Holt, Fabian. 2020. Everyone Loves Live Music: A Theory of Performance Institutions. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

By Sergio Pisfil

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There is a reason why Fabian Holt's book cover doesn't include a photo of a stage taken from the audience, with cellphone screens in the air or hands forming a heart shape. These images are not only common in festivals and arena concerts, but they have become part of the live music mass-market consumer culture the book carefully examines. With a bit of a sarcastic title, *Everyone Loves Live Music* takes a step back from the excitement about the live music boom in recent years, to investigate the social and economic structures that have promoted and sustained it.

One of the main goals of the book is to show how the recent growth of live music practices can be better understood through the lens of Modernity and the commercial institutionalization of culture. While it is true that many scholars have previously identified the economic forces that operate behind the live music industries, Holt takes a broader perspective that allows him to describe a Global North phenomenon in which corporate power and anglophone pop music culture dominate the market. To trace and analyze this phenomenon, the author targets two domains of music cultures: the everyday urban life and the summer season. More precisely, he focuses on specific performance institutions within these two domains: the rock club and the music festival, respectively. Although the table of contents suggests a division of the book that puts an emphasis on these institutions, the book's content can be read in a different manner. On one hand — as discussed in the introductory chapters and the final one — the reader is confronted with theoretical reflections on the concept of "live music." Holt's interest in this topic is also explicitly foregrounded in the subtitle of the book: *A Theory of Performance Institutions.* On the other hand, one can find the application of those considerations through historical and ethnographic analyses on the two performance institutions mentioned above. In this review, I'll start by briefly commenting on these empirical chapters, and later, shift to the theoretical arguments the author makes to problematize how live music has been studied thus far. It should be noted that the book was written before the COVID-19 pandemic, so it does not engage with the consequences of the global health crisis on both the live music industries and the academic writing that resulted from it.

The empirical chapters on festivals and rock clubs stand as acute analysis of live performance institutions and should be considered essential reading for anyone interested in live music research. Case studies in New York, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Copenhagen form the core of the club institution section. Clubs in New York are examined through the lens of gentrification, and clubs in Europe through the influence of public policies. Overall, these chapters show that the political and economic institutionalization of rock clubs in modern cities respond to market logics that have considerably homogenized live performance cultures. The goal is quite similar in the section about the festival institution. However, the focus is no longer on the parallel international development of live music cultures but on its symbolic significance in society. Drawing from anthropology and the sociology of events, this section engages with topics ranging from the historical revisionism of music festivals to the ways social media encourages (and effectively replicates) certain narratives of festival culture. It argues that corporate capitalism has played a substantial role in altering the historical significance of festivals in western societies. More precisely, it provides evidence demonstrating that these performance institutions are increasingly governed by big corporations that foreground monolithic views of culture represented by white middle-class audiences often designed for male consumption.

Overall, these empirical chapters illustrate the benefits of examining live music cultures outside anglophone countries to measure the impacts of global capitalism. They also show the great potential of multidisciplinarity in advancing more comprehensive understandings of performance institutions, even when some fields such as organizational sociology provide the main frame of reference to the study. The strength of the book, however, is not only about unveiling common traits of corporate ownership of rock clubs and festivals in the U.S. and Europe. It also provides insightful reflections on the live music discourse in both the industry and in academia. Let me now turn to these more carefully.

The starting point of Holt's analysis adopts the form of a psychological enquiry. He reminds the reader that the

term “live music” was adopted by the media in the twenty-first century, seeking to overemphasize its positive connotations. The author shows this uncritical enthusiasm by drawing attention to how “the mere appearance of the term is believed to make a sentence meaningful” (Holt 2020:15). But, as he demonstrates, the term conceals specific market-related meanings narrowing the seemingly general scope of the term, notably excluding performance practices not grounded in processes of commercial institutionalization. In Holt’s view, the “live music” discourse in academia has so far reproduced the same uncritical fascination and, as such, has only demonstrated its shortcomings as an analytical concept. In the context of cultural and social changes in Modernity, he argues, live music ought to be theorized within the conceptual frame of performance institutions.

Holt’s reflections are helpful to understand certain trends in live music research in the late 2000s and early 2010s. However, I believe Holt’s reservation about the possibility to revise and improve the live music discourse within its own operational narratives (ibid.:21) needs to be complemented with a number of publications that critically engage with the same terminology. These include reflections on the new interest in live music research (Pisfil 2020), the lack of theoretical and methodological rigor in the field (van der Hoeven et al. 2021), and sexual violence at live music events (Hill, Hesmondhalgh and Megson 2020), to name a few. Additionally, various live music industry reports (many written by academics) have appeared across the world, some of which — utilizing the same live music discursive operations — draw similar conclusions in regard to the structural problems that live music institutions face in contemporary capitalist societies.

Live music is certainly not a neutral term, but it is not a static one either. To discard it as a conceptual tool would be denying the realities of a changing research field. This, however, does not mean that this culturally and economically loaded term should be always favored to study gigs and festivals. In Latin America, for instance, such a conceptual framework (the study of “música en vivo”) has not gained academic visibility, and this has not undermined analysis of concert practices. Moreover, a focus on “performance institutions” may allow broader understandings of international developments than the ones encouraged by the hegemonic discourse of live music. A focus on institutionalized forms of culture, however, while explicating certain dimensions of music cultures, may also overlook certain dynamics of performance onstage, including live improvisation or other creative aspects of music performance. All in all, the new interest in live music may be considered, as the author suggests, as a late development in the longer history of performance culture (ibid.:21). Conversely, the focus on performance institutions could also be regarded as one of various approaches to examine live music.

At the end of the concluding chapter, the author asks whether the book is a product of its time. The question is raised within the framework of knowledge production in contemporary societies, and allows him to reflect on how the uncritical and uncontextualized live music discourse he deconstructs is tied to what he calls the “corporate institutionalization of the humanities” (ibid.). This is an important and necessary remark in a time when university policies favor productivity and publications in certain (indexed) journals, instead of encouraging projects critically engaging in theoretical and cultural production. It also allows Holt to expand his critique of live music theory to broader dynamics in modern societies and to thereby call attention to the ways research topics are constructed, as well as the very nature of academic institutions.

But there is another reason why this book can be understood as a product of its time. It appears in a moment that Chris Anderton and myself regard as the “consolidation of live music research” (Anderton and Pisfil 2022). Holt’s interest in what is central and what is peripheral in the study of live music (or, as he would probably frame it, his willingness to dissociate himself from that discourse altogether) is therefore a timely reflection at a moment when live music research needs more solid theoretical and methodological grounds. The number of fields (not all of which have been mentioned in this review) that adequately contribute to his analysis is already a valuable glimpse into the various approaches that still need further exploration. I think it is still difficult to determine what live music studies will look like in the future or what the main outcomes of this interdisciplinary field have been. It is not clear, for instance, if the study of music festivals and associated practices has more benefited from live music research than from festival studies, or what are the main points of interaction between these two fields. Live music is still a changing and evolving concept within music and cultural studies, and I suspect that, similarly to other wide-ranging terms such as “rock,” its loose boundaries and uneasy associations with culture will need to be constantly revised. In any case, Fabian Holt has made a very important contribution to its refinement.

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