Foreword - Cultural Life at the Threshold of a Disintegrating Society

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File Attachment: Foreword - Cultural Life at the Threshold of a Disintegrating Society [1]

The pop culture excitement about live music in the first two decades of this century was dramatically disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic at the very beginning of the 2020s. A series of trends had made live music seem like an unstoppable freight train of pop culture: More young people had become consumers of live music events as a form of entertainment and urban middle-class belonging; the newly branded “live music industry” was developing more and larger events in an expanding touring circuit and luxury experiences in the form of VIP packages and “glamping;” mass and social media amplified the fascination with the authenticity and extrovert visual dimension of pop culture events as alternatives to the asynchronous flow of the internet and the privatism of the personal screen device.

In the loud silence that followed from the abrupt ending in early 2020, many initially found hope in online events and informal performances on balconies and in backyards. These responses demonstrated the weakened capacity for community culture resulting from the growing reliance on media communications and professional entertainment in many societies over the past century. The explorations of new forms of performance in the early days of the pandemic did not lead to major new innovations. The static and monotonous pandemic life is characterized by a lack of motivation and creativity. The early explorations, moreover, demonstrated unfulfilled desires for a transition in a world where no meaningful transition was possible. It was like giving the participants in a marathon the opportunity to cool down in separate virtual spaces. Ritual theory needs a rewrite! Unstoppable young people broke the rules against public assembly out of hedonist desires for social fun in the here and now, not with the intent of transforming society. Their desires were amplified by a world of loneliness, depression, and death. The events were in many cases shut down by the police and did not develop into a cultural movement. The main form of collective festive action among young people during the pandemic happened at the rallies of the Black Lives Matter movement.

While those living in the live music consumer bubble of the 2010s complained about cancelled festivals, the pandemic had more serious consequences. In the live music industry and other cultural sectors, thousands of workers lost their jobs. Some found employment in other industries. The disappearance of many experienced and creative colleagues is a major loss for the now weaker industry. Much more serious, however, is the death of more than six million in the first two years of the pandemic. More than five hundred million people have had COVID. Of those still alive, hundreds of millions are struggling with the costs of living and the trauma from losing loved ones, and one hundred forty-five million are estimated to suffer from long COVID.[i] And just as a partial recovery was signaled by the return of music festivals and international tourism in some countries in summer 2022, the pandemic morphed into a major international conflict with Russia’s war on Ukraine. The pandemic has also reinforced economic, racial, and gender inequalities in everyday life. The mortality rate has been much higher in lower-income Black and Brown communities. Many mothers have done all the home care and schooling of their children, often pressured by their husband earning the higher salary. The international live entertainment industry is resuming activity with rising ticket prices, thus exacerbating patterns of excess and inequality in cultural life. *The pandemic could have been a reset, but it ended up being a setback*. That’s why the pandemic is becoming a politicizing event. Social movements tend to emerge from collective experiences of injustice and disappointment. The consequences of the pandemic for society is still very much emerging.

In a longer historical perspective, the pandemic highlights a series of interrelated social, political, and economic crises, as well as the beginning of a long-term disintegration of society set in motion by climate change.[ii] It is too early to say how climate change will affect leisure, except that it will likely remain more local and institutionally weaker for a while. Music events will continue to happen, and new producers and audiences will bring new creativity to the field, but the mass culture of live music will have a different meaning and not enjoy the same optimist cheer. Creating a new festival or a live show or reality contest will have less novelty value and be replaced by other expectations. The resurgence of social movements in the 2010s, many of which share a fundamental skepticism of capitalism, will stimulate interest in political art and grassroots community culture.

Where does this turbulence leave academic experts? There’s an inherent practical challenge for scholars in responding to rapid change because valuable explanations take time to develop. The first round of mature

analyses and efforts at institutionalizing live music as a research field appeared right around the time when the pandemic happened. This creates a resounding cognitive dissonance with the post-pandemic world.

There are solutions to this problem and new potentials to consider. Scholars can begin to understand the current moment in the longer history of a disintegrating modernity. They can inspire conversations about art and community and explore alternatives to the empire of the old normal rather than supporting it in the name of recovery and survival. The pioneers of live music scholarship could become the pioneers of music and public culture for the working class, the new social movements, post-pandemic trauma, and climate change. They could argue that cities should not look to the arts for economic growth.

Live music's genealogies

Why is it important to recognize the pre-history of live music's big moment in the early twenty-first century? The maturation and success of the field of live music research depend on its near-future ability to develop a more reflexive understanding of its values and knowledge interests. The term live music is used for a wide range of events and experiences across the globe, including cultures and religions that still have other concepts for similar phenomena. Live music is not one thing. However, contemporary discourse on live music has fundamentally been shaped by two important forces that we can evaluate critically in order to achieve greater self-determination in the future of our academic efforts. The most preeminent force is that of modernity. In the early twenty-first century concerts and festivals rapidly became corporately owned and institutionally regulated. They also became increasingly mediated by both mass media and corporate social media platforms. In a word, concerts and festivals became embedded in the economic system and institutions of modernity. This process explains how "live music" went from being an umbrella term and aesthetic concept in everyday life to becoming a more dominant term in society. In this genealogy, scholars of live music are entering the territory of the sociology of music and modernity, culture industries, urban planning, and public policy. A general question for scholars in this area is this: How can music's role in society be imagined in the context of disintegrating modernity, and how might such thinking inspire future forms of community, ownership, and political regulation? What might replace the creative economy policies that promoted unsustainable growth?

The other powerful force in shaping live music that I would like to identify is urban youth culture. The pop culture moment of live music is preceded by numerous formations in urban popular culture history, such as swing dancing in the 1930s, bohemian jazz scenes in the 1950s, the hippie festival movement in the late 1960s, and a wide range of subcultures and scenes in the late twentieth century, emerging and dying through successive waves of gentrification. At each and every moment, scholars have been fascinated with performance as a site of artistic expression, authenticity, cultural community, and as a breeding ground of talent and cultural sensibilities. They have recognized the essential role of performance institutions in the ecosystems of music and urban nightlife cultures, sustaining the everyday life of artists and audiences. One of the most important transformations of urban culture in accelerating modernity is the shift from small-scale and informal organizing in personal networks to corporate and formal organizing. In this genealogy, scholars of live music are entering the territory of urban cultural studies, popular music studies, anthropology of music, and literatures on individual music genres. A general question for scholars in this area is this: How could cities make sense of their music and cultural past? How could they transform it for the future?

Where could live music scholarship go from here?

I imagine two possible futures for the evolving field of live music scholarship. The first scenario is that the energy of the 2010s will dissipate and lead to a decline of the field. All the publications of the past few years will be the culmination and end of a trend. The emerging field sensibility will disintegrate, and declining research activity will unfold in more decentralized ways across separate areas for the study of music, media, urban culture, cultural industries, festival and event management, and cultural policy. This scenario would make sense if the post-pandemic world of the coming years showed declining interest in live music, and if scholars found it meaningful to tackle new challenges. However, I think it is more likely that a decline in live music scholarship would result from the ongoing budget cuts to the humanities and social sciences. Serious and socially just music and cultural research cannot exist without a certain level of public funding for the humanities and social sciences and a wider support from institutions in the educational, cultural, and media sectors. When institutions fail, social

movement organizing is an option.

The other scenario is that emerging scholarly research interest in live music continues to grow and will be energized by the return of live music. The roaring twenties might happen, even if this happens later than expected. In this scenario, there will be more conferences on live music and perhaps even journals and job titles. Funding institutions will support more research projects. The academic challenge will be to make the field more reflexive about its intellectual and political interests. This work could help define strategic priorities and collaborations across disciplines and institutions. There have been efforts to make live music a field of study, and claims to this end have offered lists of a growing literature on live music. This is typical of the first stage in a field formation. Gender studies, literary ecocriticism, and visual studies began like this. Their next phase was characterized by reflexivity about knowledge interests and theory. If live music is a field of research, it is not quite there yet.

The development of field reflexivity is a potential. Scholars could move on from defining “a thing” to developing theoretical and methodological approaches that respond to relevant issues in cultural life. How about feminist and anti-racist approaches to festival production and programming? A historical materialist approach to concerts and festivals? Institutional approaches? Studies of labor? A political ecology of live music consumer culture? These and other perspectives can be found in the existing literature on scenes, DIY cultures, venues, and festivals, for instance, and they are represented by outstanding work in this special issue. But discourse on live music as a field could do more to organize its conversations around such approaches and develop a higher level of disciplinary and interdisciplinary authority. To avoid that growing reflexivity ends in over-specialization and institutionalism it is important to continuously ensure an ethnographic grounding in reality. What are the new cultural issues and formations, and how do they display familiar and unfamiliar dynamics? How are citizens across race, ethnicity, class, generation, gender, sexuality, and religion making sense of their attachments to music and public culture in times of serious trouble? Such analysis would bring renewed meaning and justice to conversations about live music and about the humanities and social sciences. To ensure that live music scholarship can speak to wider issues in academia and society it is important to nurture the field without becoming insular. Live music is an umbrella term for a range of phenomena that also have lives in other social domains and fields of study. For this reason, the frameworks of live music scholarship can aim for interdisciplinary explorations and for dialogue with different and overlapping conceptions. Live music is a hegemonic term in consumer culture, but in a wider social history it is a hybrid and transitional term that currently exists between terminologies and discourses.

Notes

[i] “WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard,” World Health Organization, 19 May 2022, https://covid19.who.int/ [2], accessed 20 May 2022; “WHO: At least 17 million people in the WHO European Region experienced long COVID in the first two years of the pandemic; millions may have to live with it for years to come,” https://www.healthdata.org/news-release/who-least-17-million-people-who-european-region-experienced-long-covid-first-two-years (accessed 17 October 2022).

[ii] IPPC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) (2021) *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis: Summary for Policymakers*. Switzerland. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/ (accessed 7 December 2021).

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