke out as a pop star.

I was, understandably, skeptical. It was impossible for me to believe that the music industry, which seemed to be a behemoth of a population and market, would actually hold so few opportunities. I saw music everywhere around me, being made and supported by people who did not all seem to be struggling. Weren’t there thousands of radio stations, record shops, blues clubs, and instrument stores? Weren’t their employees working in the music industry? Was it even plausible that all of those people would soon be “chewed up and spit out” like every other high-school-drop-out-turned-rapper? The answer that spun around and around my head was definitively “no.”

When I came to school in Vermont, I had low expectations of the local music scene. After growing up outside of New York City and regularly hearing world-class musicians, I prepared myself to be relatively starved for music for approximately four years. Fortunately, I could not have been more mistaken. My first musical experiences at college were, of course, on campus. I began to meet other students who played instruments (mostly guitar) and some of us
would make plans to jam together. Eventually, most of my social life revolved around playing music with other students.

During my first year of college, I also started to explore the music scene in downtown Burlington. I saw two categories of show. The first was large, touring acts which would come to venues like Higher Ground or the Flynn Theater. These shows cost upwards of $20 for the cheapest tickets, and more popular acts would be the event of a weekend for many students. The other category was venues which booked primarily local acts. These included bars like Radio Bean, Nectar’s, and Red Square. What I saw there was primarily local musicians, and I began to recognize the same people and bands playing around town. They were by no means famous (many of them never left Burlington), but they seemed to be at least comfortable in their niche of the music industry.

As I met more musicians and developed a musical network of my own, I began thinking more about the local scene and what it would be like to play regular gigs in town. The voices of my parents and relatives echoed in my head, but what I was seeing around me was a strong enough contrast to convince me that their opinions of the music industry, while not entirely ungrounded, were certainly incomplete. A small music scene was thriving in Burlington, fueled by local talent and enthusiasm. I wanted to learn more about how it functioned and the people who lived in it, and the warnings I had heard in high school transformed into the framework for my curiosity. How did these people exist in the “industry” of music? Did they feel the same pressures I felt, and what did that mean for how they thought about their art? What did words like “hobby,” “professional,” and “career” mean to them? One hugely unifying theme that I began to notice was that the need to participate in capitalism was not incompatible with the
creative drive of the musicians I met. Their world of art provided for them value and meaning, including expression, emotional connection, and feelings of self-fulfillment, beyond the coldness they experienced in the market. Their efforts and success in making a living while making music involved an interaction between art and capitalism, not a domination of one over the other. This dynamic was central to my observations and, therefore, is central to this paper.

**Pocket Protector**

By no means did this project represent a journey into unfamiliar territory for me. I began playing the piano sometime around the age of five and continue to take lessons now. Throughout high school I played in a Young Rascals revival band which had regular paid gigs, and in college I started two bands which play at the same venues that are home to my research participants. Indeed, I met some of my participants through playing with them or people they knew. I’ve never made enough money through playing to pay for more than a few dinners out a month, but I have had experience working with venue managers and booking agents, other bands, and musicians in my own bands.

During my junior year of college, a close friend of mine and I decided that we wanted to start putting together a more dedicated “band” to play around town. We found a drummer who I knew already and invited him over to jam. We all had similar interests in funk, hip-hop, and jazz, and our music together immediately reflected that. We decided to call ourselves Pocket Protector, a play on a phrase in music which refers to the “pocket” of a groove. My experiences with the band informed much of this paper and introduced me to important aspects of the local music scene, and they are worth discussing here.
**Promotion**

Before any performances, we put together a Facebook page with some artwork done by a friend of our guitarist. Like many of the bands I have talked to, our first performances were at parties in the basement of our drummer’s friend. We gathered some support there in the form of Facebook likes. In addition, these events allowed us to take some “action shots” of the band playing live, including pictures and videos. From watching the online activity of other groups, I knew that it was important to have this kind of material publicly available. I would also learn that more explicitly from venue websites which warned that a band with no videos from a live show would not be booked; it was like a preview or proof of stage presence.

I created an email address for the band and began to bolster our online presence. In addition to photos and videos, this included event pages for upcoming concerts and regular posts on our Facebook page. In the posts, I tried to include small jokes and a generally “personal” tone. Although this was long before my conversation with Eric, I too was trying to accomplish the “one-on-one” feeling of amplification. As a Facebook user, I know the feeling of annoyance when a group bombards my newsfeed with boring or redundant posts. My goal in our social media was to keep Pocket on the radar while avoiding getting stale. I also created an account on Soundcloud, which is a website where users can host music for free streaming. We advertised the Soundcloud link on our Facebook page and periodically would add newly recorded songs.

Another major aspect of our promotion geared at individual shows. As I mentioned, each show boasted its own event page on Facebook so that users could RSVP (which has no
effect except to make the show look popular). Our posts on the band’s page would include a link to the event page, as well as a reminder of the date, time, and location in capital letters. For each show, also, we would hire a friend to design a poster to advertise for the show. Even if the band did not make money from the show, we would pay out of pocket for that artwork. The posters would be advertised on the band’s Facebook page, on the event page and, occasionally, on printed bills which we would hang around campus or downtown.

\textit{Booking}

Our promotion on Facebook was one half of the equation. The other half was communication with the venues themselves. For many venues, I began booking simply by finding the email address for the venue online and sending an email with a brief bio, a link to the Facebook page, and a link to the Soundcloud page. Early in the band’s origins, this worked one time out of roughly six attempts. Once we had played at Club Metronome, though, I was able to send pictures, videos, and recordings as well. These helped to cement the band as a “legitimate” choice for booking. Similarly, it was much easier to get a show at a venue we had already played.

A large part of our booking as well as promotional efforts involved collaborating with other groups. Venues rarely had one band for a night. On the contrary, any given evening could host two to five bands, depending on the day of the week and special events. For the agents organizing these shows, finding that many bands every (or nearly every) night was difficult. I began arranging “double bills” with bands we had met and befriended, agreeing to play the...
same show at the same venue. For the venues, this meant less work finding another band to play that night.

Double billing was also a useful strategy for us as a growing band. Although we had amassed a small following, the actual number of people we could expect to come to a show at, say, 11:30 PM on a Tuesday night was rarely enough people to fill the space. However, if we could arrange to play a show with a band which boasted a larger following, we could expect a larger audience and the venue would be more likely to take the gig. Additionally, a double bill would mean exposure for Pocket Protector. The other band would be sure to promote the show to their fans (and we would do the same), spreading awareness about each to a larger population.

Much as Joe described, I began to think about our gigs and the bands we played alongside in terms of a larger production. As an up-and-coming group, we had to be careful not to be overly picky. However, we developed a small network of student bands who played to a similar audience and whose music complemented ours. We considered our experiences seeing these groups play, including their energy, stage presence, and atmosphere, when thinking about whom we would like to play alongside. We also considered their standing in the community, largely in terms of Facebook likes, to decide which band would be the “opener” or the “headliner” (shows with such terms are not technically a “double bill,” in which both bands headline). Early on, those conversations often took the form of Pocket Protector offering to open for a more well-rooted group.
Compensation

We earned no money for most of the shows we played. Early on, we played a number of shows for student-run events on campus which were not compensated. However, we took them for for three reasons. First, they helped build a following. Second, they were important practice for us to play in front of an audience and try out songs. Third, we were simply excited to be playing music for people. During the first few months of the band’s history, we never talked about the possibility of getting paid for these shows. What we talked about was the excitement of playing a gig.

We began getting paid when we started playing at established venues in town. At the Radio Bean, a restaurant and bar in downtown Burlington, we would be paid from a tip bucket prominently on display in the middle of the venue. For the two shows we played there on a weekend, when the venue charged a cover at the door, we also were paid a percentage of what the venue made from the cover. At Nectar’s and Club Metronome, there would be an agreed-upon fee paid by the venue (between $75 and $100 for our band), and we would also be provided with free dinner and vouchers for drinks. We also were once hired to play at a birthday and graduation party by a fellow student after we responded to an online advertisement. For this, we were paid $125. All of these payments were split evenly by the band.

An important note is that we never sold recordings. Any money paid to the band came from a venue or a tip jar at a live show. Indeed, any recordings we put online were there primarily to attract venues and to get our fans excited about coming to the next show. We
would use our Soundcloud page as promotion by including a link to it in a post advertising an upcoming gig. Another interesting shift happened when the band had been together for about seven or eight months. We were invited to play at a student-run event which we had played when we were first starting. We turned down the event because the time was inconvenient and because the show would be unpaid and likely not attract a very large audience. Earlier in our history, we would have almost definitely taken that show but, having established ourselves, we were able to be slightly more selective about what shows we played.

*Small Fish in a Small Bowl*

Pocket Protector played more shows in downtown Burlington than I had ever expected to play before graduation. In addition, I was as surprised as my bandmates when we started making money from our shows. Still, in the scope of Burlington bands, our experience was significantly less involved and less serious. Part of this was due to the fact that we were all full-time students and did not have the time we would need to dedicate in order to take a next step (selling an album, going on tour, or even gigging weekly). Also, no one in Pocket was relying on it as income and so we did not have the drive to make it a financial success. Whatever way it may be defined, I think that the term “professional” would be a difficult sell for our story.

And yet, it was a fantastic way for myself and my bandmates to experience the world of local musicianship. We were playing alongside musicians who *did* play full-time, and even some from out of state who were in Burlington as part of a tour. I learned what they talked about, what they were concerned with upon arriving at a venue, and what was expected of each band for the show to run smoothly. Similarly, I learned from working with booking agents and
promoters what factors were considered in arranging a show, how to communicate a band’s needs, what the venue might be interested in, and how that differed from what a band was curious about. These things ranged from who would provide larger equipment to how the group would be compensated to schedules to expected audience turn-out. Those conversations and collaborations helped me to lay the framework and foundations for what I would study during this project.

Pocket Protector helped to highlight the blurry lines surrounding this project. Although none of us were full-time musicians and none of us were making enough money to support ourselves, we were participating in the same market as musicians who were touring the east coast and promoting their new album. Indeed, we were playing in many of the same locations and even sharing poster space with them. The size of Burlington’s music scene actually played a large role in this; the city was big enough to host more serious acts than us, but small enough that many of them had to play where we were also welcome. This is largely the nature of the local music industry, and participating in it helped me to see that more clearly.

Pocket also helped me to understand the dynamics of modern music marketing, management, and booking. Using sites like Facebook and Soundcloud, which have become staples for groups both similar to Pocket and much more serious, gave me important insight into the role that technologies play in the life of a contemporary band. I also was made aware first-hand of the importance of these tools to a band which is unable to invest significant amounts of money into recording, distribution, and promotion. The face of the modern music industry has changed drastically, and by participating in it, I was able to see what it has meant for artists occupying the grey area between amateur and professional. Just as the turn of the
twentieth century saw a burgeoning middle-class, the turn of the twenty-first has seen a new generation of musicians who are enjoying many of the advantages which used to be accessible only through a record contract.

To investigate these questions, I focused my project on fieldwork in the form of participant observation and interviews. However, as I delved further into the topic, I saw the scope of my curiosity grow. The experiences I was being told about raised concerns not only about an individual’s balance of personal and professional life but also about the position of art in a capitalist system more generally. My participants told me about deep tensions in themselves and their peers between making art and making a living. Their stories reflected varying degrees of interplay between the two, as well as different impressions of the significance of that connection. Some of them seemed to consider money in music to be an unfortunate factor but necessary for supporting themselves and supporting their art (concerts, for example, are not cheap!). At the same time, others were working to find ways to blend their art with their income without stifling one or the other. Some had even dedicated their careers to helping other artists navigate the often foreign world of business and economics.

This thesis, like many other anthropological writings, is an attempt to briefly hold down and examine a web of concepts, relationships, and values which exist almost entirely in flux. During the last two hundred years, music has developed into a commodity with a marketplace which largely defies conventional economic thought. The people who live in it experience a capitalism which deals in feelings, where money comes as close as it ever will to buying happiness. Furthermore, the contemporary music industry is constantly finding new ways to distance its product from economics while remaining decidedly an “industry.” A full
understanding of these dynamics is impossible. However, a discussion of the system of non-
economic values which drives this massive sphere of labor and capital can provide us with an
important critique (and possibly celebration) of capitalism.

Methodology

This project is comprised of two major categories of thought. The first is based in
political-economic theory spanning from the late nineteenth century to the twenty-first
century. I use the writings of Karl Marx, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and other thinkers
to develop a strong theoretical basis of the relationship between art and economics. Their
works gave me the language to explain what I was seeing, but also large theoretical bases to
either use as a springboard or contrast. My inclusion of their works in the paper is less
chronological in the interest of applying the ideas where I consider them to be most
meaningful. This is not a history of post-Marxism, and ought not to be treated as such. Rather, I
introduce their writings as they become relevant to my descriptions and arguments.

The other major category in this project is the ethnographic research I conducted over
the course of a year. I held interviews with five participants who have filled a variety of roles in
the music industry and had varying levels of experience with the business side of the industry.
My first participant played in a student jam-band which only ever played at house parties
thrown by other students and was never paid for his music. My second participant was also a
student at the time of interview, but he played in a number of bands which included members
who were relying on their gigs to pay rent. In this way, he was not making a living playing music
but he had a responsibility to other people who were. My third participant has worked a
number of music-related jobs in Burlington. In addition to playing in bands, he was a booking agent for many years and now does PR for a Vermont-based record label. My fourth participant is the executive director of Big Heavy World, a grassroots artist-support organization which relies on volunteer work to help local musicians’ careers. My fifth and final participant founded a record label in Burlington which is experimenting with a donations-based model to allow them to release music for free online. Each of these participants contributed a fresh and vital perspective to my understanding of the music scene in Burlington.

I successfully applied for exempt status from the university’s IRB for this research. All of my participants were over 18 years old, and none of them qualified as at-risk. Our conversations never included information which could reasonably put them in danger. I did not compensate them for our conversations. I briefed all of them on the project and made sure that they understood that they were able to stop the interview at any time and that they could refuse to answer any question or refuse to interview at all. I also received their verbal consent to record the audio from the interview. I transcribed the audio, after which I deleted the audio file. All of my participants gave me permission to use their real names, although they were aware that they could choose a codename if they wished.

A Glimpse Ahead

This project is divided by themes, and its divisions revolve around my ethnographic work. In Chapter One, I introduce some relevant writings of Karl Marx and the post-Marxist Frankfurt School (focusing on Theodor Adorno) as well as research participants Tim and Scott. Through the lens of Marxism as well as a sociological study by Juniu et al., I examine my
interviews with Tim and Scott with an eye for the terms “professional” and “amateur.” In Chapter Two, I discuss research participant Joe, who has worked as a musician, booking agent, and PR representative in Vermont for many years. I also introduce Walter Benjamin of the Frankfurt School, and analyze Joe’s interview as a push-back against Adorno.

In Chapter Three, I introduce two research participants who have been working to develop new ways for music and musicians to interact with capitalism. The first is Jim, who is the executive director of a nonprofit organization which relies on volunteer work and grants to support local artists. The second is Eric, whose record label, Future Fields, is developing a “patronage platform” whereby listeners receive music for free but are encouraged to support the label and band through donations. Both of these organizations are helping artists to make music without having a direct concern about selling songs for money, contributing to a music industry which can cooperate with capitalism while allowing the kind of freedom which music demands. Finally, in Chapter Four, I discuss a subset of the music industry which controls the largest market: pop. I challenge the modern Adornian criticism of pop music for being “commercialized,” and suggest that even contemporary hit radio can produce authentic and genuine art.

By organizing my chapters in this way, I hope to work from the ground up. I begin with student musicians because they had the least amount of industry experience of all of my participants. I moved on to a booking agent, whose job was to gauge both expected revenue from a show as well as the band’s ability to perform and thus had to make decisions that were simultaneously economic and decidedly not. By saving Jim and Eric for last, my goal is to paint for the reader a picture of an industry which is moving past capitalism while remaining firmly
entrenched in it. I then compare all of those stories to my own experiences, and extrapolate what I learned to a look at the largest “industry” in music. I do not claim to speak for all musicians, nor even most. However, what follows is a collection of narratives which may challenge the claim that money is a stain on art.
Chapter One

There is no correct starting point for an analysis of the music industry. Nearly all of the important dynamics—CD sales, genre trends—are chicken-and-egg scenarios which sit at the crossroads of artists, consumers, producers, agents, managers, and a host of other people. In addition, the theoretical literature surrounding art and economics can be equally murky. To help tease apart the more important subsets of the industry, I have divided this project according to the different roles played by my participants. Within those sections, I have included the literature which I think provides the best context in which to discuss those participants and their experiences. By applying the theory in the literature to the data I gathered in the field, I was able to both develop the language for understanding my data and use my data to support or question the theory.

This chapter, then, deals with what is probably the most obvious role in the music industry: the musicians. The two participants who I discuss were both college students at the time of the interviews. Since then, one of them has graduated and continues to play regularly. The other is still a student. I had a few reasons for choosing students for my interview. First, as a student myself, they were more easily accessible. Second, students occupy a very unique place in capitalism since they are old enough that they could be working enough to support themselves, but they are often not expected to. For a study about musicians who toe the line between amateur and professional, students provided the perfect microcosm. However, before I address those interviews, I want to start this chapter by delving into some of the keystone theory for this project.
To Briefly Touch on Marx

Like most writings about capitalism, this project will begin with Karl Marx. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx explains that “The object of labour is, therefore, the objectification of man’s species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created” (76). This operationalization of the word “objectification” does not carry the negative connotation associated with it today. Rather, Marx considers it the manifestation of the worker’s ability and humanity. For a worker, the act of putting time and effort into a product psychologically confers a part of themselves into the product as well. They feel a connection to their product, since they see in it themselves.

However, in a wage-labor economic order, money comes between worker and product: “The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien” (72). Instead of the product being the worker’s way of existing outside of the body, it is wrenched from them and twisted into something unfamiliar. The worker no longer possesses it, because it is “owned” by whoever owns the capital which pays for it. The worker, Marx claims, feels hostility coming from the very thing that they put themselves into by creating it and becomes alienated.

In the decades following Marx’s death, several other philosophers and economists who studied his work and the work of other thinkers from his time started to observe the world of
capitalism which developed in Europe during the twentieth century. Although some of their writing disagreed, these writers shared enough commonalities to be considered a coherent group: the Frankfurt School. Marx had predicted many of the changes that they saw, including the acceleration of capitalism’s proliferation. At the same time, the theory of the nineteenth century did not adequately explain or describe the climate of the twentieth. The Frankfurt School sought to analyze modern capitalism and socialism with theory that was inspired by and borne of Marxism but incorporated what had changed in the half-century since his death.

Importantly to this project, Frankfurt School theorists started to apply their analysis to the realms of art and culture. Art had existed long before capitalism, and yet these writers saw that it had been changed drastically by the new economic order. In particular, Theodor Adorno presented many passionate arguments surrounding music and capitalism. He focused on the predominant popular music in Europe and America at the time: jazz. Marx had written that capitalism alienated a worker from their product, and Adorno began to wonder whether music was safe from a similar fate. He saw the influx of money into the production and distribution of music as an adulterating force which promoted sameness and simplicity and stifled innovation.

In the scope of this project, I was unable to give an adequate discussion of music and capitalism on the scale which Adorno addresses. However, on the scale of individual musicians, I became was interested in how the paradigms of capitalism were addressed. This is the crux of my project; how can a musician be “professional?” How does art fit into such a heavily capitalist concept? Later in this chapter, I will return to Adorno in greater detail. First, though, I want to introduce a couple of my research participants.
Student Musicians and Sociological Surveys

I began my interviews for this project with student musicians whom I had met by virtue of simply being a student musician myself. Tim is a student who currently plays in four bands (I’ll refer to them as S, F, L, and B). He tours with F and has made some recordings with B and S. I asked him during our interview where he would place himself on a spectrum between amateur and professional. He answered, “In F, for example, where for them, that’s their only source of income, their livelihood depends on me playing bass there. Like, my job is professionally to play bass... If we don’t play enough gigs, they don’t pay rent... That makes it feel more professional than amateur.” On the other hand, his commitments to the other bands are less strict and more “amateur-ish.” In regards to the band S, “it seems like something I just do for fun. More amateur-ish. But F definitely seems more professional. B seems like right about in between.” Professionalism comes through because his bandmates rely on him, not because he needs the money he makes from music. As Tim said, “my life hasn’t yet boiled down to how many gigs I get a week, but theirs does.” It is worth noting that he never referred to any group as fully “amateur,” only “amateur-ish.” His reluctance to use the term is reminiscent of Ruth Finnegan’s claim that “professional” holds strong emotive connotations and implications of not only financial status but also of the player’s seriousness and standard of excellence (16).

However, despite his obligations to his bandmates to keep up to speed with the music, Tim revealed that his rehearsal and practice strategies incorporate almost none of the upbeat funk that he plays with the group. He said, “I’ve been [playing in the bands] for a little while so it’s like... I don’t really need to practice that. I need to do it over and over, but I do it over and over because we have the gigs.” Rather, when he sits down at home to play, the music tends to
be slower, quieter; “musically it’s more complicated to start thinking about expansive, weird chords, and so it keeps me on my game more than just slapping [the type of music that the bands play].” The music Tim practices when he’s alone is more of a theoretical exercise than a technical challenge, and he never plays it for an audience. He told me, “The kind of stuff I play at home is not what anyone wants to hear… We’re playing in bars where no one really knows what’s going on and they just wanna dance and have fun, and that’s not the kind of music I’m playing.” This comment particularly interested me; besides jamming with the band at shows, his practice regimen consists almost entirely of music that he will not play for an audience. His motivation to practice, then, cannot be solely the desire to play well at a bar (and, by extension, cannot be solely the desire to make money from playing). Indeed, at no point did he mention money as being a motivating factor to practice.

My other interviewee, Scott, described a very different experience of playing in a band. He had recently left a group that I’ll call M. M was an entirely student group that played at college parties in Burlington but never at a venue like a bar, restaurant etc. The band would get a gig by talking with their friends and being invited to a party to play. As Scott said, “Say I had some of my friends, who [the band] had no idea who they were, I’d say, ‘Hey, we can play this party, let’s go play.’… Basically whoever found the outlet to go play is where we’d just kind of follow that as far as we could and hopefully at the end of the road we’d get there and we’d play a show.” Besides connecting with friends, the marketing for the band was done on Facebook and through “word-of-mouth.” Another contrast to Tim’s experience is that Scott never got paid for these shows. He said, “You know, playing music is so fun… and playing in front of an audience is great. So at that point, I mean, it’s uh, we’re not looking for necessarily money. You
know, you got an extra beer or two? Maybe... If we can have the opportunity to play, that’s all we’re looking for.” This is not to exclude any external motivating factors. Rather, it is a case in which the external motivators consist of social connections and obligations and overlap with the internal factors of love for the activity and desire to share it.

The combination of pressure to provide a service and love of the service provided reminded me of the writings of Marcel Mauss on gift economies. Although Mauss’ work of 1967 focused on societies in Polynesia, Melanesia, and North West America, he applies his findings to his own present and locality (and, to some extent, we may do the same). As Mauss says, “Once again we shall discover those motives of action still remembered by many societies and classes: the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure... In the liberal professions of our great nations such a moral and economic system is to some degree in evidence” (IV, 4). The delight in sharing artistry is clearly evident in the way Scott describes playing at a party. In what Mauss sees as “multifarious and fairly enlightened societies,” the utilitarian aspect of services becomes mixed with other motivating factors; “Concepts which we like to put in opposition—freedom and obligation; generosity, liberality, luxury on the one hand and saving, interest, austerity on the other—are not exact...” Furthermore, in regards to Malinowski’s case of the Trobriands, Mauss explains “It is a complex notion that inspires the economic actions we have described, a notion neither of purely free and gratuitous prestations, nor of purely interested and utilitarian production and exchange; it is a kind of hybrid” (IV, 6). In many ways, Scott experienced a gift-style economy. He and his band would be invited to a social event, but there was an expectation that they would provide music while they were
there. At the same time, the obligation they felt to play was mixed with a simple desire to play anyway and a joy of the service they provided.

Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, Mauss’ work insists on a fluid understanding of economies. Scott’s “bubble” is a perfect example of how anti-capitalist models can exist within the context of capitalism (albeit enabled by capitalism in the way of, for example, parental support). And yet, the capitalistic divide between amateurs and professionals persists in contemporary thought. A survey was conducted by Juni et al. to explore the divide between amateur and professional. The study included 34 “professional” musicians and 40 “amateur” musicians (the distinction was made according to occupation, not level of seriousness or commitment). The survey focused on how these groups view their rehearsal and performance as leisure, “leisure/work,” or work and where their motivations come from to engage in both. Two open-ended questions on the survey found that leisure was defined as “pleasure, fun, enjoyment, and freedom” whereas work was related to “remuneration, commitment, obligation, stress, and repetition.” The study found that amateur musicians “were significantly more intrinsically motivated and perceived more freedom in rehearsal than professionals” (52). Not surprisingly, the study concluded that rehearsal and performance are seen as leisure by amateurs and work by professionals (53).

Perceptions of leisure also coincided with increased intrinsic motivation, whereas perceptions of work came with extrinsic motivations of “payoff” and feelings of obligation during rehearsal. Interestingly, the level of intrinsic motivation for professionals was higher during performance than during rehearsal (54). Juni interprets this as the “thrill” of performance, a motivator sought out by amateurs and professionals alike. According to
musicians’ descriptions of the two activities, “rehearsal was most likely to be stressful, tedious, and sometimes boring due to the lack of continuity. Performance, however, was considered to be challenging, and pleasurable, with enjoyment coming from the satisfaction of performing well and for an audience” (54).

In terms of their rehearsal experiences, both of my interviewees displayed similar motivations as the amateur musicians in Juniú’s study. They focused on improving as a musician for the sake of improving and being able to play what they want to play. They both practiced with their bands (which, for Tim, carried more of a professional expectation of payoff), but their solo rehearsal was not in the interest of making money. They both cited almost entirely intrinsic motivators for their practicing on their own, motivators like expanding their musical intellect or keeping their hands in shape just for the sake of being a good musician.

During their performance, my interviewees showed different kinds of motivation. Scott experienced both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to perform. He loved playing for an audience (and loved playing in general), but he also was motivated by social obligations and the promise of going to a party where he may be offered some small compensation (like free beer) for his playing. None of his motivation, though, was the expectation of money. Tim, on the other hand, described more extrinsic motivators for performance. For example, he experienced an obligation to bandmates who he described as professional musicians. This is immediately reminiscent of Finnegan, who explained that one aspect of musical professionalism is “appearance as a regular performer with musicians themselves regarded as professional” (15).
Tim’s motivation also stems from the financial compensation he expects. Apart from pressure to earn the money for his bandmates in F who need it, he also displayed some extrinsic motivation in his experiences in his own band, B, which he described as being “right about in between” amateur and professional. Tim said that, playing with B, he would change his list of songs based on where they were playing: “There’s literally songs that we have that we don’t play anywhere but the Radiobeans... it’s songs we can’t play at Red Square or Manhattan’s.” The fear is that bars that prefer one kind of music will not book the band again unless they conform. For example, if a band does not play enough covers, the venue will “probably be like, ‘Don’t come and play stuff like that, because it doesn’t work.’ And if you do it over and over they’ll just stop booking you.” In this instance, the extrinsic motivation of wanting to get hired is enough for the band to change what they play.

Because Tim was offering a service to a business and being compensated financially (unlike Scott, who offered a service to friends and was compensated non-financially), the expectations of audience members and, by extension, business owners held a much greater sway over the music he played and how he played it. Whereas Scott was actually able to quit his band due to creative differences, Tim felt much more pressure, due to his professional connections, to comply with the prodding of those who hired him. The threat of losing a gig for both himself and his bandmates (who rely even more on the expected remuneration) was enough to avoid performing certain songs in certain places in order to play more of a “background band” role. Tim felt the influence of capitalism more strongly than Scott did, exemplifying the variation possible within the context of capitalism.
The Industry of Culture

As I indicated earlier, my theoretical framing of art and economics begins with the work of Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Their writing on the acceleration of capitalism in Europe paints a grim picture of society, its members, and its culture. Enlightenment was a false prophet; it turned its eyes inward to convince itself of its own freedom while building a cage around itself. Enlightenment was also quicksand. It held rationality above all, and through rationality it mired and suffocated dissent and nonconformity. The calculability of capitalism led Europe into a bottomless pit of alienation and discontent, they claimed, and “enlightenment” was really an irreparable adulteration of European culture.

The danger that Adorno and Horkheimer saw in enlightenment was that its focus on rationality behaved like a religion. Its belief in itself led to a distrust in nonconformity. It was also all-encompassing. Theological arguments against it could be dismissed as irrational, and intellectual arguments necessarily strengthened it by using the very rationality it valued. This was the Catch-22 which allowed enlightenment to saturate throughout Europe (Horkheimer, 3). It also subjected every theoretical view to being “only a belief,” even itself (7-8). Thus, it engulfed European society while chasing its own tail.

They saw in this cycle a serious threat to art and culture. As enlightenment advanced, only “authentic” works of art were able to avoid being the mere imitation of what had already been created (13). The values of enlightenment demanded that art demonstrate its usefulness and, when it proved unable to do so, it was left to “vagrants” (13). Authentic art was incompatible with enlightenment for two reasons. First, enlightenment forced a change in
those who made it, which resulted in a change in how art was made. Second, enlightenment forced a change in the masses who consumed it, so that they were no longer able to hear what has not been heard (28). Enlightenment took culture and invented the culture industry, killing culture in the process.

As enlightenment progressed, culture became infected with sameness (94). This was the result of changes in how society treated individuals. However, those changes were the result of yet another change in the form of extreme technological advancement. The development of technologies and techniques to send art to exponentially larger numbers of people changed individual consumption into mass consumption. Symphonies that once would move a crowd of 1,000 people to tears now were heard by 10,000 people and be ignored or, worse, dismissed. The possibility of this kind of reach endowed art with new properties which replaced its old self.

One such property was the way that the masses valued the art they consumed. As capitalism advanced across Europe, its subjects began to ascribe value based on price. With drastic improvements in the technology for recording, distributing, and consuming art, the entire process became easier and cheaper. However, Adorno and Horkheimer saw this as a further blow. For consumers who had learned that value comes with a higher price, the cheap art available on the radio or on television lost its status. Nothing was expensive anymore, and yet the masses were distrustful of that which was cheap and so they lost their respect for art (129-130). Exactly the progress which allowed art to be enjoyed by all caused all to stop appreciating it.
In tandem with this, the role and behavior of art and culture shifted. Instead of risking itself by striving for the “genuine style” of past artists (103), the culture industry opted for its own perfection which will never achieve that style but will persist in stagnant repetition (108). As the seriousness of art also became diluted by its spread, the way that people consumed it changed. Art consumption became “entertainment” and, therefore, subordinate to capitalism itself. Marxist alienation had become a reality, and art had become the escape. In this way, Adorno claims, art as entertainment is simply the prolongation of work. In other words, it is escape for the purpose of allowing future work (109). Indeed, because art in late capitalism became part and parcel of capitalist industry, this escape is not even escape from reality. Rather, it is the escape from the thought of resisting reality (116). To Adorno, religion was not the only opiate of the masses.

Jazz in particular represented to Adorno the insistent sameness-disguised-as-progress of the culture industry. Despite the musical innovations in syncopation and harmonization which define the origins of the genre, Adorno contends that jazz has remained “static” and that the widespread popularity of such a “monotonous attraction” is an “enigma” (Adorno, 269). Enlightenment ideals promised innovation, but what Adorno sees in the music of his time is the opposite. What parades itself as new and spontaneous is, to Adorno, a tired rehash of old ideas dressed up and repackaged. The music remains bound by conventions of meter and key. However, Adorno even denies that within these limitations free imagination is possible. Indeed, he accuses jazz of relying on “tricks, formulas, and clichés” (270) to give the illusion of innovation, an illusion of the authenticity of the great artists of the past.
The jazz musician, then, is the arbiter of this illusion and an imposter. The jazz musician learns to speak a musical language that has been confined to the point where it is “jargon.” Through practice and immersion, the musician may master the language such that she can play it as though it were natural and not taught to her by the culture industry. However, it is not natural, and the musician is only ever able to achieve a level of apparent naturalness by imitating (in presentation and in foundation, if not entirely in content) the “language it has long since silenced” (Horkheimer, 101), or genuine art. Adorno rejects the possibility that the music of his day could be authentic. Jazz was born of the culture industry and necessarily inherited its tainted understanding of art. Those who play jazz are able to do so only by immersion in the values and history of the culture industry. Simply by virtue of existing in late capitalism, the creators of jazz music are poisoned with an inability to make anything new.

Once exposed to capitalism and the mass culture that resulted, this critique justifiably became a highly polemic debate. The idea that the values of capitalism could be poisonous for the artistic process and structure of artistic enjoyment is tempting, to say the least. Indeed, in many situations both historical and contemporary, we can see Adorno’s observations and predictions crystalize. However, as a musician and lover of music (incidentally, of jazz in particular), I immediately felt that Adorno’s arguments were far too black and white. In recent years, the majority of my music listening has been done without paying directly for the music and yet music remained one of the most valuable things in my life. I knew that in my own listening and playing, music could feel authentic, real, and spontaneous to the point of it being almost spiritual. Additionally, I was under no illusions that the language of jazz included reiterating and playing on what had been said before, but to me that did not make it stagnant.
The more I listened, the more I recognized what was familiar and the more I learned to pick out what was new. Jazz’s self-referential character is exactly what made it so unique, not stale or stagnant.

There were some important connections between the experiences Tim and Scott related to me and the ideas I encountered from Adorno. Many of the ways that Tim described his performances made them sound like the kind of escapism that Adorno detested. He told me that his audiences wanted to dance, not think about the music. Even further, he told me that he adjusted what he played for audiences to meet that need, not necessarily to play what he felt would express himself. In this way, he allowed his performances to be dictated (in part) by the market. In addition, the art that Scott provided was given for free and meant to be consumed as entertainment. Both of these performers considered the music they performed to be entertainment, not an intellectual activity. And yet, neither of them seemed to lament this. Many of Adorno’s details were playing out in reality, but not his judgments about them.

Adorno’s ideas of what art could mean as a category external of market values resonated with the understandings which I outlined in the introduction. It held a humanity and emotional depth which were lacking in the alienation of capitalism. I wanted to continue my examination of Adorno’s theoretical genealogy, but I also wanted to see how these armchair-philosophies played out on the ground and in the twenty-first century. After all, I saw a relationship between art and the market, not an infection. During the following months, I continued my reading of other authors who I will discuss more in-depth later. Meanwhile, I began to schedule interviews with more participants from the field. Importantly, I strove to find
interviewees who could represent a wider portion of the local music industry. I wanted to find out how these dynamics were experienced on the side of the venues, management, and labels.
Chapter Two

The perspective of musicians in the industry was invaluable to my analysis. However, I wanted to find some information from people who were closer to the “business” side of the music business. Being an “artist” and a “capitalist” are by no means mutually exclusive, of course, but I wanted to speak with people who worked for venues or filled management roles. I hoped that I could get a more holistic understanding of the industry by talking to the people who work with the artists. I thought that such a participant might have a slightly different take on booking and marketing, as well as payment, and I wanted that perspective.

Additionally, the dismal writings of Adorno did not line up with my own experiences as a musician or the reported experiences of Scott and Tim. I wondered if I was too biased to wake up and smell the coffee about music’s inevitable fall to capitalism. The thoughts of someone else in the industry would certainly help to provide some more details. I also wanted to continue my study of the Frankfurt School and the theory that would follow. In this search, I found the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s take on the phenomena outlined by Adorno gave me a different interpretation, one that was slightly less doomsday and allowed for several mitigating factors.

Respect, Responsibility, and Roles

In the spring and fall of 2015, I worked as an intern at a record label and management agency outside of Burlington. There, I met a man named Joe who had recently been hired as the label’s public relations and social media expert. I asked him for an interview, and he agreed to meet me at a pizza shop in downtown Burlington. I decided to start by asking about his
personal history in the industry. Like myself and most other musicians I know, Joe’s musical life began when he was young. For him, it was running audio tech for his dad, who was a bandleader and booker. He was also exposed to other aspects of his father’s groups, including booking, negotiation, taxes, and sheer persistence. He is a musician, and currently performs regularly around town. Joe learned the industry holistically, which would later contribute to his multi-faceted career.

His first booking job in Burlington was at a venue that he described as a “200-person sit-down dinner-and-a-show kind of place.” It had been a jazz club before he got there, but he helped them expand, improve their sound, build a stage, and make it “the real deal.” He began to learn tools of the trade, such as musician compensation, as well as what factors of a possible act were important to consider in booking them. This included budget, local fame, how he could market the band to attract an audience, and how he could meet and anticipate the expectations of the audience. Finally, he learned about the relationship between venue and musical act, “like where you meet the middle ground where the band is making the amount of money that they wanna make, the venue’s making the amount of money they wanna make, and the band’s performing at the level that you expect.” He stayed there for three years before the venue was sold.

Joe next moved to a smaller venue in town. As he put it, “it’s a more hip venue, a more respected venue, but there’s no space and there’s no budget.” Booking there was a balance, where Joe was guaranteed a more open-minded audience but, partially due to the size of the building, had to work harder to ensure that the venue and band were making a profit from their
shows. This also meant encouraging the musicians to work harder and holding himself to a high standard of making smart choices about who to book and when.

This led us into a discussion about how a band could grow through its relationship with a venue. Joe explained to me that Wednesday nights were considered the “development” slot, for groups that were still developing a fanbase and wouldn’t be able to fill the venue on a weekend night. In addition to their fanbase, a group in the development slot was expected to work on their music and presentation. He said of one local band, “Even though they weren’t completely technically proficient, they were fun. And they weren’t awkward. Things that really are not appealing to a booker are acts that are awkward because it’s a show... You want your artists to be connected with people, not putting up a wall, because you want people to stick around and sell more drinks and keep the place going.” In contrast, some acts can’t handle the responsibility of a large weekend crowd. As Joe said, “I made the mistake a few times of having an act that was very popular, because they had a lot of friends, bringing them into a spot that they weren’t really ready for.” The band in a live performance has a role to fill. They need to make the audience comfortable and excited both about their music and about enjoying the venue. They contribute to a venue’s atmosphere, which is often what the venue is trying to sell in the first place. Finally, Joe said, “a show should be an escape away from everything else.” The artist is there as a catalyst and “captain” of that journey.

I felt at this point that we were starting to touch on the factors that make artists successful in their roles, so I began to use the word “professional.” I asked if an artist could be professional if they aren’t making money, and Joe said yes. He told me, “The professional is there whether or not the resources for them to fully appreciate that stature is available at the
moment... The people who succeed are the ones who are always *coming at it* professionally.”

The factors that contributed to this included control: “They never let the control out.” Also included was respect: “I’ve definitely turned down shows that would’ve been successful because I didn’t like the way that the band treats the venue.”

I asked if Joe would categorize the relationship between an artist and a venue as a “partnership,” and he agreed. He said, “Every band is partnering with the venue to have something successful. I mean any business, like when you have multiple people in leadership roles... if somebody’s not doing their job or not being respected it doesn’t work.”

These traits were not measures of technical prowess or number of likes on Facebook. Rather, they were concerned with how the artists treated their job, their work, and the venues. Speaking about one local band and their audience, Joe said, “[they] don’t have respect for art, they don’t have respect for other people, they don’t have respect for the venues, they’re just trying to get their high. And not like a drug high or alcohol but they’re just trying to, they’re not thinking about other people and the whole thing. They are just in it for themselves...” He told me that he eventually stopped booking this group because their audience was obnoxious, disrespectful, and caused the venue to get its first noise violation.

In contrast, he said of another local band that “they come in, they’re always playing new songs, they bring in the nicest audience, and they put on a show, like a show that should be in a gigantic field somewhere where people could just shake that energy out. And I would book them every weekend.” This was a group that took their job seriously and brought a crowd that respected the venue and other parties that were involved in putting on a concert. The responsibility of these bands was manifold: provide music, bring a crowd, create a positive
atmosphere. If the crowd and atmosphere that a band brought was disruptive or disrespectful, then a venue’s booking agent (such as Joe) was far less likely to do business with them. On the other hand, a band that brings a happy crowd which spent money and was easy for the venue to manage was a band that was doing their job and doing it well.

Our conversation eventually turned to the topic of where art stands and how it functions in the age of the Internet. The art community was not doomed because of modern technology. However, Joe did see that there needed to be cooperation to ensure its continued success. Regarding the division of labor, he told me, “everybody has to work with each other. There’s not as much money just floating around as there used to be. There’s not as many people willing to invest in art as there used to be. It’s a fight.” This community was not limited to artists and venues. He described the slew of people involved in a successful show:

The best shows are the ones where people put a lot of time into getting it set up. Good equipment, good, competent people on the board, on the lights, on the monitors, just really working overtime... Everybody should feel the heat, from the guy who’s driving the trucks or stuffing the cases around to, y’know, gaffer, or the LD (light director), sound guy, to the musicians. Everybody should be feeling it, and when the show starts, that’s when it’s good. That’s when everybody’s gliding. But if you don’t put the effort in beforehand...

Even a small concert can become a large-scale operation when one considers the sheer number of people who need to work together to make it happen. Furthermore, as Joe described, these people could not just be united by the goal of a paycheck. They needed to “feel the heat,” a kind of emotional drive that people sometimes reserve for only the musicians.

Given the way Joe described the importance of the art scene, it was not hard to understand how an entire industry could be united through a non-financial passion. Even though everyone in the industry needs to find some way to support themselves, be it in music
or otherwise, their involvement in the industry was predicated on a love for art. Their job is not to make money, but rather to help make possible the intangible “magic” of art. As Joe told me:

I think the importance of the artist on the local level, the amateur level, the professional level, is conveying the experience and starting discussions and making people think... Art is vital to our continued existence as a species, as cultures, as different cultures, and to keep us from becoming slaves. Keeping us active and relevant and part of the system, and not the “SYSTEM” but *this big system*, this big ecosystem that we live in. how many people are looking at their phone right now while this incredible sunset is happening, not engaging, and not being out there? I think that when you’re looking at the difference between an amateur and professional musician, I think the importance of both is vital. There are just certain people who are just supposed to be the communicators... But I think for the artist it has to take that dedication of believing in themselves and really thinking about what they want their career to be.

Here, I think Joe and I both encountered head-on the reality that art existed long before capitalism or any similar economic structure. We had touched on the real reason why art existed, and it was not to support any “industry” in the traditional definition. There was something distinctly non-industrial about the role of artists in society.

I spent some time wrestling over the last few sentences in that quote, because I wanted to make sure that I saw how Joe understood the relationship between amateurism and professionalism. My interpretation of it now is that the amateur musician is one of the people who “are just supposed to be the communicators.” A fifteen-year-old singer-songwriter who has a gift for telling stories may never make a dime playing music but will always be an effective communicator through art. On the other hand, the “artist” who is a professional needs to have the dedication and career-mindedness that Joe mentioned. The singer-songwriter above may become professional when he tells himself that *this* is how he wants to make a living and begins taking steps toward that goal. To me, the inherent value of the art is there from the beginning.
The professionalism comes when the artist finds a way to incorporate their art into the economic system they inhabit (i.e. capitalism).

Joe and I never mentioned the theory of Adorno, but already I was beginning to see some push-back. Joe did not consider the possibility that music as a whole could be adulterated by capitalism. Rather, he always talked about the scene as musician-focused, with making money being something that had to be fit into the art, not the other way around. What mattered when it came to a musician’s professionalism and success was not the amount of money they made but, rather, the way they connected with an audience and treated everyone else involved in the process. Furthermore, the music itself was judged as part of the entire experience. Technical prowess might be judged according to more quantitative thresholds, but what Joe looked for in bands was less tangible than that.

Joe, the venues he worked for, and the bands he worked with all existed in a capitalist society and, for all of them, their ability to feed themselves relied on their ability to earn a paycheck. To this end, they worked together. The band’s job was to bring an audience that would spend money at the venue, Joe’s job was to find bands who would succeed toward that, and the venue’s job was to give the band a place to play and to pay them at the end of the night. However, in spite of this, Joe’s discussion of the scene focused more on the non-economic aspects of the show. He talked about the “magic” of a live concert, the connection with the audience, the personality of the band, and the way every individual treated every other. He also talked about the wide range of people involved in some concerts and how each one of them needed to be driven by a passion for the art. What Joe described functioned as an industry in that it included a division of labor, a product (or a service?) provided for consumers
(or participants?), and the exchange of money. Despite this, the drive of this “industry” was fueled not by the money but by a love for the product it created.

Technology and Art

At this point in my analysis, I must make a crucial distinction between recorded music and live music. For the post-Marxist thinkers, the importance of this distinction lies primarily in the technology required for recorded and reproduced art. The concerns about modern technology and art voiced by Adorno and Horkheimer are echoed in the works of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin was also interested in the effect of rapidly accelerating technology on artistic production and, in particular, reproduction. The basic ability to reproduce art at all made him wonder about the reproduction’s authenticity, as any reproduction lacks the original’s “here and now” unique existence (The Work, 21). This posed a challenge to authenticity, as he says, “The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological... reproduction” (21). The reproduction itself is a “forgery” (21). In this way, Benjamin supports Adorno and Horkheimer’s dismissal of mass-produced culture.

However, Benjamin does not agree with the fire-and-brimstone of his contemporaries. Although technologically reproduced art might lack the uniqueness of an original, he claims that it promises certain properties that unique art cannot. Reproductions add something new; for example, a film reproduction of a stage play allows for novel viewpoints and settings. Also (perhaps more importantly), reproductions provide art where the original is unavailable (21). While Adorno and Horkheimer consider such reproductions to be necessarily inferior, Benjamin sees this as liberating. Art in the twentieth century was no longer confined in space and time,
and even performance pieces could be captured and consumed across the globe and across decades. To Benjamin, art in late capitalism was transformed but not doomed.

The transformation of how art was consumed entailed a transformation in how it was used. The mass reproduction and consumption of art in capitalist Europe effectuated a decay in “aura,” which is a function of uniqueness, and therefore it effectuated a change in the perception of those who consumed art (24). As the public eye shifted its focus and the public mind changed the way it understood the role of art, the role of art itself changed. As Benjamin states, the “unique value” of authentic works of art was based in “ritual” (24). The statues of ancient Greece served a purpose in Greek tradition. However, as technology allowed easier and more accurate reproduction, the place of art in a ritual setting became devalued. The importance of uniqueness and aura to ritual meant that art reproductions could no longer serve the same purpose they once did.

The introduction of photography, which marked a major leap in artistic reproduction, also marked for Benjamin the beginning of a revolution in the social function of art. As art’s value for ritual declined, a crisis ensued that was quieted by a “theology” of art for the sake of art, or “pure” art (24). As authenticity ceased to be applied in a meaningful way to art, the connection of art to ritual was soiled. In its place, society began to base art on secular, self-serving politics (24-25). As Benjamin notes, to ask for the “authentic” print of a photograph made from a plate is ridiculous (25). Authenticity mattered less and less. Instead, Europe began to understand art as existing in itself and for itself.
Here lies a crucial distinction between the work of Benjamin and the work of Adorno and Horkheimer. The same loss of authenticity noticed by all three writers took on vastly different interpretations. What Adorno and Horkheimer lamented as the death of meaningful art became the birth of a new age of artistic existence to Benjamin. Benjamin did not see the quicksand of enlightenment. Rather, he saw a world of opportunities. Technological reproduction allowed opportunities for exhibition, opportunities for creativity, and opportunities for creation. Furthermore, he rejected the premise that increased perception of art (through mass consumption) necessarily degrades its quality. He says, “the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation. The fact that this new mode of participation first appeared in a disreputable form should not mislead the observer” (39, emphasis in original). He concedes that the distracted, entertainment-based consumption described by Adorno and Horkheimer and the concentration of the art lover are antitheses. In the latter, the art lover enters into the work. In the former, the viewer absorbs the work into themselves (40). However, he claims that the distracted perception provided in the twentieth century “represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception” (40). It is not the death of the old ways so much as the birth of the new.

In addition to changes of perception, the technological reproducibility of art also pushed through a shift in who could make art, what art could be, and what it was able to do in society. As technology advanced, the materials and resources needed to created and recreate art became cheaper and more easily accessible. Soon, those who had once been confined to consumption were able to produce art as well. Benjamin talks in particular about readers of
literature, who, with increased access to printing and publishing, were able to become writers (33-34). Technology moved art from the hands of a select few to the hands of the masses who consumed it.

Changes in technology also effected changes in technique. In film, techniques like close-up shots and slow-motion created new and novel images which had never been seen before. This was not reproduction; this was creation. This exploration gave birth in film to a “dreamstate,” or a set of “sense impressions” which invoked in the audience a feeling of surreality. Benjamin, though, did not fear such new perceptions and their effect on the masses. On the contrary, he thought that they presented a possibility for psychological “immunization.” By exploring as a group the delusions made possible in film, the masses were protected from their materialization in real life. Mass culture in film allowed society to come together to laugh at deep psychological sentiments which, left unaddressed, could otherwise manifest in a dangerous “psychosis” (37-38).

Finally, art’s increased reproducibility changed what art was able to do in society. During the production of a film, the actor faces the “apparatus” to confront the masses. Both the actor and the masses know this, and know that it is the masses who control her. Benjamin sees in this a rich opportunity for revolution. Of course, tainted by capitalism, such a revolutionary possibility is used by film capital for “counterrevolutionary purposes” to reinforce the corruption of fascism (32-33). Even still, the possibility for film to move the masses remains and the fact that it is used by capitalism for counterrevolution cannot dispel that possibility. Indeed, the very nature of mass consumption grants art a new power. Unlike other forms of art, the cinema is designed to be consumed en masse by large groups together. The group, claims
Benjamin, is much more ready to react progressively to a controversial work of art because of its concentration of individuals (36). Film is designed for communal consumption and, as a result, holds a power for social change in a direction that was previously unseen in art.

**One for the Money, Two for the Show**

As I discussed above, these concerns were raised by Adorno regarding music in late capitalism. The increased focus on the exchange value of music resulted, so Adorno claimed, in a devaluation of the music. Artists became detached from the art and mainstream music lost something vital about its authenticity. Adorno also saw this process as irreversible, since any music which followed would draw on elements of the adulterated music which came before it. Art and capitalism could not mix, and capitalism’s inherent strength meant that, once introduced, art would bow to it. It is no wonder Adorno took such a dismal approach to his writings on jazz.

However, Joe’s descriptions of the local music scene don’t quite line up with Adorno’s criticisms. Joe saw an industry of people who did what they could to make a living but who were, in the end, all working out of a love for the things they made. These people are not alienated from their product at all. Rather, their labor was driven by their feeling of connection to their product. As Joe said, “Everybody should feel the heat, from the guy who’s driving the trucks or stuffing the cases around to, you know, gaffer, or the LD (light director), sound guy, to the musicians. Everybody should be feeling it, and when the show starts, that’s when it’s good.” On this level, a good show results from non-economic motivation, not solely from the promise
of a large paycheck. Those workers, as well as the audience, all experience the excitement of Benjamin’s here-and-now of the live performance.

The music itself is also different from Adorno’s observations. The musicians Joe liked to work with were not making music that felt impersonal. On the contrary, what they are “selling” is the very feeling of authenticity which Adorno thought was lost. Their goal is to connect with their audience through performance on an extra-material, extra-economic level. In Joe’s words, “the importance of the artist on the local level, the amateur level, the professional level, is conveying the experience and starting discussions and making people think.” Joe saw musicians who had something to say and audiences who were willing to listen. They were not distracted, and they certainly were not disinterested in the music because it was cheap. They came out to see a band play because they wanted to participate in an experience which they could not find anywhere else. Benjamin’s aura seems very present here. Furthermore, the combined consumption that interested Benjamin played a large role in the experience of audience members at a concert. Even if that experience relied on financial resources to make sure it worked, the experience itself was distanced from that. Money enabled these shows in countless ways, but it did not define them.

Joe’s thoughts did not adhere to Adorno’s criticisms. On the other hand, the writings of Benjamin seemed to address Joe’s experiences more accurately. Music had not lost its authenticity in the face of technology. As a category, its values already existed separate from technological and capitalistic advancements. Still, as Benjamin saw, it had gained a new power. Digital recording, editing, and effects allowed not only for novel sounds but also for novel ways of creating music. Social networking, streaming, and online downloads introduced
revolutionary methods of promoting and distributing music. These changes allotted to music an unprecedented amount of cultural sway. Mass media could change the public’s worldview in ways never possible before. Benjamin saw this, and Joe did, too. The Information Era, borne of capitalism, granted new opportunities for communication and, as Joe said, artists “are just supposed to be the communicators.” Art was not being consumed by capitalism, it was being empowered.
Chapter Three

As Benajmin demonstrated, public consumption of art en masse contributed to a different kind of influence on public opinions. Benjamin talked about these factors primarily in terms of film, but the same applies for music. The feeling of community that is garnered through the shared love of a pop song can give the song’s content a foot in the door toward shaping popular worldviews. Consider, for example, Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way.” Although the LGBTQA community had existed before the song, Gaga’s hit became an anthem for gay rights. Another example might be the rapper Macklemore. Though the singer himself came under fire for changing lyrics to maintain a relationship with Nike, many of his songs promote anti-consumerist messages and their popularity ensured that they would be heard.

Benjamin stated that mass media could provide a tool for revolution. Mass distribution is fueled by capitalism and might not exist without the enormous wealth created by capitalism, but the messages distributed within the art are not necessarily capitalist. Indeed, the experiences of musicians sometimes verge on anti-capitalist. Their goals were often to find ways to perform and enjoy music in spite of their need to make money; combining the two sometimes was just a necessary evil. We can see a similar sentiment indirectly through programs like Spotify or Pandora; many music listeners would rather pay a monthly fee for unlimited listening than pay per-album.

Before the internet, the mass distribution of music was only possible through either tangible and expensive media like CDs or transient media like the radio. However, the internet (as well as technologies like the mp3) introduced new tools for distribution as well as the
opportunity for a new framework of artistic support. Some of my participants had become
deeply engaged in this new medium, and it had resulted in them challenging existing structures
of the economics of music. Benjamin pointed out in the twentieth century that the mass
distribution of art was a serious revolutionary tool. Now, in the twenty-first century, we are
beginning to see the real application of that tool.

**Big Heavy World**

The role of technology in artistic reproduction and distribution posed a significant
problem for Adorno because it allowed for an unprecedented distance between art, artist, and
art-lover. However, Benjamin saw in this mass culture new windows of opportunity. To begin,
recording technologies provided exciting techniques for editing and effects. More importantly,
the newfound abilities of artists to distribute their art meant that art could be consumed on
much larger scales than ever before. Unlike Adorno, Benjamin chose to focus on what was
*exciting* about this change. Today, many of my participants consider technologies like the
Internet to be invaluable tools for the contemporary artist. In the following sections, I will
examine the experiences of two participants who have been exploiting the Internet for its
infinite usefulness in the music industry. The first is Jim Lockridge, founder and executive
director of Big Heavy World.

Big Heavy World is a volunteer-run arts support organization based in Burlington,
Vermont. Jim founded it in 1996 as a resource to document and promote the local music scene
on the new and increasingly popular Internet. As Big Heavy developed a reputation, artists
began approaching the website with press materials for their personal promotion. Big Heavy
started providing a platform for artists to make their own websites and email accounts, a much-needed service before the advent of MySpace and Gmail. Meanwhile, Jim and his peers were making compilation albums from the music being performed in town, organizing large-scale events, and, soon, streaming music online. The organization now wears a number of hats, from running an FM radio station to broadcasting live video feeds of local concerts to providing a tour van to local bands on the condition that they advertise the organization and perform at a benefit to fund the van’s use. All of this work is done by volunteers for the sake of Vermont music.

I first met Jim when I attended a crew meeting for Big Heavy World as a prospective volunteer. The meeting was at Big Heavy’s headquarters, which is housed on the ground floor of Burlington College. The room was lit warmly with strung lights around the walls, and it was full of band posters, old broadcast television cameras, headphones, CDs and couches. Jim was seated in the middle of a ring of college-aged people and was discussing with them new initiatives for marketing for the organization. He welcomed me when I came in, moved to a stool so I could sit, and asked me to introduce myself to the group. I was surrounded by students, many of them volunteering for internship credit, and we all gave a brief explanation of who we were and what kind of work we wanted to do. Jim responded to and engaged with each person’s suggestion; he explained that Big Heavy provides not only support on the side of the artists but also workforce development on the side of volunteers. The goals of the organization are always community-based, from artists to employees.

Jim agreed to conduct an interview with me about the history, operation, and philosophy of Big Heavy World. I asked him how Big Heavy’s direction differed from other
experiences of artists with figures of authority, and he quickly assured me that the organization was not trying to promote its own structure as the definitively best option:

“We don’t have a model in our head of what success is in any one frame of reference. Just like that, our model of supporting our arts community isn’t in our head the only model or the only valid model.”

Having clarified this, he answered the question more directly:

“Our intention is to provide either the resources or the cheerleading, the spirit, to encourage artists to support themselves, to advance themselves.” Big Heavy, he explained, is useless to artists who want to shirk the responsibility of promotion or fundraising off to a major record label. His organization’s relationship with artists is one of cooperation and support with the intention of developing artists to be able to help themselves. To me, this started to sound like teaching artists the skills necessary to be commercially successful so I began to introduce the word “professional.” Jim said,

“Our relationship with artists in Vermont is as artists, and we understand that there’s a whole skill set that accompanies being a professional musician and we understand that artists are on every wavelength of that spectrum.”

I asked what that skill set might incorporate:

Probably all the typical things you’d think of anyway, but how to represent yourself professionally, from the most basic responsibility of putting your contact info on your demo recording to refining your understanding of how to get ahead in a profession by taking high contrast photos that reproduce well in black and white newsprint, or having a website that gives a venue what it needs to understand what you sound like and your technical needs are, or having verbage prepared to hand to somebody who really wants to promote you because they’re an independent booker and you’re in their venue or
they’re the press itself... You can be a new artist or a naïve artist, an inexperienced artist, and still be professional because you’re on the track to understanding and caring about what people are gonna want from you.

The various tasks necessary to achieve even moderate local success as a musician are diverse and demanding. Indeed, the “music industry” is an industry exactly because there is such a pervasive division of labor. At the upper end of commercial success in music, artists can hire whole teams whose sole job is promotion, marketing, accounting, management, or even songwriting. However, for a musician without the resources or connections to hire external assistance, all of these jobs are left to the artists themselves. Much like starting one’s own business, there are an impossible number of hats to wear, potentially massive and risky investments, and absolutely no guidebook. Also like new entrepreneurs, musicians entering into the industry on their own usually do not bring with them background knowledge of how to navigate the business relationships and challenges they will face. Those are things they will need to learn along the way.

This is one area where Big Heavy World steps in. As Jim explained to me, Big Heavy works with artists of all levels of experience and prowess in business. They begin with the assumption that not every artist already has the skills necessary to be commercially successful. As he put it, “we don’t judge them because they fail at professionalism, we support what their actual interests are.” Furthermore, he rejected the idea that “professionalism” is a trait of the artist:

“When you say professional, what I hear is not who they are but how they behave when they’re interacting with businesses... and nobody assumes that they want to interact with other businesses in the first place. They’re artists.”
The artistry that Jim is talking about is distinct and separate from commercial success, which we might understand to be a sign of being a successful “capitalist.” Indeed, he often talked about art as a “calling” and said that to some people, the need to take a day job to make money as a necessary evil: “I know musicians who wish they didn’t have a job so they could be devoted to their art... I think there’s a real tension.” If all music could make a living for the artist, such supplementary work would not be necessary. However, this is not the case. Jim told me, “I talked to someone yesterday who spent $21,000 recording an album. A local band. And they have a job in an automobile dealership to pay that debt.” The band did not even break even on this recording; they lost money and had to take another job to make up for it.

This made me interested in bands who would rather make their money by making music, and I was curious about making compromises in what they would rather be playing in order to cater to a larger audience and make more money. I asked Jim if there are trends of the artistic community (in Burlington or elsewhere) to follow market demands for a specific kind of music. While Joe told me that there was no single genre “in demand” in Burlington, Jim painted a slightly different picture. He said, “If we were talking in terms of financial reward for following a trend, locally there has been examples of bands trying to be successful, pop-punk bands, for money. There was a ‘sound...’” On the other hand, as time went on, Jim saw this dynamic change: “I’ve seen local hip hop be respected, by more and more people, but... it’s not apparent to me that it’s because it’s a successful genre. It’s more like it’s an outlet that fits their need for expression. So maybe there’s more a sense of freedom to pursue it but I don’t know that it’s driven by economic incentives.” To talk about the history of mass-consumption of music, I brought up the popularity and homogeneity of swing bands that was the result of a large
economic market for dance music. Jim was quick to point out the differences, though, of that market and the current one.

Was [swing] an art of monoculture because of the limited distribution or access to the music? With the internet making every form of music available, I don’t see there being kingsmakers in the realm of genres and I’ve lived through a period of a couple decades in Burlington where skilled, original musicianship is respected across the board regardless of the genre. And even in Burlington, there’s cross influences and musicians swapping and ‘supergroups’ for the fun of it! So I don’t see anybody playing follow the leader, I see people being confidently their own musician.

This sounds a lot like a common attitude of Vermonsters to embrace individuality, uniqueness, and genuineness in one’s craft. Jim saw that the power of Big Heavy was to steer Vermont in a new but familiar direction by fostering a nationally (internationally?) important music scene:

The state has put a lot of effort into creating ‘the brand,’ the identity of the state. It’s healthy outdoor sports, it’s pastoral scenery, it’s agriculture, and it’s skiing. So since the 60s, that’s where the focus has gone and the investment has gone and the brand of the state. And that is limiting and homogenizing and childish. When you have music representing the depth and scope of creative vitality and diversity present in our society of Vermonsters, I want the state to reflect a brand that captures the idea that there’s not goddam rules in Vermont and it’s all amazing. They haven’t thrown that switch yet but that’s what we’re contributing as a voice. With music as the exemplar.

Future Fields

The second participant who has been using the Internet for new and innovative purposes is Eric Maier. Eric is a member of a local band called Madaila, which had come onto the scene in 2015 and exploded in popularity (at the time of writing, they have 2,441 likes on Facebook, as well as over 115,000 plays and 30,000 listeners on Spotify). Eric is also the co-founder of Madaila’s record label, Future Fields. I sent him an email, and his reply a few weeks later apologized for the delay; Madaila had been on tour. We set a date and time for our interview.
Eric and I decided to meet at his studio in downtown Burlington. He wore a flannel and a well-trimmed beard, and had the face of a young but experienced entrepreneur. When I arrived, he opened the door and welcomed me into a tidy, sleek, but comfortable room that I could only describe as a lobby. A travel-trunk-coffee-table sat in front of a large leather couch, a small desk faced the door, and vintage musical devices including an old reel-to-reel tape machine were arranged for décor. We shook hands and he offered to give me a tour.

From the front room, Eric led me into the recording studio, a small room with a drum kit, an organ, an electric piano, and various microphones. Connected by a wall with a large window was the control room for tracking recordings onto the computer. Back through the lobby, we came to the production room with another computer for mixing and mastering. Although we didn’t go in, Eric told me that his bedroom and the bedroom of his roommate were through another door. I couldn’t help but smile about the thought of living in a recording studio.

We sat down in the lobby and, before I could even take out my notebook, began talking about my project. Eric had read and studied much of the theory I had been focusing on, including Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin, so I immediately felt comfortable putting his experiences in that academic context. Eric explained to me that Future Fields was experimenting with a new style of fundraising. Rather than charge listeners for downloads, the label decided to accept that their music would eventually become available for free and decided to make it so from the start. He said, “What we’re trying to do is have people able to access our stuff very easily... We’re not fighting that, we’re embracing it. And trying to spread it as far as possible. And then we’re asking people to supplement that... Basically a donation,
membership, subscription...” He called this plan the “patronage platform,” a style of crowd-funding whereby the music itself could be accessed for free and the organization asked its listeners for voluntary support.

The goal with the patronage platform is to promote a different kind of valuation for Future Fields’ music. Eric explained to me, “We’re trying to encourage people to, in terms of transactionally, just take our music for free because they’re going to anyway, then go through a process of valuation in a little bit more of a wholesale or holistic zone rather than just a transactional money-zone... They’re answering the question, ‘What is this really worth to you in your life? What do you think you could pay?’” The format, then, is through donations or a membership of, for example, $5 per month. That cost is more per-track than a Spotify membership, but far less than downloads from iTunes. Also, unlike Spotify, listeners can be sure that their money is making a significant contribution to the artist and they get a feeling of personal, direct support.

I was curious about the idea of non-transactional support. On a larger level, a grassroots-type patronage system still provides members with something, even if that is just the warm and fuzzy feeling of helping to support the arts. However, more commonly, a membership buys special privileges or access that is unavailable without spending money. I asked Eric if there were any such benefits to a Future Fields membership. He told me there were, but that the platform still represented a non-transactional form of support. To begin, he assured me that people with memberships were not getting their money’s worth in a “traditional market sense... It’s more of the idea of supporting and then giving away things that aren’t tangible, they don’t have a per-unit cost.” He described a content stream available only
to patrons, which included bonus videos, pictures, and songs. In addition, members might have early access to an album. However, he conceived of these things as bonuses and not the reason why people would support the label or the band. “The reason you’re doing it is because you think it’s the right thing to do, or you think it’s a fun thing to do... It’s like Christmas, you know you’re gonna get stuff but you’re not in this mindset of ‘What are my gifts worth?’ You’re not adding up what you receive versus what you spend on people. You’re doing a nice thing by doing it, and you’re also receiving.” Eric’s use of Mauss’ terms should not be ignored; by distancing the payment from the “gift,” and by making the product itself available anyway, Eric’s goal was to develop a relationship with his listeners of mutual support. At the same time, as Mauss notes, Eric’s platform also obliged him to give something extra to the gift-giving members. Much like Scott, Future Fields had engaged in an anti-capitalist economic microcosm.

I asked if this system could work on a larger-scale, and Eric confidently agreed. He admitted that it would require a change in the current paradigm of music consumption, but argued that his style of support already existed elsewhere. One favorite analogy of his was support for religious institutions. He said, “You don’t go to the cheapest church... You figure out what you like, participate in it, and you’re like, ‘Huh, if this church is a central part of my life, other people around me are the ones that are paying for the building...’ You do what you can to make it happen.” He also cited public radio as a preexisting model of crowdfunding support for the arts. He said, “My parents have mugs from every year they spent $30 a month [supporting public radio]. That’s an expensive mug... But it’s not about the mug. They’re part of the organism when they support it.” The mug and, similarly, bonuses from Future Fields, are more representations of the real reason for voluntary listener-support.
Eric’s thoughts about how a band could support itself financially led me to ask him about the central term of this project: “Professionalism.” He defined it as “paying attention to the whole experience that we can give people. Not just restricting that to the music itself.” This was a similar understanding as what Joe described to me. When Madaila performs, they wear costumes and put on a show. Eric said, “If you went to see our band and we were wearing what we wear on the street, it would break the charm a little bit… There is this idea, this theatrical nature of putting on a show where you want people to be taken away by it, somewhere else. So that has to do with how you’re dressed, how you present yourself, the flow of the show, but also with how you present the band to the world...” The goal of the band was to provide their audience not just with music but with an experience.

The comment about presenting a band to the world drew our conversation into the marketing side of band management. The typical term here is “branding,” but Eric explained that Future Fields uses different language to try to emphasize their own take on marketing. The label referred to those efforts as “amplification.” Just like their onstage presence, Madaila’s marketing strategy tries to focus on a more holistic understanding of public outreach than simply advertising a product. Eric’s words said it best:

So I think when we think about artists that are professional, there’s attention being paid to how they’re amplifying themselves to the world, what they’re saying and how they’re saying it from that soap box. So like the live show I was describing more in detail, it’s like having a consistency to what your message is. What your poster looks like, your fonts, what gigs you choose to play as opposed to not. If everything you do is part of a bigger statement, a bigger push and you don’t do things that deviate from that… People are going to hear your message a certain way no matter what, and it’s gonna get distorted. So you might as well have it distort in a way that you want. Like a good amp.

The professional skillset included understanding how a band will be perceived by the public and tailoring its promotional efforts to that. If an audience came to a concert not just for music but
for an *experience*, then the band’s marketing needed to communicate that. In his book *The Song Machine*, John Seabrook quotes Chris Blackwell, founder of Island Records, as saying of marketing that “the people you are trying to reach, by and large, don’t view music as a commodity but as a relationship with a band” (117). Finally, as Eric mentioned, public communication is often received differently than it was intended to be received. Good amplification requires anticipating “distortion.” A metaphor Eric used was of recording a vocalist with a microphone. A vocalist might sound warm and full in a well-designed room, but the direct recording is often dry and ugly; the job of the recording engineer is to anticipate this and use artificial reverberation or an equalizer to *restore* the sound of the room. Likewise, good promotion means anticipating how public communication distorts a band’s message and compensating for that to recreate the experience of a one-on-one interaction.

This direct-to-fan approach and the relationships it fosters are relatively new phenomena made possible in large part by the Internet. When a basic Internet presence is *free* for bands, they no longer require a middleman to connect with their listeners. Thus we see another blow that the digital age dealt to the old music industry; although pop stars still use the distribution infrastructure of a major label, more and more artists are now able to do this work themselves. The result is new and innovative ways of distributing and marketing the music. Indeed, even larger organizations like Big Heavy World, which provide this kind of service to many different artists, are able to operate with the same kind of personality which Eric celebrated. No longer beholden to record labels, artists now have an unprecedented amount of freedom to market themselves and make their music available however they want.
Chapter Four

Adorno’s critique of art under twentieth-century capitalism focused on the popular music of the time and place: jazz. Its pervasiveness and its close relationship with alienating technologies, he thought, contributed to a musical style that focused on simplifying what had come before it. It was a debased ripoff of other music and of itself, and its very authenticity had been permanently sullied by its relationship to late capitalism. This process was irreversible.

As I explained above, Adorno’s interpretation was by no means the only voice at the time. On the contrary, thinkers like Walter Benjamin took issue with the idea that popular art under capitalism was inherently and permanently damaged. Benjamin suggested that perhaps the new mode of consumption marked the development, not the death, of the modern realm of art. New technologies presented completely new tools for style, effect, and distribution which revolutionized the processes of producing and consuming art. In turn, the new methods of distribution and consumption revolutionized the way that people understood mass culture and the way they thought about art. Adorno was right that the populace had adopted a new artistic paradigm, but he actively refuted the potential legitimacy which Benjamin saw.

The world of music today is, in many ways, drastically different from the world which Benjamin and Adorno were discussing. The Internet, computers, and the increasing development of digital recording technology have introduced opportunities and tools for musical creation and distribution which they could not possibly have imagined. Of course, I doubt they would have been surprised with these developments. The technological trajectory remains in the same direction (albeit exponentially faster) as always, racing toward ever faster
and easier ways to capture an artistic performance and recreate it later. Furthermore, other technologies have introduced novel sounds and effects, much in the way that Benjamin saw novel visual effects with new video technology.

In this chapter, I will venture a discussion of contemporary hit radio (CHR), otherwise known as mainstream pop. This discussion will include an analogy between CHR and the jazz which Adorno and Benjamin heard. This analogy is by no means perfect, and I will include an analysis of where it falls short. However, in these places, I will also show why the gaps fail to discount the larger parallel. In short, to apply the major schools of thought from the mid-twentieth century to the art world of today is still appropriate; the words may have changed, but the song remains the same.

**Birth of the Pop**

There seems to be a general consensus that CHR is inherently lacking in some fundamental musical quality. Phrases such as “guilty pleasure” are tossed around with ideas that pop is unartistic, unoriginal, and that its stars are untalented. Much of this seems to come from an agreed-upon “fact” that all pop music has been manufactured according to a scientific formula for mass-consumption. I put “fact” in quotes because this is neither entirely true nor entirely untrue.

The real fact is that pop music was not invented by a record executive’s team of scientists in lab coats. On the contrary, the sounds that we have come to associated with western pop were developed in a small Swedish studio called Cheiron (Seabrook, 17). Cheiron was the home of Dag Volle (a.k.a. Denniz PoP), a young music lover who could not play a single
lick on an instrument but who knew his way around a turntable better than anyone (PoP stands for “Prince of Pickups,” referring to his skill with a stylus). He and fellow producer Martin Sandberg (a.k.a. Max Martin) had been experimenting with mashing up older, melodic Swedish hit groups such as ABBA and the more beat-centric music coming out of America, the UK, and Jamaica when Denniz was sent a demo tape from a local band called Ace of Base.

Denniz hated the group at first and was not interested in working with them. However, in an almost fictitious twist of fate, the tape got stuck in his car’s stereo and he was forced to listen to their song, “Mr. Ace,” every day for the next two weeks. By the time he was able to remove it, he had contracted an earworm and the band’s music began to grow on him (36). He contacted Ace of Base and agreed to produce the song for them.

Ace of Base was later signed by Clive Davis, the legendary A&R man of Arista Records, who made them an international hit. Denniz’s work with their music, which had the melodic and harmonic listenability of Swedish pop but the danceability of reggae and rock, made them an instant success in a music market that was oversaturated with grunge. The story is, of course, far more complex than this short summary allows. However, the most important point is that the sound of CHR was born out of a genuine passion for the various musics that influenced it and was not developed by people who were studying market trends to invent “the formula.” As hard as it might be to believe, the sound of CHR was, once upon a time, fresh.

Authenticity

Of course, the “fact” of a manufactured, mass-appeal style of music has some validity, too. After Denniz PoP’s early death, the producers at Cheiron began to feel that they were just
copying their own work (122). They had (perhaps unwittingly) invented something of a formula, which was later developed and capitalized on by producers like Dr. Luke. Later pop music would be written by teams of internationally-renowned writers and producers, sometimes brought together for intensive writing boot-camps where they were expected to churn out material every day. Teams like Stargate began to write music with the sole intention of making hits. If a song wasn’t perfect, the idea was scrapped for maximum efficiency (216). Furthermore, the artist whose name is prominently displayed on the album usually is, at the most, tangentially involved in the process. Indeed, some artists are explicitly told that if they write their own material, they will fail (141).

It is this structure, which distances the “artist” from the actual creative process of songwriting, which leads to the idea that pop music is impersonal, mechanical, or inauthentic. Compared to an exposed voice singing original lyrics and playing a single acoustic guitar (for example), an act like Meghan Trainor appears plastic. For myself as a consumer, pop was adulterated by the anonymity of its songwriting, the flawlessness of nearly every performance and certainly every record, and the knowledge that the “artist” is sometimes little more than the face on the album cover.

However, my interviewee, Eric, disagreed. He had similar taste to me when it came to music like jazz or funk, but he also had a love of pop music. He maintained that for any music, there had to be “some human connection on it... people need to be involved.” This reminded me of the history of Cheiron, where CHR was invented by real people who had a real love for the music they were making. On the production side, the fact that the music was being made by real people meant that it had some kind of authenticity.
He felt that authenticity on the side of the listener, as well. He told me, “I don’t necessarily believe that we’ve all just been dumbed down to want to listen to garbage. I like pop music, it still hits the sweet spot for me in a real way. I have an authentic human feeling even listening to Katy Perry.” He never denied that there was a difference between bebop and pop. Bebop was rhythmically and harmonically more complicated, and to Eric had a longer “shelf life” (meaning that a bebop album might be an important part of his listening longer than a pop album). On the other hand, he actively refused to put one above the other. To Eric, a lover of a vast array of music, pop had as much value as the next style in spite of the factors I outlined above.

After talking with Eric, I began to wonder whether I had succumbed to the same prejudices I was reading in Adorno. For years, I had subscribed to the conviction that pop music was inherently lesser than my beloved jazz. I scoffed at its writing teams (about which I knew nothing), and I wrote the entire genre off as fake. I considered it to be a product of capitalism while ignoring the possibility that previous popular forms of music had been, too.

I am not sure that any music is authentic simply because it was made by humans (this is not necessarily what Eric was saying; I am just finding the extreme). However, studying the Frankfurt school forced me to put my own musical tastes in perspective. The realization that jazz had once been written off for being a product of capitalism begged the question of whether pop could be written off for the same reason. Many of the language I used to complain about pop had been echoed in Adorno’s writing, and I started to challenge myself by arguing against it in the same way I was arguing against Adorno.
My feelings now are that few genres can be judged so generally. The style itself is not what makes or breaks music’s authenticity. Specific makers of pop (or jazz, or rock, or hip-hop, or dub) might make music that is more or less “authentic,” and their listeners might occupy a similar spectrum. However, the category itself can only describe features and characteristics of the music, not its value. In the following examination, I will discuss a few of these features and challenge what they mean for authenticity.

Writing teams like Stargate can often churn out many songs in a day. As I explained above, their writing process often values quantity over time spent per-song. If a song they wrote that morning doesn’t ooze “hit,” they put it aside and try again from scratch. This come-and-go style of writing may seem cold. After all, isn’t music supposed to be a deeply moving experience, with melodies which stay with one for a lifetime? How can a writer make worthwhile music if their process tells them to throw out an idea if it isn’t immediately great? Where is the dedication?

These, however, are the wrong questions and stem from a different set of musical interests. For a style like classical music, composition can take months or years. For that kind of process, a song which took 20 minutes to write cannot possibly be valuable. Similarly, listeners of classical music must often spend years listening to a piece to really feel like they “understand” it. It is also possible that the associations of classical music with elite classes and intellectual superiority have resulted in a bit of an appreciation competition among listeners. After all, traditions of silence and somberness in concert developed long after the deaths of many of the composers whose music receives that treatment now.
If pop music is judged according to the cultural setting of classical music, it will surely fall short. However, pop music can be judged according to its own cultural framework (and, indeed, should be judged as such). A primary tenet of pop music writing is that if a listener is not immediately attracted to a song, they change the radio dial. Why should the song’s writer feel any differently? Pop writing teams claim that they scrap a song if it will not be a “hit,” a standard which makes it seem as though the only reason they write is to make money. Perhaps this is true, but we should also consider that a song is a “hit” when it becomes hugely popular. Good marketing can only go so far; on some level, a hit has to be good music. Furthermore, even if the lyrics and melody of a pop song only took 20 minutes to write, the production of a pop song can actually be painstakingly thorough. Perfecting the bass guitar tone on a four-bar section might take a day or more. In this way, if the composition process is not extremely complicated, the production process is. That is where producers achieve the “larger than life” sound of pop, and it is not easy.

A common thread which I saw throughout my participants was that, although they were conforming to certain rules about what music was appropriate to play, they did not express significant frustration over it. Some kind of constraint or boundary surrounding a style of music can be hugely liberating in a sense. Indeed, it is constraints and boundaries which define styles of music and, more abstractly, define music from chaos. The demands of a free market put constraints on musicians, but they also guide musicians and often can be influenced by musicians. Individual artists who feel that they are not realizing their full creative potential may be entirely correct, but to lament the pop “formula” simply by virtue of its being formulaic is to assign an impossible ideal of boundary-free expression. Adorno is right that listeners raised
under capitalism will orient themselves toward the music that was created in capitalism, and that the music they make will be influenced by the market. However, the existence of such influences cannot be considered unnatural, and their origins should hardly matter either. Music’s extra-economic value predated any formal economic system by an immeasurable scale, and the development of capitalism did not introduce any fundamental shift therein.

Finally, Eric told me that the pop music he loves has a short “shelf life,” but that this has no bearing on how much he enjoys it in the moment. Regardless of the writing process or its re-listenability, good pop can mean the world to its listeners. Indeed, it can mean the world to listeners even if they got it for free. It is here that Adorno’s argument truly falls through. Adorno claimed that the increasingly free consumption of music would devalue it in the eyes of a capitalistic audience. Now, we have more ways to listen to music for free (or close to free) than ever before, and yet Adorno’s fears have yet to come to full fruition.

Eric’s patronage platform is a slightly unusual model for an individual artist. However, a similar model has already revolutionized the modern music industry. That model is Spotify, a Swedish streaming service where listeners can access the program’s full library for free. A monthly $9.99 subscription allows some bonuses, such as no advertisements or more control over playlists when listening on a phone. There is no way, though, for listeners to pay individually for a song, album, or artist. Either one buys a subscription or one does not. Like Eric’s model, the music is there for free. Paying for the subscription is optional and is not connected to any specific recordings or set of recordings. Without using Spotify, of course, listeners can access even more music completely for free (some of these means are more legal than others).
I would like to take a slight detour to talk about Spotify as a model. This platform of unlimited streaming which pays per-play royalties to artists has come under fire by people like Taylor Swift, who criticize the fact that Spotify’s royalties are significantly less than would come from an iTunes download. Still, the model has certain advantages for listeners and artists. Much like Eric explained with his patronage platform, distancing the music from the payment gives consumers a much more natural listening experience which they can forget they paid for. Also, the unlimited streaming allows for any given track to be played far more times than it would if listeners had to pay individually for it. Indeed, the group Vulfeck took advantage of this factor when they released their album Sleepify in 2014. Sleepify consisted entirely of tracks with no music on them, and Vulfpeck encouraged listeners to play the album on repeat while they slept. Using the nearly $20,000 of royalties earned from Sleepify plays, Vulfpeck organized a tour of admission-free concerts (McIntyre). Although Spotify eventually removed Sleepify, the band is currently launching a similar ploy entitled Flow State, promising a $1 payoff to any fan who listens to the track 1 million times and $5 for 5 million plays (Admin).

Adorno feared what free radio broadcasts would mean for music valued according to a capitalistic framework. If those fears were valid, surely we would see an even more extreme devaluation now, since access is easier, the recordings are better quality, and listeners have complete control over what they hear. However, that kind of devaluation has not occurred. In fact, the only place where we might reasonably expect to see evidence of it is in perhaps the most capitalistic measurement in the music industry: record sales.

I said above that pop music cannot be fairly judged according to the same standards as classical music. I also mentioned that classical listeners have traditions which may, in some
cases, put the music they are hearing in a context which would have been foreign to its composer. I now want to argue that the capitalistic adulteration which Adorno feared might exist, but not in the genres he discussed or which we might expect. At the label level, pop music might be deeply intertwined with capitalism. However, at the level of the listener, access has become increasingly non-capitalistic. Listeners get their music either for free or through a service like Spotify, where a flat fee is paid for unlimited access and artists are paid from the company’s pool of money. Even the jazz which Adorno discussed was often presented in settings where listeners were paying for drinks or dinner but not the music.

On the other end of the spectrum, classical music culture is much less distanced from capitalism. Botstein describes the shift in European music traditions during the nineteenth century as deriving from literary, not musical, traditions. He says,

The late eighteenth-century definition of the requisite musical skills of the musical connoisseur had been replaced, by the mid-nineteenth century, with ones transferred from the realm of literary culture...To be able to listen and then talk intelligently about music became sufficient for the use of music as a cultural good, either as an instrument of self-cultivation and education or as a vehicle for the public display of social status...In order to prevent superficiality and to achieve the marriage of the utilitarian with the beautiful and realize the higher purposes inherent in the generalization of musical knowledge (beyond the "mere ear tickling play of pretty sounds"), a source book of modern descriptive, historical, and analytical insight was indispensable. Without edifying reading material for the public, music might remain stigmatized as a mere craft (Botstein, 138-139). Those social rules were developed during exactly the time period which Marx discussed! It was not until composers like Mozart and Bach were long dead that their audiences began putting their music in a glass case. But this should not be surprising; the music which was once enjoyed only by Europe’s royalty had been granted the same elite status in the emerging class system of the West. In comparison, modern listening habits represent a fairly anti-capitalist form of music
consumption. Fueled by the free exchange of information and listening provided by the internet, the cold intellectualization of “high art” has thawed out into an open forum of ideas and creativity.

Eric and Jim may not be explicitly (or even secretly) working to subvert capitalism via music. Still, their work and similar projects have given listeners the tools to separate the music from the money. If organizations like Big Heavy World allow artists to make their music without being concerned with not paying their rent, programs like Spotify allow listeners to enjoy their music without having to see it as a commodity. Adorno saw the lowered costs of listening to music as a source of devaluation. However, the fact that listeners are willing to pay for a service which already gives them their music for free speaks to the argument that listeners do value their listening experience. Although the record labels suffered a blow from online listening, this new vehicle favors the consumption of music over the price and it is forcing the music industry to reassess its relationship to capitalism.
Conclusion

During the twentieth century, popular music in the West became increasingly governed by its means of production. The infrastructure of music recording and distribution took a much more central role as mass culture developed and people across the country and beyond nurtured a taste for similar sounds. The music market for genres like jazz and rock grew exponentially until those records were in demand across the globe. Music deserved its new title as an “industry,” as more and more people found employment in a multibillion-dollar enterprise.

Meanwhile, capitalism as a system was growing. The second world war had given birth to an economic boom, and the United States was one of the largest beneficiaries. This had a large impact on the music industry, as unprecedented amounts of money were poured into the making of records. However, this money was largely centralized with a select group of record labels. Bands were beholden to these labels for the equipment and know-how necessary to make and sell an album, and a record contract could easily leave a band with hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt.

This is the kind of capitalistic imbalance which Marx hated. Within the music industry, the means of production were controlled by a small circle of businesses which were concerned, as businesses are, with making a profit. The technology required to record, mix, master, replicate, advertise, and distribute a hit album was incredibly expensive, and revenue from the success of one album contributed to a snowball-effect in which one hit made the money for the
next. As a result, that circle of businesses shrank until the end of the twentieth century saw the rise of the “big three:” Universal, Warner, and Sony.

It is no wonder that Adorno saw such a dark future in music. He was studied in Marx’s theories of capitalism and was writing during what might be considered a climax of excess in music. Albums were being made for extraordinary amounts of money and were raking in even more in sales, but to access that money, artists had to bend over backwards for the label. Since the labels were concerned with what would sell, and since they had the financial leverage over their artists, they were able to influence the music that was made and heard in order to follow market trends. The same can be said of radio stations, which were by and large dictated by what the public wanted (or what the powerful labels decided). In a market dominated by powerful businesspeople, it makes sense that creativity and artistry might sometimes fall by the wayside.

Adorno’s thoughts are, at least, understandable in context. He was right that art’s anti-utilitarian values may come into danger in a system based on usefulness. However, over the turn of the twenty-first century, the nature of the music industry (indeed the nature of virtually every industry) shifted dramatically. Digital methods of recording music introduced novel tools while making the functions of the old ones easier and more efficient. Distribution changed, too, since a music file could be reproduced and shared an infinite number of times without losing any quality. Pro Tools quickly replaced analog recording systems, iTunes changed the way people understood an “album” and a “single,” MySpace and other social networking sites revolutionized band marketing, and online streaming made broadcast radio nearly obsolete. The Digital Era was more than a collection of new technologies; it was a new paradigm.
Furthermore, the costs of recording, marketing, and distribution plummeted during this time. The programs I listed above and their variations made the functionality of a 70s recording studio available for a small fraction of what it would have cost using tape machines, vinyl, and record shops. A home recording studio was now a feasible option for many artists, and the small label became a powerful business model. In terms of distribution and marketing, the Internet allowed small labels and individual artists to represent themselves online for free or for very little money. They could now work directly with online music stores like iTunes or, if they chose, they could deliver their music directly to fans.

To go back to the phrases of Marx, the Digital Era moved the means of production from the economic tanks of major record labels to the garages of individual artists. In many ways, this meant the market has moved toward a purer form of capitalism. Rather than the wealth being controlled by a select few, more and more entrepreneurs can access the tools for capitalistic success. Competition has grown and the market suppliers are now informed of trends in demand much more directly and accurately.

On the other hand, the new music market has managed to distance itself from capitalism in drastic directions. The Internet introduced new challenges for record labels to make money from their product, most notably peer-to-peer file-sharing programs like Napster. A hundred years earlier, music had been transformed into a commodity. Now, as a commodity, it was being made available for free again. Streaming services complicated things even more, since listening functioned like ownership but listeners never actually owned the files.
Thus, music has developed into a realm of capitalism where many of the traditional rules are radically transformed. No longer does a product get sold to a consumer for a direct profit. Now, the product itself is accessible regardless of payment. There is a nearly infinite supply, and yet the industry is rich with alternative systems of value. Listeners love their music for the emotional content and experience. They pay for services like Spotify just to remove the advertisements and facilitate seamless listening. Listeners still buy albums and songs online, often with the justification that they want to “support the artists.” Indeed, some listeners even contribute to platforms like Future Fields’ when the music is completely available for free. They pay for concert tickets and merchandise and participate in schemes like Sleepify.

This shift in the market has meant a shift in the experience of musicians. Making a living by playing music is both far more complicated and far easier than it was before the Digital Era. The old system of signing a record contract, releasing an album, and touring to promote it was relatively straightforward (at least, it was a fairly reusable mold). Now, being an artist requires finding new and inventive ways to make money. On the other hand, technological leaps have resulted in the birth of do-it-yourself artistry and smashed a glass ceiling. The hierarchy of power has shifted in the last two decades. Small labels and even individual artists can now compete with the major labels in the quality of their production, their promotional reach, and their distribution capabilities. The system is still decidedly capitalistic, but the masses have taken back a significant amount of control and seem to be holding on to it.

Even at the level of truly mass culture in the form of contemporary hit radio, artistry can exist largely independent of financial influence. Indeed, although the major record labels still employ an elite group of writers to produce much of pop music, the genre itself was originally
and continues to be as much a mode of artistic expression as any other. While individual writers and artists may be more interested in selling hits than others, pop as a genre can hold as much authenticity as jazz. That authenticity simply might manifest itself in new ways. Even this style of music, which sits at the heart of western mass culture, provides a legitimate creative outlet for many musicians. If it was a relationship between capitalism and music which Adorno feared, we might reasonably take this case as a counterargument. To use Timothy Taylor’s words, “Capitalism is people, too” (Taylor, 177).

What does this discussion mean for the professional musician today? To put it simply, the split between artistry and financial success is a false dichotomy which is quickly crumbling. For many decades, western systems of economics left the resources of the music industry concentrated with a select group which used their wealth as leverage over the people making art. There was friction between capitalism and art; the Frankfurt school was right to wonder about the ramifications. However, despite capitalism’s strong influence, art remained an independent world. The values which defined it prior to the nineteenth century continued to drive it through the twentieth and twenty-first. Meanwhile, the wheels of capitalism were churning out technological advancements to increase productivity and communication in other industries worldwide. When these advancements reached the world of music, the values which had defined music all along used the tools invented by capitalism to better assert themselves within capitalism. Today’s musicians need not fear the market, and their careers need not be dictated by Universal. They are no longer the pawns of the industry. They are now truly the players.


