Afterword - Moving forward with Live Music Studies

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If you had told me fifteen years ago that, by 2022, “live music studies” would have become one of the liveliest and fastest growing fields in the broader domain of popular music studies, I might have been skeptical. Students in the early 2000s came into our graduate programs wanting to write about the challenges and opportunities posed by downloading, or the survival struggles of small record labels, or the ways in which a Deleuzian cultural theory might help us understand the formal and affective dimensions of electronic dance music. While “live music” was cherished, it figured within academic writing principally as one among many components of the scenes or genre communities which were often the real focus of scholarly interest. The economics of live concerts, the logistics of touring, and the social relations shaping careers in live performance had come, by this point perhaps, to seem a little bit old-fashioned, even “rockist” as phenomena meriting study. It had become common, as well, to read regular diagnoses claiming that live performance was dying – stifled at the high end by the corporatization of live music within festivals and mega-events, and blocked at the low end by all those forces (like gentrification, touristification and changing leisure patterns) which had rendered the life of the small-scale live music venue precarious.[1]

This volume is one among many welcome signs of the vitality of research on live music. It would be a mistake to see this as a “continuing vitality,” as if an interest in live music were somehow persisting against all the forces which might threaten to render it out of date. In fact, “live music” has only recently been constituted as a rich and coherent object of study, in ways which the collection of articles offered here make clear. As the piece by Paul Barretta, Jeff Apruzzese and Terry Tompkins shows, any sense that “live music” is somehow a residual phenomena in decline may be quickly discarded. Their contribution shows how revenues for the live music industries (like those for music publishing and recording) have increased quite remarkably in recent years. Although we might attribute the economic growth of live music to inflationary pressures pushing ticket prices higher, to a “spectacularization” of live music in enormous festivals, or to a “post-pandemic” bump in entertainment outside the home, we must acknowledge that live music is hardly just “lingering.”

At the same time, live music has become a rich terrain of application for several of the most productive theoretical models to be found in contemporary cultural analysis. At least four of these, I would suggest, have become part of the theoretical tool kit of live music studies, contributing in important ways to the ferment which marks the field. In what follows, I will sketch out these four models or sets of concerns, as a way of drawing out what I see as some of the most interesting and useful contributions of the articles brought together in this volume.

From a first conceptual field, that of performance studies, work on live music has taken conceptual models for interrogating the ways in which “liveness” functions within a variety of media forms. In the invocation of performance studies work here, we see a welcome clearing of well-entrenched debates. Old, simplistic distinctions between the live and the recorded have been overthrown; the need to deconstruct ideas of “liveness” as grounded in ideologies of authenticity and presence no longer feels so urgent or appropriate. These movements forward have given the study of live music a firm theoretical grounding from which to consider all the ways in which technological mediation functions in relation to live performance.

A second set of theoretical models and methodological orientations has come from studies of space and place. This has encouraged live music studies to study musical venues, not simply in relation to histories of musical style, but in terms of their positioning within processes of urban change. Samuel Lamontagne’s article in this issue offers clear evidence of the ways in which music has been caught up in transformations bringing about (or challenging) the gentrification, reclamation, repurposing and decay of spaces within cities. His analysis of the recent history of electronic dance music events in Paris invites us to see such spaces in terms of those features which they share with the spaces of live, performed music – most notably, their vulnerability to gentrification and disappearance. One effect of the recent turn towards a spatial, city-focused analysis of music is that an older distinction between the spaces of live music and those of DJ-based performance has withered. Both are now recognized as spaces of “live music” – not simply in the ways their performativity is structured as events, involving human bodies in a single setting, but in their common struggle to survive in the face of economic and social forces.

Live music studies engage with space in ways which zoom outward, to consider the distribution of performance spaces across cities, or move inward, to look at the ways in which the restricted space of the small-scale concert is incorporated within the very substance of live performance. Loïc Riom's study of Sofar Sounds examines, at a level of micro detail, the ways in which artists adjust their performances to the characteristics of the atypical spaces (like offices) in which the company's concerts are held. In this adjustment, he suggests, musical performance refers to space in ways he calls "indexical," adapting to spatial environments through gestures which reveal a reflective engagement with their character.

While an attention to the spatiality of performance marks several of the articles in this volume, two pieces engage with notions of temporality in highly suggestive ways. Georgina Hughes invites us to see the live music tour as a kind of spatiality in motion over time. Its spatiality is akin to that of a laboratory, but it is over the course of a tour that new modes and relations of music-making are invented, tested, and incorporated (or rejected). In Ana Oliveira's study of independent music in Portugal, the temporality examined is not that of the tour but of the career as a whole. A lifetime in music is seen as a series of actions and experiences marked by the "adjustment and reduction of expectations" in relation to opportunities, broader contextual conditions and phases in a life cycle. The sustainability of a life in live musical performance, more than the viability of a given scene or style, here becomes the focus. (It is worth noting that Oliveira is alone in offering information on the actual earnings of live musicians. Despite its many advances, this collection mostly leaves intact the mystery which has long surrounded wages and income).

A fourth set of ideas and models invigorating live music studies comes from the study of media. It has long been a truism of live music studies that the performance of human bodies and analog instruments is inseparable from the technologies of sonic amplification and illumination (and electricity) which have provided some of the historical conditions of their possibility. To this sense of the inevitable *mediality* of live music, recent work, like that gathered here, engages with the *intermediality* of music's embeddedness within – or passage between – other expressive forms and platforms. Paula Guerra's insistence that live music is a "a multimodal experience," in which sounds, images, words and elements of the built environment collaborate in the elaboration of atmospheres, involves more than the opening up of music to consideration of its adornments. It invites us, as well, to think of musical performances, distributed through the spaces of cities, as gathering up particular configurations of the sensory and sensible, of images, forms and infrastructures – configurations whose comfortable unity or conflictual tension form a part of the affective economies of urban life.

In this engagement with the intermediality of live performance, unexpected new relationships are shown to have emerged. As Michael Spanu's comprehensive study of musical performance in Montreal shows, the past histories of such performance find their fullest archival accumulation on *YouTube*, in which the past is heavy and varied. Here, fan recordings made on phones sit alongside excerpts from professionally produced television programs, promotional concert footage supplied by artists or labels, and direct-to-YouTube performances supported by advertising or direct payment. Rather than simply gathering up the "after-lives" of live performance, YouTube serves as a repository in which we may encounter the various levels of intimacy, distance, professionalism and direct address which render live musical performance so varied and fragmentary.

I have sometimes felt that those who study live music should more actively seek out analogies and comparisons outside of music. In what ways is the organization of a concert tour like the administration of a sports team's season? In what ways is the mounting of a music festival like the planning of an academic conference or a political rally? What skills and experiences are transferable across these different categories of event, and what theoretical concepts are useful in providing an account of all of them? Gérôme Guibert's article here is particularly welcome for the ways in which it asks how participation in an on-line music event might be comparable to involvement in various kinds of on-line gaming? In what common ways does each propose a mediated sociability? Are the protocols by which participants hide behind avatars or pseudonymous identities in each case converging?

A variety of cases and examples are examined in the articles collected here, but the greatest strength of this collection, I suggest, is its demonstration of the many different ways in which live music may be studied. These ways include theoretical frameworks and disciplinary protocols, but they involve, as well, the contingencies of situations, both personal and world-historical. One of the most interesting methodological questions, raised in the contribution of Lucas Wink, has to do with the relationship between performing music and conducting ethnography during a pandemic. When both musical performance and its ethnographic observation are relegated to the Zoom session, this brings with it a "convenient window of possibilities." This convenience, Wink notes, must be balanced by recognition of what he calls the "abysmal asymmetries" of access to the technological and other resources required to sustain life during the COVID-19 crisis.

As I began writing this brief afterward, *Billboard* tantalized me with a headline – “Concert Industry Scrambles to Hire Skilled Workers Amid Labor Shortage.”[2] Like most people, I suspect, I had not considered labor shortages in any scenario for the return of live music following the pandemic, though the shrinking availability of bar staff figured early in prognoses concerning the return of the night-club industries. The article’s report laid bare the infrastructures on which the live music industry depended – the transportation companies, equipment supply firms, food provisioning services and others whose key role in live performance is only beginning to receive academic recognition.[3] My failure to anticipate such shortages was rooted in a long-term prejudice which presumed that there were always more people attempting to make money from live music than any market could handle. And, indeed, no one has spoken yet of a post-pandemic shortage of musicians – or of novelists or visual artists or actors. This moment, perhaps, is like any moment in the history of live music, marked by an abundance of people seeking to make it and an array of social forces standing in their way.

Notes

[1] See, for different versions of the “live music is dead” argument, J. G. C. Wise, “The Death of Live Music,” *The Curator*, April 20, 2012, https://www.curatormagazine.com/joshcacopardo/10739/ [2] and Jackson Weaver, “The middle-class musician may be a thing of the past, thanks to the pandemic,” *CBC News*, May 11, 2021 https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/middle-class-musician-1.5941796 [3]

[2] Steve Knopper, “Concert Industry Scrambles to Hire Skilled Workers Amid Labor Shortage,” *Billboard*, March 7, 2022, https://www.billboard.com/pro/concerts-tours-labor-shortage-hiring-training-workers/ [4]

[3] See, for one recent example, Gabrielle Kielich. “Road Crews and the Everyday Life of Live Music” PhD Thesis, Department of Art History and Communications Studies, McGill University, May 25, 2021.

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