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Author(s): Holly Kruse

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Subcultural identity in alternative music culture

HOLLY KRUSE

Angela McRobbie (1992) has recently observed that what is currently missing from Marxist cultural studies is a sense of urgency. In part, I believe this lack of urgency is the result of cultural studies' tendency ultimately to privilege theory over lived experience; the lived experiences of the post-baby boom generation seem especially neglected. As a 1991 issue of *Spin* magazine told its readers:

Magazines and newspapers such as *Time* and the *New York Times* are . . . comparing you unfairly to the dynamic and euphoric baby boomers – the authentic prototype of youth culture, at least as they would have it. They're saying you, the members of the twentysomething generation, have no distinctive identity, no culture to call your own, only recycled bits from the past. Ask yourself this question: Do you recognize yourself in this portrait? No? We didn't think so. (Owen 1991, p. 68)

As a member of the twentysomething generation and a *Spin* subscriber, I found myself concurring with *Spin's* assessment. The magazine went on to remind its readers that even 'if a general youth culture no longer exists, vibrant subcultures still do'. In this article I will look at one particular subculture – college music scenes – and discuss the ways in which these social, cultural and economic formations allow their members to define themselves as somehow separate (though not unproblematically so) from mainstream culture.

During the 1980s, music disseminated over the air waves of college radio emerged onto the national (and international) scene, spawning its own trade paper, *CMJ*, its own chart in *Rolling Stone* and a host of annual seminars. The advent of college radio and the college charts created the possibility that a band could break through to at least cult popularity without the aid of a major record label (and now can achieve mainstream success by graduating from the ranks of independent labels to the majors: witness REM and Nirvana). Local and regional scenes abound with low-budget fanzines which help to create identities for unknown acts, and with artists who put out tapes and records on their own or with the help of independent record companies. So college music is associated not just with college radio, but with particular geographic sites: the earliest and most famous scene was Athens, Georgia from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, home of the B-52's, REM, Love Tractor and, temporarily, Matthew Sweet; the most recently prominent in Seattle, home of Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Mudhoney. (I might add that in Fall 1991 *Rolling Stone* called Champaign, Illinois, site of my own involvement in college music and of much of my research, a 'fledgling music Mecca'.)

Though college music is largely geographically defined (Hüsker Dü always

was a 'Minneapolis' band), membership in the subculture(s) associated with college music – comprised of musicians, fans, record label owners and employees, record store owners and employees, college radio station disc jockeys and music directors – points to the ways in which alternative music scenes across the United States, and even across the Atlantic, are connected rather abstractly through shared tastes – Simon Reynolds has observed, 'A noise band in Manchester can have more in common with a peer group in Austin, Texas than with one of its "neighbours" two blocks away' (1990, p. 174) – and quite concretely through social and economic networks. Before examining how processes of identification work in college music scenes, I want first to look more closely at the idea of identity.

Theories of identity

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) suggest that social identities are not fixed, but rather are articulated within a structure of social relations that causes every social agent to occupy multiple social positions at once, through identifications of race, gender, class, ethnicity, occupation, educational level, tastes and so on. Further, as Stuart Hall has observed, identification does not happen once and for all (1989, p. 73). Yet while we can point to how subjects are fragmented, we must not forget that most of the time we each tend, through the construction of identity within the workings of ideology, to experience our subjectivities as unitary and non-contradictory – to see ourselves as whole individuals (see Henriques *et al.* 1984). Identities are produced within an ideological field where signs 'can be discursively re-articulated to construct new meanings, connect with different social practices, and position social subjects differently' (Hall 1988, p. 9). The practice of using LSD, for instance, meant something different among members of the US counterculture in the 1960s than it did in Athens, Georgia in the early 1980s (where it was widely used by participants in the local, college-based, alternative music scene) and than it did (does) in Great Britain during the 'raves' of the late 1980s. In each of these cases, a particular practice is articulated within a specific discursive terrain, and helps to construct a different sort of *oppositional* identity.

Indeed, as much as the word 'identification' seems to imply a sense of belonging, perhaps even more it describes a process of differentiation. As Laclau and Mouffe state, 'all values are values of opposition and are defined only by their difference' (1985, p. 106). Senses of shared identity are alliances formed out of oppositional stances. Yet even in the world of alternative or college music, oppositional choices are increasingly channelled through the conduits of corporate capitalism; so that you may choose to buy the latest record by the Breeders instead of Color Me Badd's platinum album – but both CDs are put out by Warner. Consumer culture, as Mike Featherstone points out,

does not encourage a grey conformism in the choice of goods . . . rather it seeks to educate individuals to read the differences in signs, to decode the minutiae of distinctions in dress, house furnishing, leisure lifestyles and equipment. (quoted in Tomlinson 1990, p. 21)

Defining yourself in opposition to mainstream music merely means that Warner can sell you the Throwing Muses instead of Madonna. The college or alternative music consumer of today who is an adept reader of the signs that differentiate pop music products knows that when Nirvana, now on David Geffen's label after putting out a record on Seattle's independent Sub Pop label, hits number one on

the *Billboard* album chart, the only real underground left can be found among the growing ranks of 7-inch singles only labels, like Champaign-Urbana's Parasol, or Slumberland on the East Coast.

Popular music identities: indie pop in Champaign

Yet there are subcultures out there defined primarily by forms of musical consumption which are perceived as oppositional. In looking at how particular members of these cultural formations describe their own social practices, we must recognise that these practices take place on a number of different levels. On the most general level, particular situated practices identify subjects as participants in a broad alternative/college music culture. Of course, using labels like 'alternative music' or 'college music' is problematic. As an Urbana record store manager and drummer points out:

You could pick Suicidal Tendencies and call them alternative, but they're more of a metal band. Then you've got Ministry, Depeche Mode, and even though they're just pop bands, they get played on college radio . . . [and then] you've got somebody like REM or Depeche Mode who have become extremely successful, branching out from [the college radio audience] to listeners that are younger.

From this perspective, 'alternative' is really an industry-imposed definition. A musician I interviewed claims that a band is alternative if

the only way people know of them is through 'alternative' markets. They're not being played on MTV – they're not being played after Extreme, they're not being played every hour like "No More Words" or "More Than Words" or whatever that is.

But 'alternative music' seems to have not merely to do with channels of product distribution. To some degree, everyone I interviewed – musicians, people involved in radio, people involved in the production and sale of records – implicitly defined themselves as 'alternative' by making claims about the uniqueness of their music or their audience: no one else was doing what they were doing. Common remarks from musicians included 'I don't think anyone in town sounds like [us]', and '[Locally], there's nobody like us'. At small independent labels, comments like 'there're other labels that do the same stuff, but . . . we're not in it for the money, and I don't see it as competition', are not uncommon. People who work in record stores will acknowledge that they share clientele with other stores, but note that they really do not see the other stores as competitors, because they 'don't carry identical merchandise'. And people who programme college and community radio stations rarely view commercial stations in their areas as competing for their audience. All these scene participants view their products or services as unique, at least within their localities.

In order to get a firmer grasp on what specific determinants constitute identity in alternative music scenes, we must look more specifically at taste. A veteran singer/songwriter/guitarist in the Champaign scene illustrates the importance of taste in delineating subcultural identities by noting that at the time he and his band relocated to Champaign in the early 1980s, it was (and still is) important to him that, 'the music that we liked then wasn't something that everyone knew about: Alex Chilton, the Velvet Underground, Mitch Easter'. As he became more interested in bands like Sonic Youth and Black Flag in the mid-1980s, the band broke up, though he has remained a fixture in the local indie music scene. The list of

musicians who have impacted the college music scene participants I interviewed is rather repetitive and limited: the Beatles, the Beach Boys, Alex Chilton, Neil Young, Television, the Sex Pistols, the dBs, REM, Let's Active, Hüsker Dü, the Replacements, the Softboys.

This very narrow range of taste reflects the focus of my research on the indie pop subcultures. Within alternative music culture the pop/rock distinction is clearly important. When asked to label the music they play, the musicians I interviewed tended to employ the word 'pop' as a particularly meaningful term, though one which inevitably required modification with adjectives. Responses to the question about how they would label their own music included: 'I used to call it pop, but . . . I don't know what it means anymore – it's just melodic guitar stuff'; or, 'Beatlesque pop stuff with nice melodies and clever arrangements'; or, in this particularly painful attempt at self-definition, 'I would call it pop music. I would call it wimpy pop music. I would not call it power pop. I would have to say "jangly" guitar pop – even though I have a great fear of the REM comparison'. The owner of a Champaign-based independent singles label called the music he puts out 'mainly pop stuff – indie guitar pop'. (In fact, when I first moved to Champaign, a musician I met, upon learning who my favourite bands were, said, 'Oh good – another pop fan! I had never thought of my taste in those terms before.)

The choice to label the music with which one is associated as 'pop' is a very interesting move, because understanding 'pop's use in this context requires a certain sort of subcultural knowledge. For most people, 'pop music' refers to Top 40 material, but within alternative music culture, 'pop' is used to refer to music that tends to, in the words of Ruth Finnegan, 'reject . . . the wilder extremes of, say, heavy metal or punk' (1989, p. 104). Indie pop stresses melody and song structure, and is largely defined historically by a knowledge and appreciation of certain (mainly non-local) bands and musicians; and while you might trace your 'guitar pop' tastes back to the Beatles or the Beach Boys, most commonly cited as the mythic founder of this genre is Alex Chilton, and specifically his early 1970s Memphis band Big Star.

On the surface, indie pop does not appear to be particularly 'oppositional', especially now that REM, its most visible practitioner, has achieved multi-platinum success. But Simon Reynolds maintains that indie pop – in Britain, at least – does signify opposition to mainstream music practices, not just because the genre emerged – and still largely can be found – on independent labels, but because 'pure pop' de-emphasises the physicality of the body and is instead a cerebral form in which the voice is a relatively transparent medium for the words (1989, p. 247). For Reynolds, British indie pop represents, in its 'pure' and 'innocent' structures and sounds, a refusal to grow up.

The British indie pop scene clearly is not coterminous with the American indie scene, but there are similarities; in fact, Champaign-based 'pure pop' musicians (like Nick Rudd, Paul Chastain, Ric Menck and Adam Schmitt) have received more recognition and critical acclaim in Britain than in the USA. Reynolds' criticism of British indie pop's form of refusal – that it 'has itself settled into stifling orthodoxy: an insistence on short songs, lo-fi, minimalism, purism and guitars, guitars, guitars' (quoted in Redhead 1990, p. 81) – is equally descriptive of the state of indie pop in the USA. Despite its incipient orthodoxy, however, pop in alternative music scenes is still defined by its difference from other forms of both mainstream and alternative music: it refuses the mammoth guitar solos of heavy

metal, the life and death seriousness and sonic overload of hardcore, the technological excesses of experimental music.

As with all forms of identification, in marking its difference from other types of music, alternative or college pop music offers those who engage in a certain set of social practices – practices of consumption, of production, of interaction – a sense of community (for a fuller description of the concept of a rock community, see Frith 1981). And while participants in local scenes find it necessary to articulate their difference from other sorts of music producers/consumers, they are also conscious of belonging to a subculture that extends beyond the boundaries of their own communities. Michael Stipe of REM observes that in the mid-1980s there were ‘a bunch of musicians who worked out their own philosophies all across the country. It was only after we started travelling and met each other that we began to see we had all these things in common’ (quoted in Fletcher 1990, p. 78). For the owner of an independent singles label based in Champaign, business connections are largely responsible for his awareness of being part of a broader network of people with shared knowledge and interests:

If I were to go to San Francisco, I’ve got a bunch of people I could call that would go, ‘Oh, you’re Geoff from Parasol’. And I would know who they are and I would know what kind of music they listen to. . . . But you have to find the right people . . . there are people all over the place who know who we are . . . We could go anywhere and find somebody who knew who we were, but we couldn’t just randomly pick people.

Once you go outside your genre of music, it all falls apart . . . If [Sub Pop] knew who we were, it would be by some weird, freak thing.

Musical taste and style are clearly important components in subcultural awareness. A long-time drummer in the Champaign indie pop scene comments:

[I would] be able to find a niche of musicians and people that I could identify with [if I were to go somewhere else] . . . you can find people that are similar [to me in] what I like in music and how I dress and how I talk . . . anywhere you go. Which I appreciate. Sometimes I think I’m too narrow-minded. I do find though when I go to more record stores, like when I went out East to visit [a friend] in New Haven, it’s more of a hard-core, alternative metal, punkish type [community]. Not much pop. That disturbed me.

The sort of subcultural awareness evinced by these indie pop aficionados indicates that looking at any one particular scene – which both Sara Cohen and Ruth Finnegan do in their recent ethnographies of British music communities – cannot give a full account of the complexity of the context in which musical practices and processes of subcultural identification take place. This is not to say that Cohen and Finnegan’s contributions are not important. Both authors bring crucial attention to local musical practices. Cohen notes in the introduction to her 1991 book, *Rock Culture in Liverpool*, that what is specifically lacking from the body of literature that comprises popular music studies is ethnographic data which details both the process of music-making and the means by which bands struggle to become successful at a local level. Her goal is to produce a micro-sociological study of the Liverpool music scene; the same goal put forth by Ruth Finnegan at the beginning of her study of Milton Keynes, *The Hidden Musicians*. Finnegan argues the importance of ‘looking at practice rather than formalised texts or mental structures, at processes rather than products, at informal grass-roots activities rather than formal structure’ (1989, p. 8).

While Finnegan looks at *all* aspects of the amateur music world in Milton Keynes – including brass bands and church choirs as well as rock bands and pop

groups – Cohen confines her analysis to struggling rock/pop bands in Liverpool and Merseyside. Most of Cohen's data is derived from her observation of and interviews with two Liverpool bands, in the mid to late 1980s. She looks at these Liverpool bands within their particular social, cultural and economic contexts by describing how the musicians go about producing and performing their music. The bands' struggles to succeed are used by Cohen as a means to consider 'the inter-relationships between art and society . . . the tension between creativity and commerce' (1991b, p. 2). But the focus for both authors is clearly situated musical practices – especially for Finnegan, who argues that 'local music is a matter of active collective practice rather than . . . passive mass-controlled consumption or the solitary contemplation of musical works' (1989, p. 297).

By focusing exclusively on local practices, however, I think that Finnegan's and Cohen's studies overlook an important way in which musicians and others involved in local scenes understand their own involvement: as something that both identifies them with and differentiates them from individuals and groups in other communities. Moreover, when we see the social and economic relationships that link one locality to another and that ultimately place *all* individuals involved in relation to an organised national and transnational entertainment industry, we realise the importance of understanding how, as Jody Berland states, cultural technologies and their accompanying structures move entertainment 'from a particular space to a non-particular space' (1992, p. 47). Berland underscores the importance of analysing 'topographies of consumption' which acknowledge that '[t]he process that produces . . . audiences is in fact indissoluble from the process that produces the spaces which they inhabit' (p. 39).

In the case of alternative or college musics, institutional and economic structures that are increasingly conscious of a market for this music are able to deploy resources to move the music of what would generally be considered a non-mainstream band like Nirvana from the particular spaces of college radio, alternative record stores and the college club circuit, to the non-particular spaces of Contemporary Hit Radio, MTV and chain stores. Such shifts produce new audiences within these different spaces. Or, on a more underground level, the rising popularity of singles-only labels and the economic networks that disseminate them create possibilities for artists to reach new, non-local audiences. As one Champaign musician, who has a single out on the Champaign-based label Parasol, explained, because Parasol deals with distributors:

instead of one person buying something in a store, [Geoff] deals with one person who sells records to a whole bunch of people. And [Geoff will] hear from them. There was some guy in Australia who was like, 'I love this record, send me more of it'.

But *local* music scenes are the sites at which we may first want to look, as Cohen and Finnegan do, in order to understand the relationship between situated music practices and the construction of identity; and I use the word 'scene' to imply something less stable and historically rooted than a 'community' (see Straw 1991, p. 373). In the face of this marginal instability, however, I think it is important to acknowledge that within these scenes senses of continuity and tradition *do* exist. So while as Will Straw argues, and I would agree, that to a large degree 'points of musical reference are likely to remain stable from one community to another', I disagree with his claim that 'the relationship of different local or regional scenes to each other is no longer one in which specific communities emerge to create a

forward movement to which others are drawn' (*ibid.* p. 378). The emergence of bands in Champaign in the mid to late 1980s which sought to duplicate the 'Minneapolis sound' of bands like the Replacements and Soul Asylum, and the current prominence of the Seattle scene and a supposed 'Seattle sound', testify to the contrary.

Moreover, indie bands and their records often do *not* find it possible to successfully 'circulate from one local scene to another', as Straw maintains. Some localities are more receptive to indie pop (Iowa City, Iowa and Columbia, Missouri, for instance) than others, just as some scenes are receptive to hardcore while others are not; and this does seem largely to do with the particularities and histories of each scene. I would argue that the local and the trans-local co-exist within music scenes, because local identity and even the concept of a 'local sound' remain important (see Cohen 1991a, p. 345). So you can have a musician in Champaign who cites both REM (from Athens, Georgia) and Paul Chastain (formerly of Champaign) as important influences. Almost everyone I interviewed involved in the Champaign alternative ('pop') music scene had a clear and shared sense of the scene's history (The Vertebrats, Screams, Turning Curious, Nines, The Farmboys, Didjits, Pop the Balloon, Weird Summer, The Bowery Boys, Titanic Love Affair, The Poster Children) and identified their own participation in terms of this history, as part of this tradition.

The relationship between the local and the trans-local in the construction of oppositional musical identities is an issue that should be addressed more completely in ethnographic research; similarly, I think the relationship between music consumers and producers and how this relationship defines participants in scenes needs to be problematised. For many participants in the Champaign music scene, differences between performers and audience members are non-existent or irrelevant. When a record store manager observed that everyone who worked in the record store was a musician, except for one woman, he added, 'she might as well be. She collects, she likes records and all that stuff'. The 'do-it-yourself' ethos of the alternative, college music environment clearly contributes to the perception that performers and audience members are virtually interchangeable. The non-musician who owns Parasol records stated that 'this is an area where . . . somebody who isn't perfect on the guitar or a perfect singer can get into it . . . if I wanted to do it, I probably could pull it off'. When asked whether he considered himself more of a musician or a fan, a local bass player responded:

I think all musicians, all really truly good musicians, are big fans. And I think a lot of fans consider themselves musicians; it seems like everyone [says] 'Oh, I'm gonna get a band together', 'I'm gonna take guitar lessons'. I'm probably just slightly above that because I've actually been on stage a couple hundred times.

Concluding thoughts

An ethnographic, or micro-sociological, analysis of music scenes allows us to get a sense of the plurality of practices that help constitute the identities of those involved. Examining actual lived experiences calls into question assertions that claim, for instance, that rock culture allows youths to enact ever-changing sexual and gendered identities in a space of radically conflicting social messages (see, for example, Grossberg 1984, p. 108; and Redhead 1990, pp. 89–90). While social identities are not fixed once and for all, we must keep in mind that at any historical

moment within a particular cultural or subcultural context there are not an infinite number of options for experiencing identity. Alternative music identities are constituted in scenes which, as Sara Cohen observes of Liverpool, are:

divided by cliques, factions, feuds and rivalries, yet at the same time united by age, gender, a common ideology, mythology, and gossip grapevine, and a web of interlinking networks and band genealogies as its members move between bands and music-related occupations. (1991b, p. 225)

Such a field of relations does shift over time, but clearly is not an entirely fluid space.

These particular subcultural formations are not defined only by musical taste and knowledge; race, class and gender clearly are also important as points which intersect with taste in music. The drummer for the Raleigh, North Carolina band the Connells is black; what is notable in discursive constructions of the band in the music press is the degree to which his African-American-ness is effaced. Female musicians are more conspicuous than black musicians in college music; but as one woman involved in the indie scene argues: 'women who love [indie guitar pop/rock] learn the art of transference . . . that everybody in indie rock is a boy' (Powers 1992, p. 8). Nothing about the social and economic organisation of alternative music necessarily seeks to subvert the white, patriarchal structures of the mainstream music establishment.

But what college, alternative, independent (these labels are largely used interchangeably) music does do is enable subcultural participants who are largely members of the post-baby boom generation to draw a boundary between themselves and the omnipresent baby boomers; to refuse definitions imposed on them and to reject the assumption that the twentysomethings, as a whole generation, must galvanise behind some 'cause' deemed acceptable by ex-members of the 'authentic' youth culture of the 1960s. If it is true, as the French situationist Raoul Vaneigem wrote, that 'the man [sic] of survival . . . is . . . the man [sic] of refusal' (1983, p. 9), then there is a lot at stake for all who choose, through their social and cultural practices, in some small way to refuse the possible identities offered to them by a baby boom generation which is coming to control most of the material resources, and will therefore hold most of the power, in our society. If, as Angela McRobbie suggests, '[i]dentity could be seen as dragging cultural studies into the 1990s', then '[w]hat is now required is . . . a new paradigm for conceptualizing identity-in-culture' (1992, p. 730). I recommend we heed her call and work toward an understanding of how – within a terrain of social, cultural and ideological practices – gender, race, ethnicity, class and generation are articulated and experienced.

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