



An endless stream of emails floods my inbox, notifications of new releases and people spreading the word of a whole host of strange sound. What would normally be an exciting premise has become the dull reality of an endless barrage of attention and detachment. Much of the charm of DIY music was, for me, about the personal approach of its practitioners – interpersonal, not transactional. A trade or a gift, something caring and cared for. Now, the personal has become impersonal. I highlight all and delete. I listen to nothing.

I am talking changing life in the small, participatory, DIY, experimental music scene referred to self-deprecatingly as the no-audience underground. This music scene, named so in the early 2000s by Rob Hayler, is a space where “there is no ‘audience’ as such, in the sense of ‘passive receivers’, because almost everyone with an interest in the scene is involved somehow”¹. Down in this subterranean stratum of non-conventional sound, there is deep rooted indifference towards any notion of the music industry proper, and a sense of doing things through collaboration and communality as alternatives to the increasingly pervasive entrepreneurial individualism of life in the 21st century. Striving for a modicum of self-sufficiency, this is a scene which is cultivated and survives through active participation rather than passive consumption – it is the sum of its parts. Thus, the informal, amateur, hobbyist approach adopted by many of its practitioners can perhaps be considered a potentially radical method of musicking; an emancipatory mode of being; something altogether liberating.

Weird and wonderful sounds – ranging from ego-cleansing drones and tones to abrasive harsh noise or delicately squeaky improv – are its cultural forms, where a focus on experimentation and sonic exploration are central to its existence. Being marginal in its general appeal, the scene has a resultant lack of resources – economic, spatial or otherwise – and therefore relies on the tactical mobilisation and distri-

bution of resources from elsewhere to function. Yet what it lacks here, it makes up for with an abundance of the social. Sharing access to a work photocopier, making use of temporary space for performance, borrowing tech equipment from a friend’s place of study – all actions which attempt to make do with whatever means are at the scene’s collective disposal. As such, the no-audience underground operates with varying degrees of autonomy in relation to wider cultural and situational contexts.

The no-audience underground exists as a continually drifting translocal network, not concentrated in one location or the purview of a strict set of individuals, but instead encompassing variously overlapping and enmeshed local activities which constitute the wider scene. Sharing recordings functions as a key point of connection across these distanced nodes, creating a sense of proximity across space. The scene’s actions exist within a lineage of offline, peer-to-peer exchange, building on and sustaining the legacies of cassette culture and the global CD-r underground of the early 2000s. Still to this day, you can enter a venue – whether that be an artist-led gallery, DIY music space or nondescript pub function room – say hello to the friend and find a tape or disc slipped from palm to palm. This gift, this altruistic offering of sonic matter, whether reciprocated or not, is, as Rob Hayler has stated, “the lifeblood of the scene”². While these acts still occur and are essential to keeping the social and cultural fabric of the scene nourished, the gradual shift away from an analogue-only outlook has occurred over the no-audience underground’s history. What was once a scene operating in an almost exclusively neo-luddite manner has slowly embraced the lure, and hypothetical democratic potential, of digital forms of distribution.

Bandcamp thus became the next logical step for those in the no-audience underground, where it has been the de-facto online home for much of its activity over the past decade. Initially, the platform’s promise of relative control over the means of distribution – personified by a comparatively hands-off approach to mediating the circulation of recordings, both digital and physical – resonated with much of the political sentiments of

DIY music. Despite its widespread adoption encouraging a broadening of who participated in the scene, we have reached a point where the near sole reliance on the platform has impacted the autonomy of the scene. Releases are now shaped around Bandcamp’s structures, particularly Bandcamp Friday – what started as a lifeline for artists now dictating their behaviour, releases fighting for attention around this one day. Likewise, the company’s takeover by Epic Games and subsequently Songtradr call into question the political and cultural values of the organisation that we have so heavily relied on. If Bandcamp initially offered DIY, experimental, amateur artists the means to democratically distribute their recorded work with a certain degree of autonomy, especially when compared with larger access-based streaming services, then how do we move on from that initial promise?

Other platforms have surfaced and disappeared just as quickly. The likes of Ampled and Resonate envisaged an artist-owned digital infrastructure, rejecting the need for corporate sponsorship and putting the means of distribution firmly in the hands of practitioners. However, the precarity and difficulty of sustaining such projects long-term means a workable alternative is yet to materialise. Such is the complex, contradictory situation of life in the margins of experimental music, where a search for autonomy is continually hampered by lack of, and search for, resources. A move away from relying solely on Bandcamp is the first step in regaining a degree of autonomy in our creative lives. How this unfolds is yet to be envisaged. Calls for a return to peer-to-peer networks, in the digital sense, argue for the use of torrents and decentralised servers to share our work directly, eschewing the need for a platform to mediate this exchange at all. Murray Royston-Ward posited such a shift in the no-audience underground way back in 2015, offering a practical guide on how to build DIY digital distribution networks through self-hosted torrents, suggesting that “collectively we might begin to approach building our own solutions”³. Yet, uptake was slow. The reliance on more readily accessible platforms

staying strong, this call to action was unfortunately overlooked. Perhaps this thinking was ahead of the curve. However, as time passes and spaces for genuine experimentation become increasingly striated, it is a conversation as pertinent now as it was then.

I end these thoughts with a renewed call for action and, more importantly, collaboration, as is so prominent in this scene. I ask how we might build an internet, and a means of distribution that does not rely solely on external mediators to function, that is beneficial to those using it, not the corporations and capitalist class who search for value extraction at every possible point? Sharing, distributing and mobilising resources is key. The scene’s way of operating has much to offer those unaware of its practices, just as the scene has much to learn from those having these discussions elsewhere.

Not having the skills to develop such infrastructures does not mean that they cannot be found elsewhere. The no-audience underground must look to those outside the confines of its own network to think about how we can build these collective, communal and alternative resources and reinforce the sentiment of doing-it-yourself or, more poignantly, doing-it-together.

Can anyone help?

¹ Hayler, Rob. ‘Simon Reynolds, DIY Culture and the No-Audience Underground’. Radio Free Midwich, 7 October 2012. <https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2012/10/07/simon-reynolds-diy-culture-and-the-no-audience-underground/>.

² Hayler, Rob. “Our Way of Shaking Hands”: Trades and Largesse in the No-Audience Underground’. Radio Free Midwich, 28 November 2011. <https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2011/11/28/our-way-of-shaking-hands-trades-and-largesse-in-the-no-audience-underground/>.

³ Royston-Ward, Murray. An (Opinionated) Critical Guide to DIY Digital Publishing. TQ, 2015.

• Thanks for all the great responses, and we hope you enjoyed this third issue of The Pits! If you’re interested in writing a piece for the series please get in touch with your ideas via communalleisure@proton.me – we imagine written pieces to be 800-1200 words long, but are open to other formats. We can pay £150 per commission. Essays will be printed, like this one, on specially designed posters, and distributed far and wide. See you in the pits! Love,

Communal Leisure x