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‘Hold on to your Genre’: Digital Audio Collecting and
Indie Music Connoisseurship

by

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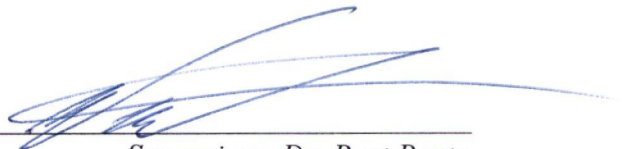
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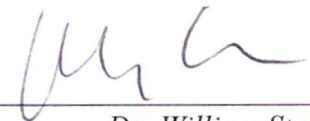
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled " 'HOLD ON TO YOUR GENRE': DIGITAL AUDIO COLLECTING AND INDIE MUSIC CONNOISSEURSHIP " submitted by THOMAS M. EVERRETT in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.



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Abstract

Since the 1990s, practices in digital music collecting have been steadily on the rise, prompting a number of debates regarding the value or legitimacy of digital artifacts, as well as the technologies developed to facilitate their use. Though these changes have been met with significant opposition by scholars and audiophiles alike, there is much evidence to suggest that these practices are in fact leading to increasingly intimate and socially-constituted forms of music collecting and consumption. In this paper, the author uses the contemporary indie music scene as an example of how recent developments in portable audio devices, online download infrastructures, and social networking software have converted once-private experiences into public affairs, linking music collectors to social communities where their personal accumulations may be both accessed and judged. As such, traditional collecting practices associated with connoisseurship and canonism are demonstrated as being preserved by digital technologies both musically and culturally today.

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Chapter One: Digital Audio Collecting and Indie Music Connoisseurship

Over the last ten years, traditional practices of music collecting have begun changing in many significant ways. Debates regarding the value or legitimacy of new digital formats have recently taken shape, challenging preconceived notions that the compressed audio file is inferior to traditional musical media, and by extension, that the digital audio collection is nothing more than a hard-drive stash of pirated musical booty rather than a valued and worthwhile artifact in its own right. Aside from the legal issues that surround the topic of free music downloading on the internet, two other perspectives have been especially apparent. The first, which I call the *lament of the audiophile*, concerns the fear that ‘degraded’ digital audio formats are somehow destroying musical recordings by reducing them to digital bits and contributing to an altogether inferior listening experience. The second, which I call the *egocasting fallacy*, concerns the fear that by allowing individuals to hear only what they want to hear, new portable audio devices and digital music software are effectively shielding music fans from unwanted influences in a kind of technologically-enabled form of selective musical perception. Over the course of this paper it will be shown that these perspectives, though noble in their quest to protect music from excessive and unnecessary degrees of degradation and technological mediation, often appear shallow in their overall understanding of how digital formats and devices actually function, both technically and socially, in the broader context of contemporary music consumption.

Since the so-called ‘download revolution’ of the 1990s, digital audio files like the mp3, and more recently the AAC and WMA (two popular audio compression formats

developed and trademarked by Apple and Microsoft respectively), have risen exponentially in popularity. Though compact discs and vinyl records are still selling in large numbers, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that music is increasingly making its way from the realm of the physical to that of the digital. In this respect, the term ‘record collecting’ as it is used today no longer refers solely to the literal ‘collecting of vinyl records’, but to the collecting of various other media as well, from cassettes and compact discs, to many compressed digital formats now found readily online. To reflect this shift, use of the term record collecting in this paper will refer generally to any individual amassing of a sizeable, though not necessarily exorbitant, number of musical recordings – in any or all formats, either physical or digital – which are accumulated in a single location (milk crate, hard drive, etc.) and considered more significant as a whole. In saying this, a distinction between those recording formats that are ‘physical’ (vinyl, cassettes, CDs) and those that are not (mp3s, AACs) will still be necessary in order to allow for a comparison between older practices of music consumption and what is increasingly occurring in the digital realm today. In this regard, usage of the term digital or intangible media will refer only to those artifacts which can not be physically touched or manipulated without the use of other technologies¹. This should help distinguish between those critical perspectives which take issue with digital music’s lack of physical presence and structure (a problem with immateriality and fluidity) and those more concerned with the alleged degradation of contemporary music recordings on the whole (an issue with a lowering of acoustic definition and fidelity).

¹ It is for this reason that CDs – though technically ‘digital’ – will be categorized as physical media here

As one might expect, each of these issues can be easily applied to nearly all arguments opposed to the ongoing development of new digital music technologies, though some are certainly more relevant to specific objections than others. From the 'lament of the audiophile' perspective, concerns with degradation are more prevalent: self-proclaimed music aficionados have been battling digital proponents for years over whether or not 'true' music fans would ever want to settle on the 'inferior' quality of the compressed recording. In the case of the 'egocasting fallacy', prior concerns with physical immateriality and fluidity are somewhat enhanced. In this perspective it is most often argued that the ability of new digital technologies to enable increased levels of customization and individualized listening practices are leading to, amongst other things, a growing intolerance of challenging music, a deadening of popular taste, and an overall cheapening of the musical art-form itself.

Over the course of the next five chapters, these concerns will be addressed in a number of ways. Chapter two will examine the arguments of critics who claim that the practice of collecting digital music is inferior to that of traditional music media based on the assumption that the compressed and otherwise immaterial nature of the digital artifact necessarily renders it of lower definition and fidelity, and therefore, of lower grade and worth. This perspective will be challenged through the arguments of several key theorists who have since shown that the experience of collecting digital audio files is in many ways a *more* personal and intimate experience than that of more traditional music media. Chapter three will address assertions that portable digital audio players are ushering in a

so-called ‘age of egocasting’ where the ability of new technologies to direct user attention and otherwise filter musical content are subsequently lowering the average music fan’s ability to seek out other musical influences or attain a true appreciation for music as a work of art. This chapter will position the digital collection as a unit in and of itself, arguing that a second perspective on egocasting exists – one that will be labelled ‘ego-broadcasting’ – which serves to complicate many of the critical claims embodied in the original approach. Chapter four will shift attention towards the contemporary indie music scene as an example of how age-old issues of canonism and connoisseurship remain tied up in today’s popular music-listening practices, even, or perhaps especially, in the realm of the digital. Evidence presented in this section will show that popular music taste continues to evolve largely as a result of the influence exerted by certain (sub)cultural communities that actually foster an increased interest in critical knowledge-building and communal appreciation for music, rather than promote any measure of intolerance or impatience for more challenging forms of art. Finally, chapter five will provide a brief overview of the effects of indie taste-maker Pitchforkmedia.com on the contemporary indie music scene itself, which will help to draw out many of the points made in previous chapters. By illustrating the importance of contemporary digital technologies, particularly as they are increasingly integrated with software programs located online, and (sub)cultural music communities like that of indie, which continue to challenge individuals to share their opinions and collections with others in public space, this chapter will show how each contributes to a widening, rather than any sort of ‘deadening’, of popular music taste on the whole. In this regard, by balancing a stroking of the ego (I listen to what I like) with a broadcasting of the ego (this is what I like: what

do you think about my choices?) I hope to illustrate that new digital music technologies and contemporary music communities share an exceptional ability to unite listeners through communal interests in music, rather than promote any kind of widespread cultivation of personal bias or musical egocentrism. Just as contemporary scholars have been successful in showing that digital artifacts should be judged not in terms of their lack in definition or fidelity but by their ability to travel more easily through people, space, and time, it will be shown over the course of the next ninety pages that corresponding *collections* of digital audio files too should not be judged by their egotistical or ‘masturbatory’ attributes, but rather by their ability to connect people and music in ways never possible before.

Chapter Two: Collecting Music in the Digital Age

Ever since the dawn of the download revolution only a decade ago, digital music, and the mp3 in particular, has been a major source of controversy – not just in legal terms, but aesthetically as well. Simply typing ‘mp3 sound quality’ into Google today brings up almost thirty-five million hits, most of which are positioned on either side of a debate surrounding whether the mp3 file can be considered a legitimate musical artifact on the one hand, or just a degraded form of another more ‘respectable’ format on the other. One such site, designed by PCstats.com to help explain which sampling rates are best to use when converting music from physical media into mp3s, contains a line which sums the debate up nicely. While discussing the pros and cons of using a 256 kb/s sample rate to ‘rip’ a compact disc, the author writes: “[In the 256 kb/s format] Sound quality should be virtually indistinguishable from the original, unless you are a true audiophile (and if you are, why are you creating MP3 files anyway?).” (PCstats, 2007) For many years now, this distinction has been made clear by advertisers and music fanatics alike: those who love music should buy physical artifacts like vinyl records or compact discs, since the music is uncompressed and therefore ‘pure’, and only those who cannot tell the difference in quality, or just simply do not care about how their music sounds, should settle on the inferior mp3 format. Though this paints an unflattering portrait of digital music, the question remains as to whether or not sound quality truly *is* the best way to judge the value or legitimacy of a musical artifact – an issue academics have only now begun to assess in relation to digital media collecting and consumption.

Over the last five years a few scholars, Tom McCourt and Jonathan Sterne in particular, have introduced fresh perspectives on many previously overlooked, or at least underestimated, aspects of digital music consumption that have indicated listening to mp3s may actually be a *more* intimate, interactive, and sociable practice than ever before. Indeed, the purpose of the current chapter is straightforward: to synthesize some of the most recent academic writing on digital music technologies and in doing so determine the extent to which legitimacy or value extends to the actual collecting of such recordings; most of which are considered, quite literally, to be both ‘illegitimate’ – that is, not sanctioned by law – and ‘worthless’ – that is, of no real value as commodities alone. The following pages will thus consist of two parts: the first will examine the conflicted ways new music technologies have been discussed over the last few years, specifically comparing newer digital audio collections to those of old; and the second will explore the increasingly important role of portable audio devices like the iPod and digital music library software like iTunes in facilitating the many changes that have been brought on by this shift in these contemporary collecting and listening practices.

2.1 Music Collecting Goes Digital

With the publication of two recent articles, “The Death and Life of Digital Audio” (2006a) and “The mp3 as Cultural Artifact” (2006b), Jonathan Sterne becomes one of the first writers to truly challenge popular music scholars and self-proclaimed audiophiles on the alleged superiority of traditional analogue media by locating the value of musical artifacts not in their sound quality or definition, but in their potential for greater sociability instead. In the first of these two articles, Sterne puts forth a motion for the

reformulation of the terms by which the metaphysical being of a particular musical recording is judged, arguing that qualities of ‘liveliness’ should be measured not by levels of definition, the range of frequency/dynamics captured in a particular recording, but rather by the potential for greater mobility, or “the degree to and manner in which the recordings themselves circulate.” (2006a, p. 1) In other words, although an mp3 audio file, by nature of being a compressed audio format, may indeed be of a lower definition, this should not suggest that it is any less ‘alive’ than its analogue counterparts – even though it is, at least hypothetically, further removed from an original live studio event than, say, a vinyl record or cassette.

Sterne defends this perspective in several ways. First he contests the purported authenticity or ‘liveness’ of an actual recording session, arguing that a studio performance is really only a piece-by-piece reconstruction of an artist’s music, or a “performance designed to capture the recording” (p. 5), rather than any sort of authentic live event in and of itself. He follows this point by reminding the reader that many producers have consistently and systematically reduced the dynamic range of popular music over the last decade or so, replacing the delicate or understated musical phrase with the uniform, high-decibel glut of the ‘loudness arms race’ preoccupying the recording industry as of late (p. 7). From here Sterne proceeds to introduce reasonable doubt as to whether or not a higher-definition sound could truly be considered a priority in today’s increasingly mobile and distracted society anyway, a point he makes by asking whether or not anyone could really discern, or care about, a difference in audio quality when listening in an environment like the train. Following this point he even

problematizes the assumption that developing an increasingly higher-definition sound has ever been the first priority of contemporary audio engineers, for, in his words: “Every time the signal got clearer, artists, musicians and engineers sought out new methods of distortion. And every time the bandwidth grew, engineers looked for new ways to make recorded or transmitted sound more mobile, more flexible and more ever-present.” (p. 8) All this adds up to the suggestion that compressed digital audio formats like the mp3 should be judged not in terms of their purported lack of ‘definition’ or (dis)connection from a live studio event (read: ‘fidelity’), but by their potential to pass effectively and efficiently through people, space, and time.

In “The mp3 as Cultural Artifact”, Sterne continues to build on these points, noting crucially that “the mp3 has been ascribed the status of a thing in everyday practice, even though it is nothing more than a format for encoding digital data. Both listeners and companies that sell mp3s, or the equipment to play them, readily talk of mp3 collections analogously with record collections or book collections.” (2006b, p. 830) Although he confirms that mp3 collections can indeed be considered legitimate in terms of being able to meet the broad definition of a record collection as outlined previously, Sterne cautions that they are certainly not exactly the same as more traditional media accumulations in terms of how they are used, manipulated, and understood. In other words, “because of their micromaterialization, users can handle mp3s quite differently from the recordings they possess in a more obviously ‘physical’ form such as a record or compact disc (CD), even though they may talk about mp3s as if they are physical objects.” (p. 832) It is this aspect of the mp3 record collection then, its purported difference from the collecting of

other more physical media, that needs to be addressed before moving on to the more social aspects of the digital record collection to be discussed in chapter three.

2.1.1 Digital Collecting

In one of the first articles to undertake the task of locating emotional involvement or value in the collecting of digital music recordings, entitled “Unpacking our Hard Drives: Discophilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction”, author Julian Dibbell writes:

CDs don't have quite the voluptuousness of LPs, certainly, but they're shinier and cuter, and if it's only the collector whose lust for them approaches the pornographic, I'm confident there remains a dash of the erotic in even the most casual of record purchases. What I'm not so sure about – and the question I want to pose today – is what becomes of this kind of eros when its once-solid object begins to melt into digital air. [...] Where is the love in the age of the download? (2004, p. 280)

Applying the ideas of Walter Benjamin from two separate articles – the famous “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1968a) and the lesser known “Unpacking My Library: a Talk About Book Collecting” (1968b) – Dibbell attempts to uncover what could be called the ‘fetish potential’ of the more or less intangible digital audio file. In juxtaposing Benjamin’s ideas in relation to more traditional book collecting, Dibbell finds that although mechanically-reproduced ‘copies of copies’ may indeed suffer from having a diminished aura insofar as they are further removed from the original manuscripts than an ‘original’ copy, it is not the production of these objects that matters most to the end user, but rather the eventual *possession* of them as part of a personal library or collection. In other words, it is the means of ‘apprehending’ said object, and the path it took on its way to the end user, that instills each copy with an aura of its own, thus

having a greater effect on fetish potential than any such metaphysical ‘degrees of separation’ between the copy and its original. As noted by Dibbell: “What excited Benjamin as a book collector, then, was not the words his books contained so much as the indissoluble blend of content, craft, and wear and tear that told the story of each book’s journey to its place in his library.” (2004, pp. 281-282) The problem of course, is how to apply this perspective to digital audio files which, by most accounts, bear no markings or wear and tear which could indicate how such a noble journey to one’s collection may have transpired. As Tom McCourt later puts it, “Through their immateriality, digital files cannot contain their own history. Unless they are burned onto a CD, they have no physical manifestation. No history is encoded on their surfaces, since they have no surfaces.” (Mccourt, 2005, p. 250)

Dibbell handles this dilemma by reasoning that the ‘thrill of the hunt’ still exists though the *process* of apprehending said digital media online, since even downloading requires the tracking down and securing of specific songs and albums as ‘property’ on one’s personal hard drive, a quest which retains a sort of personal history in its own right. Though he at first attributes this widespread practice of (illegal?) downloading as a kind of ‘romance of resistance’, Dibbell is much closer to the mark when he posits that “Without the physical body of the disc to rub up against, without the economic muscle of the corporation to throw itself at, a post-Napster consumer erotics comes to rest on the body of information itself.” (Dibbell, 2004, p. 287). McCourt even manages to take this perspective a step further when he states:

Diminished or nonexistent physical property undermines the notion of intellectual property – hence the widespread illicit copying of software and public support of file sharing. Paradoxically, the lack of materiality in digital files heightens our sense of “ownership,” as well as our desire to sample, collect, and trade music in new ways. (McCourt, 2005, p. 250)

So where Dibbell starts the conversation by problematizing the apparent lack of fetish potential in digital audio collections, McCourt actually sees this phenomenon as being “a *more* intense and intimate experience than owning physical recordings, based on three things: The desire for compacting, [...] The desire for immediacy, [...] and] The desire to customize.” (p. 250; emphasis added) In his formulation, industry decisions like when to release an album, or physical limitations like the order in which the songs appear, no longer restrict collecting or listening as fully as they once did: it is the ability to customize or personalize the individual listening experience that has now become the true source of value in collecting musical artifacts. As McCourt sees it: “Fluidity, rather than integrity, is the defining characteristic of digital technology. [...] Digital content is not static or universally commodifiable; instead we engage in “dialogues” with a work by altering the artifact itself or recontextualizing it through mix CDs or playlists.” (p. 251) From this perspective then, the end user has his or her hands all *over* digital recordings, if only by virtue of being able to connect to those media files via personal computer software or portable media players.

2.2 Intimacy and Interactivity in the Digital Age

A digital audio device, at its most basic functionality, is really nothing more than a computer-operated hard drive and speaker system with accompanying music software

that is able to read digital audio files and then convert them into appropriate electrical signals, or sounds. Although this in itself is nothing new, the challenge for computer and audio engineers over the last decade or so has been finding a way of utilizing this capability to efficiently compress, store, and manipulate massive amounts of digital audio information, which could only originally be done with a home computer system, and then transferring it all into a simple and reliable hand-held device. In this respect, though portable audio devices like the Sony Walkman have been with us for almost thirty years, none has had as large an impact on music listening and collecting habits than the reigning champion of the portable audio market, the Apple iPod, which was released less than six years ago in the fall of 2001.

As Leander Kahney, author of *The Cult of iPod* writes, “Fire, the wheel, the iPod. In the history of invention, gadgets don’t come more iconic than Apple’s digital music player.” (2005, p. 3) Indeed, the sales figures and reviews appear to speak for themselves: “As of April 2005, Apple had sold more than 10 million iPods. By comparison, Sony only sold 3 million Walkmans in its first three years. The iPod commands an astonishing 92.7 percent of the market for hard-drive players, according to sales and marketing information company the NDP Group.” (Kahney, 2005, p. 13) Of course, much of the quasi-academic writing on the topic has suffered at this stage in time by reading like an Apple sales brochure; however it is still helpful in determining the reasons behind and the scope by which people are now assigning value to this new technology. For example, in *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Shuffles Commerce, Culture, and Coolness*, Steven Levy claims that the iPod “is the most familiar, and certainly the most desirable, new

object in the twenty-first century. You could even make the case that it *is* the twenty-first century.” (2006, p. 1; emphasis in original). Similarly Dylan Jones, author of *iPod, Therefore I Am*, claims the iPod to be “the greatest invention since, oh, that round thing that cars tend to have four of, or those thin slivers of bread that come in cellophane packets.” (2005, p. 4) Even the titles of these three books instill the iPod with a kind of mystical aura, an inherent, almost supernatural ability to endlessly manipulate (or perhaps ‘shuffle’?) the identities and cultural practices of its users. This of course begs the question: what on earth can these things do that makes the collecting of digital music so much different from what was done previously?

To answer this question, it is helpful to return to the three desires which McCourt (2005) identifies as elevating the intensity and intimacy of owning digital artifacts. The first, a desire for compacting, relates directly to “the ability to contain huge amounts of data in a small area” (p. 250), and connects well to such a discussion of the iPod as first and foremost a portable data storage device. The second, a desire for immediacy, refers to “the ability to sort and regroup files effortlessly [... where] speed itself becomes a fetish” (p. 250), which lends itself to a discussion of digital music library software such as iTunes. The third, a desire to customize, concerns “the malleability of digital media” (p. 250) and segues nicely into a discussion of popular digital features like that of the ‘shuffle’, as well as the growing phenomenon of the mixed playlist in shaping contemporary collecting and listening practices. A more elaborate discussion of these three terms follows.

2.2.1 Desire for Compacting

As mentioned above, at the heart of it all the iPod really is nothing more than a portable hard drive that plays music. Though much of its overwhelming popularity could be seen to rest on its potential for mobility, slick minimalist design, and user-friendliness, it is the ability of the iPod to store literally tens of thousands of songs that is its principal feature.

As Leander Kahney writes:

Like a lot of people, I had a giant collection of vinyl LPs and CDs that grew over the years into an unmanageable archive weighing hundreds of pounds. Fast forward, and now the entire collection can fit inside a small white box the size and weight of a pack of cards. To me this is a miracle. A crowning achievement of technology. (2005, p. 3)

It is this rather fundamental, but undeniably impressive aspect of digital music players like the iPod that makes them difficult to compete with, since most traditional analogue collections often require substantial amounts of space, sometimes entire rooms, for storage and organization. As Jones has put it, “The iPod is a bottomless well, a black hole of limitless dimensions, a hobby that knows no bounds” (2005, p. 25). The only limitation to one’s digital music collection at this stage in time then is the actual size of the computer hard drive or handheld device, creating what Jones has called a kind of ‘digital penis envy’: “one way to make sure you have the best [music] is by having everything; then you can’t lose. Capacity is paramount in the world of the Pod.” (2005, p. 149)

Tied equally to this desire for compacting and capacity is the issue of increased mobility. In the same way mp3s have revolutionized the sociability of music media by allowing

individual recordings to be compressed and transferred so fluidly, devices like the iPod have begun to do the same to the entire *practice* of music collecting as well. Kahney alludes to this when he comments that, since buying an iPod, “That unwieldy pile of vinyl and cardboard has been freed from the living room and is available anywhere I go.” (Kahney, 2005, p. 3) Jones too notes that “Everything I do for the rest of my life can now be accompanied by my little white memory box.” (Jones, 2005, p. 193) For the first time in history, one can shrink an entire lifetime of music purchases into one place, and then take this collection practically anywhere – a capability which cannot be underestimated once one begins to look at how issues of connoisseurship and subcultural capital are affected, as shall be seen later in chapter three.

2.2.2 Desire for Immediacy

No discussion of the iPod would be complete without at least a passing reference to iTunes, its so-called ‘digital umbilical cord’. This program, part library software, part web browser, is responsible for many of the unique features most people have come to associate with digital music collecting in recent years. Three aspects tie in well to discussions of immediacy as they appear in the realm of digital music: the ability of the software to allow instant access to online music in a secure and user-friendly environment; the ease by which this is accomplished, in terms of allowing music to be moved quickly from the internet to a handheld device; and the speed by which both the iTunes software and the mobile iPod device function once a digital collection is amassed, in terms of serving as a cooperative and interactive digital music library.

The first feature, the ability to access music instantly, speaks directly of iTunes' main purpose: to offer iPod users and other digital music collectors the ability to access online music legally, affordably, and most importantly, without delay. While many have emphasized the 'free' aspect of the original download revolution, Dibbell has rightly exposed the 'instant access' phenomenon as being at least of equal importance. In speaking of one of his first encounters with a bonafide college music 'pirate' in the earlier days of online music downloading, Dibbell makes the comment that "it wasn't the songs which interested him, it wasn't even how many he had. What he collected was the speed with which they'd traveled from their corporate origins to his computer." (2004, p. 287) The student himself described this as "The zero-day scene. It's a competition. A race to see who can get the latest stuff up first." (p. 286) As soon as downloading practices evolved with the introduction of Napster and other peer-to-peer programs like AudioGalaxy and Kazaa, and the iPod was introduced to the mass consumer market, things began to change: it was not *just* about being the first to get music anymore (a social motive), but about being able to get music onto one's computer and handheld device as quickly as possible (a concern with practicality as much as anything else). Suddenly millions of people wanted and needed digital music to use in their brand new portable players, but few possessed the computer competency, or the sheer time and patience required to successfully download and manage large digital audio collections. Broken downloads, improper labels, corrupt files, bad formats, slow transfer rates, spyware issues, and limited availability were issues even the most computer-savvy of college students were struggling with on a regular basis, never mind those millions of newer iPod owners who had never been exposed to such challenges before.

It is here where the second feature of iTunes, what I call its general ‘ease of use’, becomes relevant. Not only did the software offer computer illiterate music junkies the ability to download music legally, and often for less money than it would cost in a record store, but it also gave them the ability to do so more straightforwardly, efficiently, and reliably than ever before. As Levy puts it in relation to other pay-per-download sites:

To venture onto the [iTunes] store, one did not have to fire up a browser, punch in a Web address, and tap in a password, the virtual equivalent to putting on one’s boots and driving five miles to Tower Records. [...] And when you did buy, the download would be quick and the song would go straight into your iTunes library. For iPod owners, this process was immeasurably easier than seeking out tunes on some file-sharing network, where the download might or might not work, and then taking steps to load it into iTunes.” (Levy, 2006, pp. 164-165)

The key here is efficiency; ‘ease of use’ concerns the ability of iTunes to not only allow users to access music easily through the internet, but to also have the ability to *move* this music seamlessly to the designated portable media device (in this case, the iPod) with little or no effort at all.

Once the music has been imported and labelled, the actual usability of both programs, in terms of giving users the ability to access and manipulate their digital collections faster and more easily than ever before, becomes the third feature, which I have called a high ‘speed of function’. The iPod and iTunes specifically have evolved into powerful digital music libraries, giving users the ability to sift through thousands of songs and albums at speeds unparalleled in the history of music collecting. Such organizational features

include the ability to re-order one's entire collection with the single click of a button, to track down or isolate specific songs, albums, or genres instantly by typing a few letters in a search command box, or to otherwise customize collecting practices by simply adding a few check-marks to a viewer options list or toggling a few user preferences. Though these features are certainly noteworthy, it is two others especially, known as the shuffle function and digital playlist respectively, that have truly captured the interest and imagination of collectors in the digital realm.

2.2.3 Desire to Customize

If there are two specific features of new digital media organizers (like iTunes) and portable audio players (like iPods) that are truly novel in their approach to the experience of collecting and playing music, they would be that of the random shuffle and digital playlist. Not only have these features revolutionized the way music collections can be manipulated, organized, and rearranged, but they are actually having a major impact on the way many listeners are coming to appreciate music playback on the whole. The ability to shuffle not just albums, but *hundreds* of albums simultaneously is something that was simply not possible before the birth of digital music software. Though not the first to introduce such a feature – programs like Winamp, RealPlayer, and Windows Media Player have been including shuffle functions for many years – iTunes was certainly the first to integrate it so seamlessly with a person's entire digital music library on a computer as well as a handheld audio device. Suddenly it was possible to have personal 'mix tapes' created both effortlessly and on the fly. Described by Jones: "The shuffle facility became my own private energy source, my own electricity, running my

life, accompanying my every move, choosing every song in my head. I'd chosen every song it played, I just hadn't told it when I wanted to hear it." (Jones, 2005, pp. 24-25) Or Kahney: "Select Random Shuffle, and the iPod dredges up tunes you might never consciously choose to play. But chosen for you, they're a delight. This mode of play also allows you to discover gems in a collection that previously sat unplayed on a shelf of CDs." (2005, p. 3)

In this regard, such features not only reflect contemporary listening habits, but also the ability of digital music players to aid in the shaping of them as well. Again, Kahney: "Stuffy old listening habits – such as playing albums from beginning to end – are being thrown out in favour of allowing machines to choose songs at random, which often leads to unexpected, and magical, juxtapositions of music." (2005, p. 20) Taken further by Levy:

shuffle turns out to be the *techna franca* of the digital era – not just a feature on a gadget but an entire way of viewing the world, representing the power that comes from aggregating content from a variety of sources and playing it back in an order that renders irrelevant the intended ordering by those who produced or first distributed the content. (2006, p. 179)

Each of these statements reveals not only a common interest in customizing one's own listening habits in ways simply not possible using physical media alone, but also becomes an ongoing personal quest to find new ways in which to experience and collect music itself.

If the 1980s could be called the age of the personalized mix-tape, and the 1990s the days of the burned CD, the 2000s would be known as the time of the playlist: an era of even greater possibilities for music mixing and custom listening than ever before. A digital playlist could be thought of much like a burned CD without the physical disc: the song names are all there, but one need not go through the hassle of copying or burning the music to another medium in order to enjoy it in full. When making a playlist in iTunes for example, there is no need to physically copy each individual track to a new folder in order to create a mix, thus taking up precious hard-drive space. The playlist rather serves as a kind of hypertextual list of songs which links to corresponding tracks already present on the computer or handheld device. In other words, if you decide to make five separate playlists (a driving mix, a sleeping mix, a jogging mix, etc.) and you have one particular song that appears on each, the program will not physically make five extra copies of the song, taking up an extra twenty-five megabytes on your hard drive, but will simply link to the one copy you already have whenever it is selected. In this regard, they can contain either a few minutes of music (helpful for falling asleep) or an entire day's worth of songs (convenient for an all-night party) and take up no more space on one's hard drive than an average text document. It is for this reason that the playlist not only allows personal mixes to be created far more efficiently than ever before, since no physical copying is necessary, but they also give users the ability to be as creative as they wish without being restrained by the size of physical media used, as with a ninety minute cassette or seven hundred megabyte CD.

2.3 Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter the question was raised as to whether or not sound quality was the best way in which to judge the value or legitimacy of a digital musical recording. It has since been argued that perhaps it is the sociability or flexibility of musical artifacts that can be seen as their most resonant features. First, as Sterne has shown, there are many points in the traditional fidelity/definition arguments which are indeed questionable, including the purported authenticity of a live studio event or the desire for increased sonic definition in contemporary listening practices. As Dibbell has illustrated next, even the apparent lack of fetish potential in a digital artifact can be explained away by calling attention to some of the other unique pleasures inherent to the tracking down and apprehending of digital formats online. Finally, as McCourt has argued, the collecting of digital music shows many signs of being an even more intimate and interactive experience than that of physical media based on three contemporary desires – compacting, immediacy, and customization – which have come to be associated with such increasingly popular technologies as computer music library software (iTunes) and portable audio devices (iPod).

It is at this moment when a new issue can be raised, that being the question of flexibility and sociability when speaking of an entire ‘collection’ of digital music, as an artifact in and of itself. In this regard, where Will Straw once rightly referred to the phenomenon of traditional record collecting as “part of the ongoing, unofficial relocation of objects from the public, commercial realm into the domestic environment” (1997, p. 5), the opposite could now also be shown, in respect to individual recordings certainly, but to entire

collections of music as well. Put another way: through the displaying and trading of digital music libraries located as collective 'units' on personal computer hard drives and portable audio devices, record collectors are now equally re-locating their collections *back* into the public realm, a fold-back process arguably making contemporary record collecting more musically and culturally significant than ever before.

Chapter Three: The Private and Public in Digital Music Collecting

As illustrated in the previous chapter, digital record collections are unique in several ways. They are typically made up of compressed audio files, often in the mp3 format; are organized differently, usually in terms of customized folders and playlists; and can be manipulated in ways never before thought possible, especially when using shuffle or keyword features. The question to be addressed next then is: if digital collections are indeed legitimate, in terms of supplementing or even replacing physical media, and also personalized, in terms of functioning as individual ‘memory boxes’, then what can be said of their equal potential for greater mobility, in terms of increasingly circulating widely within the broader social world? Put differently: how are digital audio devices blurring the line between the private and public in personal music collecting, and subsequently, through this process of both physical and virtual transcendation, fundamentally affecting the role and function of the contemporary digital music collection itself?

To begin answering this question, it must first be suggested that most studies of so-called ‘new media’ typically position their subject matter in one of two lights: a dystopian one, which tends to mask the often positive aspects of that particular medium’s widespread adoption and acceptance, and a utopian one, which often unwittingly “import[s] the value system of advertisement into scholarship, where ‘newness’ is itself an index of sociocultural significance and transformative power.” (Sterne, 2003, p. 368) In this chapter, a balance of these perspectives will be attempted through a discussion of the evolving relationship between digital music collecting as an individual experience on one

hand and a thoroughly social practice on the other. To do so, the role of mediatory devices (iPod and iTunes especially) in affecting and otherwise directing the experience of using compressed digital audio files at the level of the individual must first be assessed. As such, a critical engagement with Christine Rosen's "Age of Egocasting" article is pertinent because it is the first to truly address, in no uncertain terms, the many 'dangers' inherent in the widespread adoption of portable audio devices. In the second section, this conversation will extend towards a discussion of the more public and otherwise social elements of such digital media usage which call into question many of the fears of egocentricity that are voiced in Rosen's original approach, while pointing out that such devices are not becoming anywhere near as autonomously managed or socially isolated as she seems to believe. In fact, in many ways the opposite will be readily shown. Finally, the third section will allow for the introduction of a supplementary term, one which I have labelled 'ego-broadcasting'. This will serve not only to ground Rosen's theory in the reality of digital music collecting in terms of how such practices actually occur today, but will also help to show how it is that digital music's increased fluidity, mobility, and sociability are making the act of digital music collecting a community process that promotes the building of musical tastes and critical knowledge, rather than 'devalues' or 'deadens' them. Through an introduction of Sarah Thornton's reformulation of Pierre Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' in the field of subcultural music studies, it will be shown here that private decisions as to what to listen to (and when) depend equally on processes of group identity and hipness which form as part of a larger, more publicly situated sphere of musical influence. In exploring these three areas it will be illustrated that the private and public work together, indeed the two could not be reasonably

separated, in the creation and maintenance of a thriving environment for music creation and consumption today.

3.1 Digital Collecting in Private

When most people think of the physical act of collecting musical artifacts, they usually picture it as a highly private and personal activity. Though for most of popular music history one has typically had to venture outside the home to obtain recordings, requiring some degree of social interaction and communication no doubt, once actually *in* a person's collection these artifacts tended to accumulate in a private space to which access was restricted unless explicitly granted by the collector. In this respect, the act of collecting has often been associated with the anti-social behaviour of people like Rob Gordon, the main character in Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, "whose passion for collecting is often a substitute for 'real' social relationships." (Shuker, 2004, p. 311) Regardless of whether or not this is truly an accurate stereotype, and indeed Roy Shuker (2004) has gone to great lengths to argue quite persuasively that it is not, the question remains as to what degree a person's control over his or her record collection translates into an absolute egocentric retreat into the restricted world of one's own preconceptions and musical biases. In respect to the issue at hand, the question to ask is not whether individual practices of music collecting in general can indeed be considered self-centred and otherwise alienating or antisocial, but whether or not, as Rosen suggests, certain music listening technologies *themselves* – the iPod and iTunes in particular – can be blamed for facilitating and otherwise encouraging such 'selfish' activities on a much broader sociomusical level.

3.1.1 The Age of Egocasting

In recent years, many popular writers and journalists have relayed concerns over the potential negative effects of new digital audio technologies on both music and society. These concerns have ranged anywhere from fears of growing audience indifference in respect to production value and quality of sound (Saxe 2001) to the addictive and ‘drug-like’ qualities of the personal audio experience itself (Sherman 2004) to the ‘systematic reduction’ of communicative opportunities in contexts of portable media use (Bencuya 2005) to the gradual, but ‘certain’ removal of all desire for the serendipitous casual conversation or social musical event (Sullivan 2005). Though rather far-reaching, these perspectives are most aptly explored and expanded in one particular article titled “Age of Egocasting” by Christine Rosen, in which she coins the term egocasting to refer to what she sees as “the thoroughly personalized and extremely narrow pursuit of one’s personal taste” (2005, p. 52). Within this seminal piece, Rosen’s arguments are based on the observation that, since the birth of the television remote control in the 1950s, broadcasting power has shifted to the individual.— “creat(ing] a world where the individual’s control over the content, style, and timing of what he consumes is nearly absolute.” (p. 51) Tracing personal technologies from the living-room remote control to the personal video recorder (PVR) and finally to the portable audio device, she makes the argument that “Technologies like TiVo and iPod enable unprecedented degrees of selective avoidance. The more control we can exercise over what we see and hear, the less prepared we are to be surprised.” (p. 67). As such, “They encourage not the cultivation of taste, but the numbing repetition of fetish.” (p. 52) Finding portable audio devices guilty for ushering in a new era of increasingly reclusive and highly personalized

practices of music consumption, Rosen warns that a new age of audiophilia is emerging, one which privileges a ‘fetishization of preferences’ over the appreciation of legitimate artistry and genius; passive consumption and ‘escapism’ over concentrated listening and connoisseurship; and an overall ambivalence (or disrespect) for time-honoured aesthetic ‘truths’, high-art critical standards, and ultimately a space in contemporary listening for artistic intention and musical integrity.

According to Rosen’s analysis, the consequences of the recent widespread adoption of new digital artifacts and portable audio devices appear dire indeed. Comparing the iPod to a phylactery, “those little boxes containing scripture, which Orthodox Jewish men wear on the left arm and forehead during prayers,” (p. 65) she argues that “the iPod is marketed as the technology of the disconnected individual, rocking out to his headphones, lost in his own world.” (p. 65) Quoting testimonials by several despondent former Walkman and iPod users, she concludes that the future of music may well be in jeopardy, since once music becomes locked in our ‘own worlds’ it instantly becomes degraded or devalued in the process. As one columnist quoted in her study claims:

“No invention in my lifetime has so changed an art and cheapened it as the Sony Walkman.” By removing music from its context—in the performance hall or the private home—and making it portable, the Walkman made music banal. “It becomes a utility, undeserving of more attention than drinking water from a tap.” (pp. 64-65)

According to Rosen, not only do such portable devices ‘remove music from its context’ and ‘render it utilitarian’, but in doing so they encourage users to indulge in other pleasures offered by such technologies (presumably playlist-building and shuffling),

rather than patiently appreciating music as it was meant to be, as a pleasurable and worthwhile experience in its own right. By facilitating a ‘sampling’ approach to music, she argues, the iPod not only leads to a disrespect for artistic works in allowing us to skip or make personal adjustments to the listening experience at will, but equally “erodes our patience for a more challenging form of listening.” (p. 66) Using an oddly un-reflexive and rather elitist high-art rationale to back this claim, she proceeds to suggest that:

The first time a person sits through an opera, patience is tested; they might wonder whether hour after hour of *Die Meistersinger* is really worth it. But with experience and patience comes considerable reward—the disciplined listener eventually achieves a different understanding of the music, when heard as its composer intended. Listening to “Mahler’s Greatest Hits” is not the same thing. (p. 66)

Quoting Walter Benjamin, she goes as far as to claim that the so-called ‘absent-minded’ music criticism fostered by portable audio devices and related technologies is equally leading to a “lowering of culture and a public with an increasingly vulgar and simple-minded ability to appreciate art.” (p. 70) This further results in “an impatience for what art demands. The more convenient our entertainments, the weaker our resolve to meet the challenges posed by difficult or inconvenient expressions of culture.” (p. 70)

It becomes clear after reading Rosen’s “Age of Egocasting” that four individual concerns regarding the widespread adoption of portable audio devices are evident. The first is that as users become more accustomed to gaining access to music ‘on demand’, they will soon begin to value their power to ‘select’ and ‘choose’ over the inherent value of the selections themselves. In Rosen’s terms: “We have created and embraced technologies that enable us to make a fetish of our preferences.” (p. 51) The second concern is that as

music collections become increasingly large, the patience for spending much time with individual selections or albums may well be in decline, leading to a more general inability to appreciate longer or more challenging artistic efforts. As she puts it: “The iPod facilitates a “sampling” approach to music. [...] Sampling is the opposite of savoring.” (p. 66) The third is that as one’s experience in listening to music becomes increasingly mundane or distracted, their ability to develop personal music knowledge and connoisseurship undoubtedly suffers as well. In her words:

In our haste to find the quickest, most convenient, and most easily individualized way of getting what we want, are we creating eclectic personal theaters or sophisticated echo chambers? Are we promoting a creative individualism or a narrow individualism? An expansion of choices or a deadening of taste? (p. 68)

Finally, in allowing us to make the decision to retreat into our own individual ‘music worlds’ while functioning in public spaces like the street or on the train, we are blatantly withdrawing from any and all opportunities for participating in sporadic, casual everyday social encounters. Again according to Rosen: “Those people with white wires dangling from their ears might be enjoying their unique life soundtrack, but they are also practicing “absent presence” in public spaces, paying little or no attention to the world immediately around them.” (P. 66)

The issue I wish to explore further in this section, and indeed for the remainder of this paper, is whether or not these rather far-reaching criticisms should be viewed as valid charges against an emergent culture of digital music collectors and portable audio users. Put differently: are digital collections and portable audio devices really making music

collecting and listening practices more ‘egocentric’ and socially isolated? Or can it instead be argued that – by nature of their being extremely mobile, fluid, and well-integrated in both virtual and ‘real-life’ networks, users are actually becoming more publicly and socially situated than ever before? To phrase the question in more Dibbellian terms: where is the love in the age of egocasting?

3.1.2 The Private Collection

There is one thing that most everyone notices when first receiving a brand new iPod: there is no place to insert a compact disc, cassette tape, or vinyl record within the device itself. The iPod unit is actually much smaller than each of these individual ‘physical’ media formats, and thus begs the preliminary question as to how it is exactly that one does get their music inside it. The most straightforward answer is that several important and time-consuming steps must first be taken before the iPod becomes of any use to its owner: the accompanying iTunes music software must be loaded into one’s personal computer; songs (either downloaded, or from other media) must be digitized, tagged, and imported into the program; and finally the iPod unit itself must be plugged into the computer and ‘synched’ via its supplied USB or FireWire cables for the songs to be transported to the actual handheld device. In this respect, while most users typically spend most of their time waxing lyrical over the device itself, anyone who has owned an iPod knows without explicitly stating or needing to hear it, that praise for the portable unit extends equally to the iTunes digital music library software as well, for this is what more or less controls the iPod experience from afar.

Where the iPod is concerned, iTunes is precisely where all the big decisions are made: which albums to import, how they should be labeled, what categories they should fit in, and where they will appear on the handheld device once the synchronization process is complete. The true ‘magic’ in collecting digital music may often be only *realized* once the iPod user has experienced the feeling of carrying their entire musical catalogue outside for the first time (hence the relentless gushing witnessed by Rosen), but where the real work occurs, the true ‘labour of love’ if we may label it as such, is in the hours spent making that collection ‘just right’ while still plugged into the computer at home. In fact, iTunes is often where one’s digital collection becomes just that – a collection. In this regard, the act of maintaining a fully stocked iPod or iTunes library, though often taken for granted as effortless, is far from a passive or mindless affair. In the beginning especially, it is often the most painstaking of tasks: an ongoing commitment to music that one signs up for the minute they bring an empty iPod home and realize they cannot just shove a disc or cassette inside and make it work. For the portable audio device to be functional, it must first be *organized*, and this means paying closer attention to one’s music collection in a more active way than most are accustomed to, or indeed have ever found necessary before.

As suggested above, the task of starting a digital collection for the first time, using iTunes or any other comparable music library software, is overwhelming to say the least. Ask anyone who has imported a few hundred compact discs, cassette tapes, or vinyl records if the ability to customize over twenty category labels per *individual song* (name, artist, year, genre, etc.) was an exciting idea from the start. Although many albums are now

logged into Apple's disc recognition software, meaning that most of the information now automatically appears for each song once the uploading process has completed, there are always a few errors which require some degree of correction. This becomes especially obvious where the aforementioned information tags and labels are concerned (the things iTunes and iPods use to keep the media organized within one's digital library). For example, in my own experience, genre tags have often been the most frustrating and confusing to keep straight: indie albums are often wrongly labeled 'alternative', hardcore albums labeled 'rock', folk albums labeled 'country', jazz albums labeled 'world', and the like. To put things into perspective for those who maybe have not yet owned a digital audio player of their own, having an iPod filled with improperly labeled music is much like the hypothetical experience of pulling out all of your kitchen supplies only to have a friend put them all back in the cupboards where they think everything belongs: their choices might not be 'wrong' per se, but they certainly make it difficult when half-way through cooking dinner you cannot find where they may have hidden the wooden spoons or oven mitts.

When it comes to downloading music illegally off the internet, these issues increase exponentially. Though often adequately labeled on their surfaces, usually by a simple track number and song name, most music downloads are usually labeled improperly in their actual 'property fields', which are the hidden tags which tell iTunes what track number they are, what album they're from, what year they were recorded in, etc. In this respect, a song titled '09 – Bloc Party – I Still Remember' ('track nine, band name, song title') will often magically become 'unknown' in all fields once dragged and dropped into

the iTunes library. This means, quite simply, that all information fields must now be entered manually if one wants to have the ability of finding this song in iTunes or, alternatively, on one's iPod ever again; all unlabeled tracks become part of a sea of 'unknowns' until the effort is made to sort them all out and label them one by one. In this respect, the contemporary iPod user is often far more familiar with the sheer breadth, quantity, and quality of their music collection than many more casual traditional collectors have ever been, and for one simple reason: maintaining an iPod means embarking on a quest of sorting and labeling one's music collection in ways that few technologies before it have so thoroughly demanded as part of their overall functionality. Again: you cannot just stick a disc in an iPod and make it work.

The reality is that, although the process of owning and maintaining a personal digital music collection may often be 'numbing' and 'repetitive', especially in the case of trying to upload over thirty years worth of album purchases over the course of only a few days, it is certainly as emotionally and intellectually challenging as any other form of more traditional music collecting, and perhaps even more so in respect to issues of meticulousness, reflexivity, and care. As Dylan Jones rather eloquently describes it:

If all the iPod did was collect all your stuff in one place, then I could simply ask someone else to upload it for me, and where would be the fun in that? [...] The big thing about the iPod, I thought, was the way in which it forces you to listen to your life in a different way. (Jones, 2005, p. 22)

In short: by undertaking the task of digitizing and successfully passing through all the necessary steps of inclusion/ exclusion, the collector becomes the 'connoisseur' of his or

her own collection of works, as well as a discerning judge of the best in a lifetime's worth of music stockpiling. In this respect, though Rosen's point that a 'fetishization of preferences' may indeed exist in one degree or another with the majority of iPod users, such a celebration of choices would not – indeed it *could* not – exist first without a devotion to the art objects themselves. Users do not spend hundreds, or even hundreds of thousands of hours importing music for the sake of amusing themselves with their preferences. The pleasure is found first and foremost in the heightened possibility of finding new opportunities, and more *time*, for listening to, and appreciating, the music itself. In this respect, owning a digital collection does not 'restrict' one's ability to fully appreciate quality music or 'deaden' one's taste for more challenging forms of art; even if most digital collections start with one's prior musical artifacts, they generally move outwards from there. In other words, by forcing music collectors to spend countless hours labeling and cataloguing their artifacts, and countless more hours listening and trying *new* music in places they otherwise could not (at the train station, in the gym, on a plane), such devices facilitate a greater interest in exploring musical possibilities. The question should therefore be not 'how are iPods ruining the experience of listening to music', but rather 'how are they turning the process of collecting music into the most flexible, unrestrained, and 'universally involving form of artistic appreciation in popular music history to date'? To be sure, such a shift in perspective requires a far more detailed understanding of the relationship between the individual collector and the public context within which his or her collecting takes place – a topic that has so far received little attention from popular music scholars in relation to the digital audio collection as a mobile and socially integrated unit in and of itself.

3.2 Digital Collecting in Public

While it should be clear by now that the relationship between an individual and his or her digital music collection is every bit as emotionally and intellectually involved as that of any more traditional music media, the questions of privacy and exclusion remain. As Rosen asks: are digital music collectors really building a wall between themselves and the greater listening public when they choose to maintain a digital collection? Do library software like iTunes and portable audio devices like the iPod really allow users to easily retreat into their own convictions and by extension shield themselves from the possible influence of others? Are such devices truly ‘as narrowing as they are freeing’? To answer such questions, an exploration of the more public aspects of digital music collecting is required, first in terms of the iPod’s ability to allow personal music collections to enter the public, ‘physical’ domain (by nature of being manually lifted and taken out of one’s private home and into the greater external world); and second the collection’s presence in online or ‘virtual’ domains, which refers to the digital library’s equal and simultaneous existence on the personal computer as a necessary ‘master’ copy of one’s portable audio collection.

3.2.1 *The Digital Collection in ‘Offline’ Space*

As emphasized in Rosen’s egocasting argument, the issue of the iPod’s invasion of public, physical space ranks highly as one of the most serious of the device’s infractions against both music and society. The ability for one to physically move a digital collection from the privacy of the home into the space of the outside world is seemingly fraught with negative consequences, ranging from the decontextualization of the musical

experience to the desocialization of humanity itself. According to Rosen, iPods are very clearly the root of a wide range of contemporary problems: distracted listeners are missing train stops; casual conversations between strangers are no longer being had; and music itself is being cast from the quiet of the living room to the chaos of the street. Such issues are curious indeed, and worth exploring in more detail here.

The first concern is that of Rosen's 'absent presence' thesis, which states that active iPod users are nothing more than 'disconnected individuals', alone in their own self-imposed 'music worlds', blissfully unaware of the events unfolding all around them. According to Rosen, "the distinctive white iPod headphones have become so common that one disgusted blogger called them oppressive." (2005, p. 65) Like a smoker who lights up in an enclosed area and instantly sours the environment for all involved, the iPod is viewed by Rosen and her study participants as nothing less than an antisocial mass conversation killer when it is brought into a public space like the street or the train. And even when auditory culture theorist Michael Bull brings up the obvious counterpoint – "How often do you talk to people in public anyway?" – she responds by charging him with being "unconcerned with the possible selfishness this might foster." (p. 66) Like the exhausted young student with the 'audacity' to shut her eyes and try to sleep on the bus ride home from school, iPod users are often charged with treating their devices like antisocial diving cylinders – afraid to leave home without them, lest they risk drowning in the misery of potential human interaction. The truth is that iPods are first and foremost 'music players', and so most people who have put the time into organizing and maintaining them tend to pull them out only when they are in the mood to do just that: play music. And even if

their white earbuds send the message that casual conversations are not quite what they had in mind at the moment, the point must still be raised that iPod users are neither blind, nor unable to function as respectful citizens while listening to their favourite tunes in public.

Another point concerns the nature of the experience itself. Using an iPod inevitably results in the blasting of music into one's ears, something most people are not particularly in the mood for twenty-four hours a day. To assume that all iPod users remain 'plugged in' from the moment they leave the house to the moment they get home again is one thing, and certainly contestable, but to suggest that these same users are veritable 'addicts' that are both abandoning previous methods of music enjoyment like going to concerts or listening to music at home, and equally losing patience for dealing with social reality and hence require intravenously-supplied musical support whenever venturing in public, is just plain false. While addictions probably exist, the vast majority of iPod owners plug into their devices only sporadically in places where they feel it unnecessary to reserve their ears for casual conversation or a random social encounter. In the same way few have ever felt it necessary to charge the owner of a car with avoiding human interaction by choosing to commute to work in a personal vehicle rather than the subway, and to listen to their own music rather than roll down the windows and listen to the 'urban soundtrack' of the busy highway; it is odd that portable audio listeners would be charged with selfishness by choosing to wear a pair of headphones during the same commute while riding on the train. Perhaps then it is the question of society's priorities which must then be raised: is it better to spend a two-hour workout or daily commute

evaluating the comprehensiveness or quality of one's digital collection and sampling new music downloaded on the internet the night before, or spend that same time searching for fleeting conversations with strangers or catching a few moments of sleep? Is there really an inverse – and, if you side with Rosen, a direct causal – relationship between what is technologically good for the individual (portable music players) and what is bad for society (widespread selfishness)? Can it be realistically believed that the more individualized and customizable our technologies become, the more greedy, egomaniacal, and musically inept we will all become? Such questions undoubtedly remain, but the answers are not quite so easily obtained.

At present, there seems to be enough evidence to at least offer the suggestion that iPod usage in public spaces is beginning to spawn far more interest in the sharing of musical collections and experiences than it seems to be encouraging the simple retreat into one's own individual music hideaways. As Rosen's 'disgusted blogger' readily admits, albeit unintentionally: "White headphone wearers on the streets of Manhattan nod at each other in solidarity, *like members of a tribe or a secret society*." (quoted in Rosen, 2005, p. 65; emphasis added) While 'alone' in the sense that nobody else can hear their music, iPod users are always amongst a quiet society of music-loving strangers, even if words are not typically exchanged. New practices in public music sharing like that of 'jacking', which Kahney describes as "sharing an iPod through its headphone jack" (Kahney, 2006, p. 103), are slowly catching on, which allow users to explore others' music selections on the fly in ways that were simply not possible before the birth of the portable audio device. Describing his first such experience with a young woman during an evening walk,

software executive Steve Crandall notes: “I was taken aback. She pulled out the earbuds on her iPod and indicated the jack with her eyes. [...] We listened for about 30 seconds. No words were exchanged. We nodded and walked off.” (quoted in Kahney, 2006, p. 103) Commenting on the experience, he continues “It’s almost like you’re being a DJ for the other person [...] It’s a great feeling to see other people enjoying your music, and my tastes are fairly bizarre. [...] I’ve probably bought half a dozen CDs based on what I’ve heard. It’s like finding a new radio station.” (quoted in Kahney, 2006, p. 103) In a similar fashion, the new Microsoft Zune boasts wireless sharing capabilities as one of its key features, which means that songs can actually be transferred from one unit to another in public space, requiring only that both users own a Zune device. As described on Microsoft’s website:

Picture this: You're walking down the street. Or you're in a room with a bunch of friends. Or at a concert. Or at the airport. Or on the bus (you get the picture) and then you whip out your Zune and see all these other Zune devices around that you can choose from. Zap! You're connected to your best friend and send the new song your band recorded in the garage last weekend. Another friend gets the hilarious podcast your kid brother made at school, plus that song you just downloaded from the Zune Marketplace and can't get out of your head. And hey, lookee here, your friend wants to send you something that you might like and buy, too. Best of all, the song you sent isn't just a 30-second preview—it's the whole song! (Zune.net, 2007)

Although the Zune has a limited functionality at the moment², the potential for heightened curiosity in other people’s collections and increased music sharing in public spaces is certainly on the rise. Individual earbuds are no longer just signaling “I’m busy

² users can only keep song files for three days or three listens after a transfer, whichever comes first

listening to music at the moment”, but are increasingly broadcasting to other iPod or Zune users in the area that a potential new radio station, in fact, an entire *library* of music possibilities, is now only a small wink or nod away. In this respect, where one person’s lips in the street might mouth something about a recent cold snap or a friend’s recent engagement, the white ear buds in another’s ears may soon be saying a different thing altogether: something along the lines of “music is my life – and my life is here in this little white box for anyone who cares to notice and share it with me.”

Leaving this line of thought for the moment, the question of what such devices are then doing for (or against) music on the whole still requires some measure of discussion, especially in regard to Rosen’s claim that portable audio devices habitually “remove music from its context—in the performance hall or the private home—[by] making it portable.” (2005, p. 64) In short: even if devices like the iPod are not destroying society quite yet, is there still a case for their gradually destroying music itself by promoting increasingly distracted and otherwise ‘disrespectable’ listening habits?

3.2.2 The Digital Collection in ‘Online’ Space

Returning to the previous chapter, it is easy to see where many such ‘death to music’ theses find their ideas; but just as it is entirely irresponsible to hail the vinyl record as being musically superior to all other recording formats simply because it contains some sort of nostalgic value for a particular collector, claiming that the ‘context’ or ‘place’ for Music (in the broadest sense of the word) should be limited to the concert hall or living room borders on the absurd. To be fair to Rosen and others who share this perspective,

there was a time not too long ago when even the family living room was viewed as an illegitimate place for the appreciation of proper, 'serious' music. In fact, the basic rationale seems eerily familiar when one compares it to commentary surrounding increasingly widespread gramophone usage earlier in the twentieth century. Consider the following for example:

While technology [like the gramophone] may liberate the music work from its performance in one way, it opens it up to new possibilities of humiliation in another. In [Glenn] Gould's words, "at the centre of the technological debate, then, is a new kind of listener – a listener more participant in the musical experience[...]" Consumer choice means we decide what to listen to from among our records. (The gramophone, wrote Percy Scholes in 1924, "allows every man to decide for himself.") It means we decide which tracks to play and in which order. And it means we decide how loudly to play them, with what balance (left to right), what tone (treble to bass), what mix. (Frith, 1996, p. 231)

Similar to the iPod, the 'participatory' nature of the gramophone struck chords of discontent with more than a few critics right through the 1960s, some twenty years before the idea of the portable music player would become even a small blip on the consumer radar. In the telling words of one Goddard Lieberson at this time: "I believe the listener should leave his phonograph alone; if he wants to get into the picture, let him play the piano. I would like to see a standard set of phonographs whereby even the volume could not be changed. Then you would finally have what the artist wanted." (quoted in Frith, 1996, p. 231) In this regard, the fear of what effects listener interaction could have on the integrity of music as an art form certainly runs deep; since chapter two was already devoted to exploring the various complexities and misconceptions involved with these issues, I will not spend more time assessing such charges here.

What I will address however is the oft-ignored fact that, regardless of what most portable audio critics wish to believe, devices like the iPod never truly remove one's digital collection from the home at all, but merely copy it for more convenient use on the road. The truth is that a necessary and dual relationship always exists between the digital collection as found on one's portable iPod device, and the 'master' collection which exists equally and simultaneously on one's computer hard drive. What this means is that to truly appreciate the complex dynamics of contemporary digital music collecting, one must first understand that although one's iPod may indeed leave the house, one's comprehensive private collection need never leave the living room at all.

Going back to the previous section where the process of loading one's iPod was discussed, it was mentioned that in order to move music from a compact disc or download folder into the portable device itself, one would first have access to a desktop or laptop computer loaded with the corresponding library software – in this case, Apple iTunes – and second possess that ever-important 'umbilical' cable which would then effectively make possible a bridging of the gap between the two. What was never mentioned was the fact that once such a transfer was completed and the cable was yanked from the USB or FireWire input slot on the computer device, the new iPod user would be unable to make any further changes until back at the computer with the portable unit reconnected and synched once again. In fact, now is the time to remind those who have never themselves owned or used such a device that the iPod is not exactly a digital music organizer; it is simply a digital music *player*, and this is a crucial distinction to make. Whereas an 'organizer' (like iTunes for instance) allows for the manipulation of folders

and the movement of files or other data between them, a 'player' allows only for the viewing or using of those files the way they have already been designated to appear and function. The point to make in all of this is that for one's digital music collection to exist on his or her iPod, it must simultaneously exist on his or her computer hard drive as well; once the unit is detached from the computer, the mobile collection is then frozen in time until paired up with the iTunes software once again. In this respect, the iPod user is never truly free from the computer device. An empty iPod without computer connectivity is like a compact disc without a CD player: shiny and neat, but useless all the same.

What this means for the act of maintaining a digital music library is that, like older forms of musical collecting, the predominant place for private music curation continues to be, as it historically has been, the private residence. The only difference is that while existing primarily within the rather stationary confines of one's computer, where it is often manipulated and played just like any other more traditional music media, the digital collection has been granted the potential of making itself far more publicly accessible as well. The reason for this is while most traditional music collections have been organized in ways which allow users the easiest and most efficient possible access to the artifacts stored within them, most computer hard drives possess something that milk crates or CD stands could only dream of: direct internet connectivity. The private collection often becomes much more like a public library in the very literal (and literary) sense of the term. For 'unrestricted access', unknown visitors need only obtain the correct membership card, which, in the digital realm, usually amounts to nothing more than a quick download of one of many dozens of free peer-to-peer sharing programs located

ubiquitously online. The best part is that in the digital music world, borrowers need not even return the materials once they're done; there are no late fees to worry about, nor is there any physical evidence of their removal, since music files are never physically borrowed. They are simply made into perfect, non-returnable copies whenever others feel the need to 'check them out'.

By recognizing the untapped potential in the conjoining of interactive digital library software with peer-to-peer file-sharing networks online, many programmers have since jumped all over the possibility of linking individuals and their music tastes together in virtual communities where processes of collecting, connoisseurship, and canonism have been found to thrive. From hypertextual sites of music criticism which attract millions of viewers per week, to quality-regulated second-generation download communities and highly customizable online friend networks whose membership collectively surpasses many *tens* of millions, music collecting, and it's often inseparable counterpart of music sharing, are vast becoming two of the most important and widespread activities taking place recreationally on the internet today. Equally fascinating is the fact that the very act of sharing music through peer-to-peer networks online, which was originally made popular only as the most efficient way of tracking down 'free music' on the internet, is now tied inextricably to issues of self identity and hipness that can no longer be overlooked, nor understated. Though these issues will be given a much more detailed treatment in the following two chapters in the discussion of the cultural economy of the contemporary indie music scene, there is one important point which has yet to be raised: what becomes of one's susceptibility to 'egocasting' when what once was done in private

goes unabashedly public? Put differently: are we just as easily centred on individual whims and personal biases when connected to a social community of people who outwardly *despise* any sign of close-mindedness or musical intolerance as part of its very *raison d'être*?

3.3 Digital Collecting in the Age of 'Ego-Broadcasting'

One of the newest developments tied up in the sharing of digital media online is that people are starting to learn very quickly that their personal music collections, and all the uncool or otherwise embarrassing records located within them, should no longer be considered strictly private once introduced to the domain of the online friend network or download community. 'Playlistism', a term coined recently by a twenty year-old journalist for the Wesleyan University student press named Steven Aubrey is defined as "discrimination based not on race, sex, or religion, but on someone's horrible taste in music, as revealed by their iTunes playlist." (quoted in Kahney, 2006, p. 130) Like changing clothes in front of a window, people are increasingly becoming aware and self-conscious about the music they have accumulated. As Aubrey observes, "Students are starting to realize they must manage their music collections, or at least prune them, or risk permanently damaging their image." (quoted in Kahney, 2006, p. 130) As young people especially are finding it easier to root through the personal collections of colleagues and friends, they are noticing that there are social implications for making such information or rather, such digital *material*, publicly accessible. It would appear even those communities associated with music sharing online have social conventions which require as much close attention and support as those occurring in 'real' physical

space, an important thing to note when dealing out such broad charges of egocentrism and close-mindedness in such a multifaceted environment.

The point is that as portable music technologies are becoming increasingly integrated in physical as well as online social networks, the more it is that personal aspects of owning digital music collections are becoming equally implicated with what Sarah Thornton has previously coined 'subcultural capital'. This can be loosely defined as a leveraging of cultural knowledge, most often in the form of mutually recognized displays of cultural credibility or 'hipness', in return for greater levels of respect or status within a particular social group. In her words:

Subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder. [...] Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections (full of well-chosen, limited edition 'white label' twelve-inches and the like)." (Thornton, 1996; p. 11)

In this regard, for many, and especially those involved in underground or 'alternative' music cultures like that of indie, the ability to showcase one's own hipness by means of displaying their own 'carefully assembled' digital record collections online, or in other public spaces, is an opportunity for status that is rarely refused. This is similar to traditional high-art archivalists with their large collections and keen desire for recognition as studied experts and patrons for all that is unknown or underappreciated. In giving music fans the ability to trek their collections out of the private home via portable audio devices, or share them online via social computer networking software, it becomes increasingly clear how community regulations as to how such music should be organized

and consumed becomes a major factor in how these practices regularly unfold. For example, in describing the concept of playlistism further to Kahney, Steven Aubrey admits the degree to which such practices are already valued by youth as a way of judging or otherwise labelling their peers. “[A]n iTunes music library tells a lot more about a person than the clothes they wear or the books they carry. “It’s the T-shirt, plus the book, plus the haircut,” Aubrey said. “It’s everything.”” (quoted in Kahney, 2006, p. 130) In this respect, as Rosen has called the ‘narrow pursuit of one’s individual taste’ egocasting, I call the equally ‘widespread desire to make individual tastes public’ ego-broadcasting. The point is that bonafide music fans have *always* been egocentric in their music tastes to one degree or another. Rosen would never have promoted Mahler’s *Die Meistersinger* if it had not given her some form of personal gratification, musically *or* socially at the time; nor would Beethoven or Mozart have become so-called ‘classics’ if millions had not fervently endorsed, and personally *believed*, their music to be somewhat more worthy than other styles and works of the time. The question I would ask is that if Rosen charges the tastes of iPod owners as being narrow and egocentric, can we not say the same about those music fans who skip the ‘heavy metal’ section at a local Music World location entirely and head straight for the room marked ‘classical’? Surely these people actively avoid exterior influences as much as the next leather-clad metalhead affixed with white earbuds allegedly does.

The important point to gain in all of this regarding the use of portable music devices and related technologies is that they ‘restrict’ only as far as they are ‘restricted’. With new trends moving in the direction of increased interaction amongst digital devices, both in

online *and* in offline space, such fears of egocentricity as being somehow ‘embodied’ within such devices should be taken as archaic at best. What Rosen *really* laments is the potential loss of the so-called ‘academic’ or ‘institutional’ aspects of music listening that have been internalized by many high-art fan communities over the years. These would be the critical judgments and rulings developed and enshrined within particular cultural groups, regulated by community-approved genre aficionados who collectively decide and defend the aesthetic/ artistic ‘correctness’ of its members’ taste choices. What will be shown in the following two chapters, and specifically in the case of indie, is that these genre-conventions and social codes have not been lost at all. In fact, they may actually have been *intensified* with the aid of such new digital technologies within more popular music circles as of late.

3.4 Conclusion

Where some have criticized compressed digital music formats for lowering the quality of music in terms of definition and fidelity, Christine Rosen has since raised the concern that by promoting an increasingly mobile and personalized music experience, the actual devices which serve to facilitate the everyday use of such formats have in reality contributed to a much more deep-seated problem, namely a widespread devaluing of music, a deadening of taste, and a withdrawal from the social aspects of community life. The purpose of this chapter has been to point out one simple but substantial flaw in Rosen’s argument: she speaks of personal devices like the iPod as facilitating a retreat into one’s personal beliefs and opinions while ignoring the important fact that digital collecting has become the most socially-integrated practice of music listening and sharing

ever yet conceived. Everything associated with digital music, from downloading albums, to burning cds, ripping tracks, uploading libraries, and compiling playlists, has an extremely personal element no doubt, but also an undeniably social one as well. Indeed, the two can never be spoken of separately as these individual tastes could never form alone in a vacuum. To further flesh out these points, I will now introduce such practices in relation to the indie music scene in order to show how issues of subcultural capital and connoisseurship factor heavily in the widespread exploration and appreciation of contemporary digital music and the various technologies with which they are associated.

Chapter Four: Collecting, Canonism, and Connoisseurship in the Indie Music Scene

Directly implicated in the various issues discussed already in this paper stands the contemporary indie music scene: an ‘alternative’ music culture recognized equally for its emphasis on personal knowledge-building and individual connoisseurship as well as its visible but often understated reliance on communal processes of canon formation and a clearly delineated economy of subcultural capital (known vernacularly as ‘indie cred(ibility)’). As a subculture and musical genre built on the foundations of used record collecting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, indie has had a long and intimate relationship with both changing music media and related listening technologies over the last three decades. Given its elitist attitude and emphasis on collecting and connoisseurship as the ultimate signifiers of subcultural capital, the indie scene’s rather unabashed adoption of new digital formats and technologies over the last five years has occasioned a unique glance into the space between private collecting and public credibility. By insisting on the importance of individual opinions, but often labeling them as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, the indie scene encourages a particular breed of connoisseurship that is built on a faith in musical ‘truths’ which *appear* to develop organically, but are in reality influenced in no small way by a few major trend-setters located prominently within the scene. In this respect, by fostering an environment where in order to stay current or credible such self-proclaimed indie fans must buy a lot of music; listen to a lot of music; and also share a lot of music, or at least share a lot of ‘information’ about music, there are simply few more ready examples of where personal identity and public opinion collide so absolutely. This is especially true in regard to the widespread adoption

and coordinated use of contemporary digital music technologies on a mass scale within the scene itself.

This chapter will be divided into three sections, each exploring a different aspect of the indie scene as it has developed and matured over the last thirty years. The first section will lay the foundations for a general understanding of the way indie has evolved out of the British postpunk movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and will serve to illustrate the manner by which indie has made the shift from an underground political movement bent on destroying the major music industry, into a thriving ‘alternative’ music culture built upon an ideology of eclecticism and music appreciation, often in the broadest sense of both terms. The second section will proceed to reference scholarly literature, particularly the work of Matthew Bannister (2006), who suggests that rather than thinking of indie as a ‘political movement’ or a particular ‘sound’, indie should instead be viewed as a ‘history of record collectors’ all referencing a similar foundation or canon of time-honoured selections and shared cultural foundations. The third and final section will conclude by suggesting that contemporary indie fandom is based largely on the idea that what constitutes true indie music should remain a ‘discussion’ rather than a restricted ‘category’ of particular sounds or ideals; therefore, the manner by which new music technologies are used within the scene to unite fans, but also to maintain social hierarchies and cultural distinctions, makes it ripe for inquiry. This serves as an excellent example of how certain music cultures consistently, and *insistently*, blur the lines between the private and public in music collecting today.

4.1 A Brief History of Indie Music

To begin this brief but important overview, it must first be pointed out that what we now know of as indie music emerged only in the late 1970s when the original British punk movement began to wane and a new postpunk movement rose up to take its place. Simon Reynolds describes this in his recent historical account of how the postpunk movement developed in the formative years of 1978-1984:

For the postpunk vanguard, punk had failed because it attempted to overthrow rock's status quo using conventional music (fifties rock 'n' roll, garage punk, mod) that actually *predated* dinosaur megabands like Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. The postpunks set forth with the belief that 'radical content demands radical form.'" (Reynolds, 2006, p. 3; emphasis in original)

In other words, postpunk emerged largely because, in the eyes of many British youth at the time, punk was seen as no longer being punk *enough*. Again, according to Reynolds:

By the summer of 1977, punk had become a parody of itself. Many of the movement's original participants felt that something open-ended and full of possibilities had degenerated into a commercial formula. Worse, it had proved a rejuvenating shot in the arm to the established record industry that punks had hoped to overthrow. (p. 1)

It was in the continued spirit of the original punk movement (break down musical barriers, destroy the record industry, etc.) that small-time postpunk record labels began "view(ing) their business arrangements – no contracts, 50/50 split of costs and receipts, the band's ownership of their recordings – as a political statement" (Aaron, 2005, p. 19). During this time, three things were seen as fuelling the desire for a new independent musical movement: a widely perceived need for more innovative new music and an 'alternative' music culture, a growing romantic faith in the 'artist as genius' myth, and a

perceived need to put forth a challenge to the handful of major labels that were monopolizing the music industry at the time (Lee, 1995).

Though ideologically powerful and theoretically sound, this new ‘independent’ framework – much like that of punk before it – soon began showing its cracks in the face of major-label competition and shifting market forces in the 1980s. As detailed by Stephen Lee (1995), some of the biggest challenges faced by the early independent movement included a lack of business savvy among indie-label owners, a difficulty in adapting to quickly-changing market forces, and an underestimation of major-label power, both politically and financially. Simply put, independent labels were having trouble keeping up with consumer demands and mounting debt. At the same time, independent artists were finding it increasingly difficult staying loyal to local ‘indies’ who could not afford to promote their music adequately. By the mid-eighties, as the financial situation of the indies went from bad to worse, the major labels began to aggressively close in on the independent scene. If they could not buy the smaller labels outright, they would simply offer them everything they needed to stay in business – money, exposure, distribution, etc., in turn for financial stakes in their companies and a percentage of their earnings. In time, many would come to believe these ‘arms-length’ partnerships were the only viable way for independent labels to survive in such a highly competitive market. As such, where this major/minor label dynamic would start as a simple exercise in pragmatism by all involved, it would later become firmly entrenched as the ideal way for majors and ‘indies’ to do business together for many years to come.

As to be expected, an increased level of major-label dependence would soon begin to challenge the so-called ‘pure independence’ rhetoric of earlier times. Without a stable belief system to fall back on, the postpunk movement, or ‘indie scene’ as it was beginning to be popularly referred, began regarding its music under new and evolving terms. As identified by Hesmondhalgh, the first clear evidence of a major ideological shift became apparent between the years of 1985 and 1986 when *Music Week* began to focus their independent charts on “sound, rather than economic status” (Hesmondhalgh, 1999, p. 51). This started a major industry-wide debate as to what being ‘indie’ truly meant:

[...] when indie became established as a genre, a musical sound as well as, or perhaps instead of, a sign of a political stance towards the music business, many industry insiders began to argue that the independent charts should be based on musical style, rather than on the basis of whether the distributor had ties to a major corporation (the definition of ‘independent’). (p. 51)

This top-down ideological shift – ‘top down’ because it was initiated by the charts and record companies and only later passed down to the actual listening audience – was surprisingly well-received by the majority of indie music fans at the time. Once seemingly obsessed with keeping their albums and artists from the profit-driven agendas of the corporate majors, these music enthusiasts did not seem to notice, nor care, that their precious ‘independent’ acts were all subscribing to a new indie vision which seemed to permit some degree of ‘selling out’ in order to maintain a healthy output of quality music. As observed by Stephen Lee a few years after this trend became increasingly apparent:

Given this lack of overwhelming social condemnation (or, frankly, even acknowledgement at the passing of [a small record] company from the indie ranks – the indie music press has seemed most concerned), this leads to an important question: if music fans in practice do not distinguish between a fully independent indie and one that has mutated into a ‘hybrid’ (or potentially, a ‘major’), then what is the importance of the social articulation of an ideology known as ‘independence’? (Lee, 1995, p. 29)

The point is that as indie music was becoming increasingly popular it was also becoming more diverse, which meant that there no longer seemed to be the same concerns that commercial success necessarily meant a sacrificing of artistic integrity in the process – a trend which would continue to this very day. In the last year alone, quintessential indie acts Death Cab for Cutie, the Shins, and the Decemberists have all signed on to major labels with little or no criticism emerging from either the indie music press or the ‘underground’ scene itself. In fact, for the most part, indie press coverage has been very supportive of these moves, a sentiment echoed in a similar acceptance of the barrage of indie music finding its way into all aspects of mainstream popular culture, from high-budget television shows to blockbuster films and even radio and television advertisements for a wide range of commercial products.

A last point to make is that since the early 1980s the indie music scene has embraced a wide range of different styles and subgenres, thus making a specific ‘indie sound’ impossible to circumscribe. As evidence of this, consider a mere handful of sub-genres which can all fit comfortably within the broader indie umbrella: Lo-Fi, Alt-Country, Riot Grrrl, Freak-Folk, Post-Hardcore, Dance-Punk, Dream-Pop, Post-Rock, Indietronic, Twee-Pop, A.D.D. or ‘Math’ Rock, Ambient, Experimental Noise-Pop... the list goes on.

Consider alongside these the various ‘revival’ genres which have gained prominence as of late as well, including new interpretations and a vast reworking of 1960s garage rock, traditional postpunk, new wave, no wave, shoegaze, and many others still. And if not confusing enough, it is also important to point out that each of these apparently disparate, but also largely subjective, categories have *themselves* developed various offshoots and exceptions which continue to complicate the idea of any so-called unifying indie sound exponentially. For example, it is not rare to find bands describing themselves as ‘jazz-infused post-hardcore math-rockers’, or something of the sort. The point then is that indie should be understood not as a particular sound or exclusive musical genre, but rather as a culture of music fans who collectively, however subjectively, embrace a vast, but by no means infinite, spectrum of musical possibilities which are often assessed on a case-by-case basis.

4.2 Collecting Indie Music

As suggested in the section above, over the years indie music has been analyzed from many distinct perspectives. Examining the economic, political, and institutional qualities of two influential labels of the 1980s – Wax Trax! and Rough Trade respectively – Stephen Lee (1995) and David Hesmondhalgh (1998, 1999) were the first to problematize the romantic view of independent labels serving as ‘creative oases’ functioning outside of the economic interests and constraints of western capitalist society, and in doing so introduced serious doubt as to whether pure independence was ever truly an attainable, or even a desirable, goal for label owners and artists to pursue. Continuing in this tradition (albeit from a different angle), Ryan Hibbett (2005) has since put forth

the argument that the indie music scene is really just part of an ‘old and familiar social structure’, the traditional ‘high art’ community of years past, and as such is concerned primarily with issues of social differentiation or ‘cultural capital’ rather than on developing strict generic blueprints of acceptable sounds. More recently, Wendy Fonarow (2006) has shown how the indie scene continuously monitors and perpetuates itself in the form of indie performances or ‘gigs’ where moral and aesthetic concerns are constantly delineated, tested, and reproduced. Despite the wide range of topics and issues covered by these theorists, Matthew Bannister (2006) has recently pointed out that although important in providing a sense of the many complexities involved in understanding contemporary indie music culture, none has spent much time examining the actual relationships between indie fans and their physical lifeblood, the indie recordings *themselves*, and how these too affect familiar discourses of music tradition and identity.

Taking indie fandom as first and foremost an expression of individual, but also collective, musical devotion and knowledge, Bannister recommends analyzing indie music culture from a new perspective. He views it not just as a history of music in the ‘political’ sense, in terms of a rejection of mainstream conventions, or the ‘generic’ sense, in terms of arguing for any purported uniqueness of its sound, but as a history of the opinions and practices of those who *collect* indie music: in his words, “a history of record collectors” (Bannister, 2006, p. 81). He bases this argument on two separate but interconnected factors: the first is the influential but often underappreciated role of used record store owners and small-label producers in the late 1970s–1980s in training young consumers

and musicians to recognize and understand ‘good music’; and the second is indie’s continued emphasis on processes of canonism and the educational or ‘academic’ aspects of alternative music connoisseurship in the scene today.

4.2.1 A History of Indie Record Collectors

Indie itself did not emerge out of thin air. Many theorists (Hesmondhalgh 1998, 1999; Azerrad 2001; Reynolds 2006; Bannister 2006) have effectively shown that although indie’s ‘official’ lineage can be traced back as far as the postpunk and independent movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s, its actual roots, in terms of its direct musical influences, go back further still, most notably to alternative 1960s/early 1970s bands like the Velvet Underground, Tangerine Dream, and Captain Beefheart. The reasons for this can be tied to two important issues: the first was the desire of a newly formed youth culture to find new and radical musical influences outside of what the ‘mainstream’ was consistently providing in the mid 1970s; and the second was the desire of used record store owners and small-time producers, usually sharing similar sentiments, to point this youth in the ‘right’ musical directions. Giving historical context to the first point, Bannister writes:

Unlike today, when classic hit stations and CD reissues are ubiquitous, in the early 1980s, the 1960s were virtually unheard of, a kind of secret. To uncover a ‘lost’ classic from the bin of a second-hand shop represented a small victory against the forces of modern capitalism, which were only interested in selling you the latest Dire Straits album. (Bannister, 2006, p. 81)

While initially it was often this desire for discovery and rebellion that brought empty-handed young music fans to used record shops, it was usually the store owners

themselves who were the ones responsible for which albums were tucked under the kids' arms when they left. Again, according to Bannister, "Second-hand record shops and their owners performed a broadly educative function for indie musicians, broadening their awareness of musical history." (p. 82) In many respects, the owners of these shops served as mentors to a growing population of youth who wanted to use the forgotten recordings of yesteryear to help change the face of music today.

Many of these used record shop owners were not just salesmen but substantial private collectors in their own right, and often aspiring small-label producers as well. In fact, many of the most prominent and influential independent record labels of the 1980s (Flying Nun, Rough trade, and Creation in particular) had direct ties to owners of used record shops, as did many similarly prominent postpunk mainstay artists, such as Orange Juice, the Replacements, and REM (Bannister 2006). Just as used record store owners had full creative control over what music passed through their shops, so did owners and producers of small-time labels in terms of the bands they signed and whose music they released. Again, in Bannister's words:

Because many indie labels were initially more ideologically than commercially driven, the aesthetic preferences of the owner(s) were central to the style of music produced [...] Such figures not only enabled indie production – they also played an important role in 'policing' the purity of the genre." (p. 85)

From this perspective, practices in professional music archivalism in combination with amateur (used) record collecting not only affected the original 'foundation' of the 1970s-80s postpunk movement, in terms of supplying the economic, ideological, and musical

blueprints upon which the scene could be built, but also in the ‘evolution’ of the genre as well, since only a select few decided which new music qualified as worthy of being recorded and promoted in the underground circuit. In this respect, the stable development of indie music over the last three decades required not only the recording and collecting of good music, as collectively defined within the scene, but the construction of an official *canon* of ‘good music’ as well, upon which all new recordings could be reliably judged.

4.2.2 The Historical Function of the Indie Canon

The fact that ever since the late 1970s the indie music scene has made some measure of effort to downplay its reliance on collective forms of connoisseurship and canonism is no real surprise. As Bannister astutely explains:

At a first glance, independent rock and canonism would seem to have little in common. Canonism would appear to connote institutionalized high culture, hierarchy, tradition, authority, dominant social groups, while independent rock suggests popular culture, collectivity, innovation, and (in)subordination. A canon implies a tradition, an establishment and rules. Independent rock is not generally viewed in such a light.” (p. 80)

In saying this however, the connection has always been clear to anyone involved with the scene over the last three decades. As Ryan Hibbett describes it: “indie enthusiasts [...], defending what they like as “too good” for radio, too innovative and challenging to interest those blasting down the highway [...] become the scholars and conservators of “good” music.” (Hibbett, 2005, p. 60) Put differently: in rejecting mainstream music conventions, indie music fans over the years have been instrumental in constructing what could be called an ‘alternative’ mainstream: a canon of must-have indie albums that any

self-respecting fan should know, appreciate, and eventually obtain for their own personal collections. As Will Straw once put it: “Part of the implicit work of alternative-rock culture over the past decade has been the construction of a relatively stable canon of earlier music forms [...] which serves as a collective reference point.” (Straw, 1991, p. 378) In its most basic form, the canon gives indie fans something to talk about – a place for them to begin forging a collective understanding of what it is they are actually hearing when the music itself is played.

In this respect, by making selections over the years as to what did and did not qualify as indie music, the scene itself created its own lineage, its own history of being. Again in Bannister’s words:

canon is also a way of historicizing indie, not just because it is historic (literally) but also because it can be read historically as an archaeology of knowledge – it shows how the discourse of independence was shaped. Canon-related practices such as archivalism are not simply cataloguing the past – they are political and selective.” (Bannister, 2006, p. 78)

Though certainly important, this idea of a selective history is nothing new and is well documented and emphasized in various other publications regarding issues of music history, such as when Negus writes: “As ‘history’ in general, the beginnings and ends of musical genres and styles are *produced* ‘as particular rock stories have been constructed and narrated’ (quoted in Karja, 2006, p. 7; emphasis in original). Where Bannister’s contribution *is* unique however, is in his heavy emphasis on the inherent contradictions built in to any attempt at directly endorsing, or on the other hand, denying, the presence of an official indie canon from within the scene today.

Canonism was initially an implicit rather than explicit indie discourse. Making it too explicit would have institutionalized the scene, and made it appear parochial and derivative – not a good look for rock culture, especially a postpunk one, since punk was supposedly so anti-traditional. But paradoxically this very radicalism necessitated regulation, to maintain a sense of the scene's uniqueness and difference. (Bannister, 2006, p. 86)

The point is that the value of the indie music canon lied equally in its ability to signify distinction, not just in terms of sound, but in terms of community identity as well. As Bourdieu once put it, “[taste] functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position” (Bourdieu 2002, p. 466). By enshrining the rules or codes surrounding the adoption and appreciation of indie music through canon, indie music fans have been able to construct their own version of the so-called ‘universal aesthetic’ from the ground up; and in doing so perpetuate, and guide, their own collective existence. In fact, it is perhaps Karja who puts it best when he writes “if history is about choosing those things that are worth telling, then canonization could be described as choosing those things that are worth repeating.” (Karja, 2006, p. 5) And by choosing those things worth repeating, the indie scene has spent the last thirty years not just providing a ready encyclopedia of must-have music, but a template as well, for how such music knowledge can equally be mobilized within communities of similarly minded individuals for social leverage and respect.

4.3 The Politics of Indie Music Fandom

As suggested above, becoming a well-respected member of the contemporary indie music scene requires three separate but interconnected commitments: a legitimate interest in discovering good music, old and new; an eagerness to sample and collect a wide range of music, some of which will certainly take effort and patience to truly appreciate; and perhaps most importantly, a willingness to justify opinions and defend one's taste in public fora. The reasons for this are simple: first, without a true passion for music, heavy involvement in the indie community has typically had little to offer to average casual music fan: navigating the terrain of indie can be confusing at the best of times, so only those who truly care tend to become well integrated.³ Second, without an interest in collecting and consuming large amounts of music (increasingly using new digital technologies), one finds it difficult, if not impossible, to stay current or well connected to the changing landscape of the scene itself. Again, since indie as a genre does not subscribe to a particular sound, what it means to be 'indie' changes often and requires effort to maintain an understanding of. Finally, becoming a valid member of the scene means building a high level of indie connoisseurship and a confidence in one's individual music tastes. This requires proving to others around that one indeed knows what they are talking about, and often requires the use of signifiers, like large and carefully managed digital collections, to justify worthiness and gain credibility in the community. This also means being willing to stick one's neck out and enter the public discussion of what indie,

³ With a recent surge of interest in the scene, many of those who never considered themselves 'indie' before are using new technologies to happily and successfully plug themselves in, so this could very well be changing.

which today has evolved into more or less a synonym for ‘good, worthwhile music’ actually means. Indie credibility is earned by proving not only that one subscribes to the indie canon, or at least can appreciate why it has evolved as it has, but by also proving a willingness to display one’s own personal convictions in places where they too can be publicly lauded or condemned. As indie is a discussion and not a ‘thing’, only those who truly care about exploring a full spectrum of musical possibilities today find the time and patience to sift through the infinite supply of music circulating daily in order to continuously prove their ability to participate meaningfully in such an important discussion.

The last concern to take into account is whether or not such a sharing of musical tastes and preferences is indeed social or, as some might suggest, just another example of ego-stroking – only this time in a public place. The answer is that it is both: members of the indie scene maintain large private collections and develop personal indie know-how to expand their own musical horizons, but also to show a commitment to the movement itself by publicly asserting how ‘cool’ or ‘credible’ they truly are. In this regard, having a fully stocked indie-approved iPod or iTunes library fulfils two functions: first it provides personal gratification in allowing members to discover music that suits their own individual needs (the concept of egocasting) and second it provides social gratification in allowing fans to instantly plug into a vast network of musical possibilities where they may *collectively* construct the meaning of their music by sharing opinions and albums with those who may not always agree with their choices (the concept of ego-broadcasting). This indeed is the point that must be made in response to charges of

egocasting and a so-called widespread deadening of music tastes: in caring *so* much what other people think and do, indie fans constantly monitor their own actions and opinions.

4.4 Conclusion

As Ryan Hibbett has rightly noted, “Indie rock is far from a static entity; rather, it is a malleable space filled by discourse and power, whose meaning is always under construction by various agents (bands, listeners, labels, critics, etc.) with diverse objectives.” (Hibbett, 2005, p. 58) Part of the pleasure then in making the transition from analogue to digital collections surrounds the very idea that music is contestable, and therefore participation in fan cultures like that of indie become especially exciting and involving once they are expanded into interactive fora online. In this context, fans are actively encouraged to share their collections on special indie download networks; post on indie message boards; publish personal indie blogs; contest major indie reviewers, and otherwise challenge anything and everything they see fit with respect to the music, its scene, and its members. On the other hand, indie draws many comparisons to traditional high-art communities for its cultural elitism and snobbery, and also its close attention to historical trajectories of aestheticism, authenticity, and artistic ‘truth’. In this respect, there are countless instances of seasoned indie fans lashing out at ‘poseurs’ or ‘scene-kids’ attempting to talk a big game, but who have obviously not done their research first. In the next chapter, I will explore three major examples of where such clashes between the personal (I listen because ‘I’ like) and the public (I listen because ‘they’ like) occur in virtual space, specifically on major review sites, download communities, and online fan networks. It will be demonstrated here how digital audio technologies actually encourage

music fans to pay more reflexive attention to the music they like, and spend more time participating in serious fan communities where practices in record collecting and canon formation still retain high levels of cultural significance.

Chapter Five: The Pitchfork Effect

Online sites for music sharing and fandom have seen an increase in academic attention over the last few years, especially with regard to the manner by which social communities have increasingly turned to virtual space as a means of supplementing, rather than simply ‘replacing’, already established forms of offline communication. Arguing for the legitimacy in studying such communities while paying special attention to the meaning of their online manifestations, Nessim Watson (1997) has been one of the first to illustrate effectively how certain groups of people readily interact in both online and offline contexts, thus encouraging scholars to re-think the somewhat negative and often patronizing connotations of the term ‘virtual’. In Nessim’s words: “the distinction of real communities from virtual communities is not the same as the distinction between online and offline [for the former] distinction as handed down to us tells us immediately that online phenomena are not real communities.” (Watson, 1997, p. 130) This notion of ‘online’ and ‘offline’ as being the preferred terminology to use in reference to music communities and their increased use of the internet has since been taken up by Andy Bennett to help illustrate the web’s importance as a valuable extension of offline interpersonal communication. Rather than viewing the internet today as some kind of separate ‘subcultural space’, Bennett sees it as yet another significant “cultural resource appropriated within a pre-existing cultural context, and used as a means of engaging symbolically with and/ or negotiating that context.” (Bennett, 2004, p. 165) This distinction is especially important to make when discussing contemporary indie music culture for two reasons: first because indie fans and musicians exist neither online nor offline, but in both spaces simultaneously; and second because the internet is rapidly

growing in importance as a musical resource, not just for bands hoping to get their names out to the masses, but for fans who are increasingly taking advantage of such online materials in their own personal quests for musical guidance and support.

One such resource which has recently developed an industry-wide reputation as being the most prominent site for indie music criticism and connoisseurship today is Pitchforkmedia.com. Functioning centrally as a web-based hub for indie music fandom online, Pitchfork fulfills the role of both taste arbiter and indie gatekeeper, not necessarily telling fans what to think, but certainly telling them what to think about – and where to find it when they do. As shall be shown throughout this chapter, Pitchfork not only drives music lovers to the internet in search of new bands and new information (both designed to work alongside new digital music libraries and portable audio devices), but also empowers users to embrace the internet itself as a major competitive advantage for indie culture on the whole. This is illustrated most readily in reference to Pitchfork's acute ability to keep its visitors abreast of new developments, most often in the form of upcoming concert events, record release dates, and the like, which encourage users to participate on a scale unprecedented in the history of the genre. In this respect, where indie has historically prided itself on knowing the "music of tomorrow, today" (Fonarow, 2006, p. 27), Pitchfork is widely regarded as one of the most reliable places for fans to acquire new information, and indeed develop the navigational skills and technical proficiency necessary to efficiently locate and identify important bands and music trends. To adequately illustrate how it is that certain internet portals like Pitchfork are having a very real impact on the lives of fans and musicians, in online and offline contexts alike,

the following pages will be split into three sections, each dealing with a different variation of what has become widely recognized within the indie community as the ‘Pitchfork Effect’.

The first section will serve as an introduction of the Pitchfork website itself, illustrating some of the ways that it has affected the broader landscape of music criticism on one hand and the discourse of indie on the other. This is a crucial place to begin, for, as Bannister once put it:

rock journalism is the most important and visible site for canonism [...]. While it may seem counterintuitive to suggest musical scenes being influenced by writing, rather than the other way around, I argue that this is a function of indie’s complex (but often ignored) relation to ‘rock tradition’ (including canon). (Bannister, 2006, p. 79)

The second section will discuss the effect of the website on actual indie bands and musicians today, many of whom have seen a direct link between the strength of a Pitchfork review and the subsequent success or failure of an album itself. This link is most often represented through heightened or depleted record sales and concert attendance, as well as similar levels of perceived connection between bands and their fans in more traditional offline contexts. Through this it should become clear that the often seamless fusing of digital music collecting with other fan activities located online suggests neither an “erod[ing of] patience for a more challenging form of music” (Rosen, 2005, p. 66) nor any kind of “dampen[ing of] enthusiasm for seeing music performed live” (p. 66). The third and final section will conclude by describing the mobilizing effect of Pitchfork on the indie listening public itself, as represented through fan networks,

download programs, and personal indie blogs which are now readily found online. This will demonstrate how reputable hubs on the internet can be used to link various internet sites and new digital audio technologies together, creating, in turn, an extremely rich environment for the development of individual connoisseurship and collective music taste, both online and off.

5.1 The Pitchfork Effect... on Music Criticism

Pitchfork Media, located online at www.pitchforkmedia.com and defined most simply as an internet music magazine or 'fanzine', has been recognized widely over the last decade for its up-to-date music news features and daily indie record reviews. Started in 1995 by nineteen year-old Ryan Schreiber in the bedroom of his parents' house near Minneapolis, Minnesota, Pitchfork has since evolved into one of the most prominent record review sites on the internet today, with visitors exceeding one hundred sixty thousand daily and averaging roughly one point three million per week (Freedom du Lac, 2006; Thomas, 2006). The site itself is organized into three main columns, titled 'News/ Best New Music', 'Record Reviews', and 'Forkcast/ Features' respectively. The 'News' and 'Forkcast/ Features' sections are updated several times daily from Monday through Friday, with the 'Reviews' section being updated once each morning. On any given day, Pitchfork's main page will feature twenty to twenty-five 'News' headlines, containing information on tour dates, music festivals⁴, new albums, collaborations, gossip, etc. It also lists a 'Best New Music' feature which links to the review of Pitchfork's most recent

⁴ This includes Pitchfork's own 'offline' P4K Music Festival, now being held each summer in Chicago, IL

favourite album release. Five new 'Record Reviews', two as featured, three as supplementary, and twenty others from days previous are also listed. The site highlights five to ten 'Forkcast' song and video links, often organized as 'playlists' which users can later upload onto their iPods, and seven or eight 'Features', usually consisting of major interviews, longer news columns, and other special reports. To aid in the navigation of the site, a search box is located at the top left-hand corner of the main page, especially helpful for finding older news and reviews. Each column-heading also offers a link to its own devoted sub-site, featuring easy access to an entire back-catalogue of previous posts. Banner advertising is located in a box in the center of the page, as well as horizontally along the top and vertically along the left-hand side of the page, and contains ads for anything from album releases and music festivals to breath-mints and clothing.

As one can see already from this brief overview, record reviews are only one aspect of the site's total oeuvre; however it is this aspect which consistently receives the majority of attention from fans, critics, and artists alike. The style of writing found in this particular section usually amounts to six-hundred+ words of dense and ostentatious prose per individual album and is accompanied by a 'scientifically precise' numerical rating (scaled from 0.0 to a maximum of 10.0), which is often a major source of controversy. This has led Pitchfork to even sarcastically claim for itself the title: "home of the gratuitously in-depth record review" (Pitchfork Media, 2007) – no doubt an apt name for a website that is designed to cater to a culture built upon a long 'history of record collectors' (see again chapter four). While the reviews themselves will become more important in the sections to come, it is the overall impact of the site itself on traditional

music media that deserves some measure of attention first, since this will help establish Pitchfork's reputation as a major player in the overall discourse of indie culture today.

Named after a tattoo worn by Al Pacino in *Scarface*, "a pitchfork that supposedly marked him as an assassin in the Cuban underworld" (Itzkoff, 2006), Schreiber's decision to christen his brainchild 'Pitchfork' has proved remarkably prescient as of late. First suggested in a 2004 article by Rob Harvilla provocatively titled "Pitchfork's Progress: Will a Sassy, Hip Web Site Spell Doom for Printed Rock Criticism?", Matthew Shaer has since noted that "Pitchfork is often compared to *Rolling Stone* in its prime: a music journal that is single-handedly revolutionizing music journalism." (Shaer, 2006) This comparison, while qualified by Shaer as still being somewhat of 'a stretch', is certainly a prominent theme in recent writing on the subject, especially by those rock journalists concerned with Pitchfork's effect on the broader critical establishment on the whole. For example, Dave Itzkoff, a former editor at *Spin* who partly blames Pitchfork for the recent loss of his own job, is not shy in admitting that "As Pitchfork's influence grew, we [at *Spin*] consulted the site as both a resource and a measuring stick – if it was lavishing attention on a new band, we at least had to ask ourselves why we weren't doing the same: By then, our value as a trustworthy and consistent filter had waned." (Itzkoff, 2006) This notion of the music filter is a crucial one. Though many cultural theorists have introduced concern with the so-called 'demise' of the traditional critical music establishment (see again Rosen's egocasting perspective in chapter three) as well as the possibility of music fans being potentially overwhelmed with material in this new virtual space (see for

example, Jones 2000), many underestimate the role of filters (or ‘gatekeepers’) in continuing to help fans with keeping their options straight. Again in Itzkoff’s words:

Though the music industry has seen drastic changes in recent years, what has remained constant is the fact that most listeners still find their music with the assistance of a filter: a reliable source that sifts through millions of tracks to help them choose what they do (and don’t) want to hear. [...] But like the indie bands that are its lifeblood, Pitchfork has found its own way to thrive in an industry that is slowly being niched to death: It influences those who influence others. (Itzkoff, 2006)

The last point here is also key: while Pitchfork itself only attracts a little over a million visitors a week, where it does its most influential work is in starting *discussions* about music, conversations which extend equally in both on and offline space. Though a more detailed treatment of these in reference to issues of fan blogging, etc. will be provided in section three, this idea of Pitchfork as an ‘instigator’ rather than any sort of omnipotent ‘dictator’ is an important one, stressed equally by both critics and proponents alike. In saying this however, Pitchfork’s overall effect on indie music itself has been anything but insignificant over the last few years, leading to what many indie fans and artists refer to as the infamous ‘Pitchfork Effect’ mentioned above. This term has become especially popular indie vernacular over the last three or four years, emphasizing the site’s overall impact on indie as both a genre and as an affiliated community of artists and fans.

5.2 The Pitchfork Effect... on Indie Artists

The definition of the ‘Pitchfork Effect’ as it is used within the indie scene today is concerned not with the changing landscape of critical music journalism as described above, but rather with the idea that over the years Pitchfork has developed enough power,

credibility, and devoted readership to actually begin having a sizeable impact on the widespread conception of the indie genre as a whole. Consider a few recent journalistic articles which have popularly addressed such concerns: “The Pitchfork Effect: How a Tiny Web Outfit Became the Most Influential Tastemaker on the Music Scene” (Itzkoff, 2006), “Giving Indie Acts A Plug, or Pulling It: Pitchfork Web Site Rises as Rock Arbiter” (Freedom Du Lac, 2006), “The Pitchfork Effect: How an Upstart Record-Review Site Won the Animosity – and Allegiance – of Indie Music Scenesters and Changed the Rules for Breakout Bands” (Thomas, 2006). It is clear from these titles that Pitchfork’s existence is having a real impact far beyond the limited confines of the personal computer screen, and fans and artists everywhere have been quick to take notice.

Although establishing a direct causal link between an online music review and the success or failure of a particular artist’s offline work (tour bookings, album sales, popularity, etc.) is a fraught exercise at best, there have been a number of stand-out examples over the last few years within the indie scene that have been met with some measure of consensus for having done exactly that. The textbook example thus far has been the case of Canadian group Broken Social Scene (BSS). This Toronto act had been slugging it out in the local bar scene for several years before Pitchfork CEO Ryan Schreiber stumbled upon their most recent album at the time, buried deep in a box of promotional CDs, late one night in his Chicago office. The pure randomness of Schreiber’s decision to even review the album is noteworthy; here is a small excerpt to illustrate this point:

See, the problem is, it's impossible to know what's what; you have to just dive in [the box] and hope for the best, because sometimes the bands with the worst names and most hideous packaging are just great musicians who would make terrible image consultants. Case in point: Broken Social Scene. [...] I wish I could convey how they've made just exactly the kind of pop record that stands the test of time, and how its ill-advised packaging and shudder-inducing bandname seem so infinitesimal after immersing yourself in the music. And I hate to end this saying, "You just have to hear it for yourself." But oh my god, you do. You just really, really do. (Schreiber, 2003)

As recalled later by Schreiber himself: "The night before we ran the record review, [BSS] had played a show to, like, 200 people. [...] And the next night, and the night after that, and the night after that, and the night after that, their shows sold out continuously. That was amazing to me." (quoted in Harvilla, 2004) Even BSS frontman Kevin Drew, a man not particularly known for his humility, has since given Schreiber's review major credit for the band's big break. As quoted in an interview by Dave Itzkoff, "The next tour we went on, we suddenly found ourselves selling out venues. Everyone was coming up to us, saying, 'We heard about you from Pitchfork,' It basically opened the door for us. It gave us an audience." (quoted in Itzkoff, 2006) Previously unknown indie acts Clap Your Hands Say Yeah!, Plastic Constellations, and Tapes 'n Tapes have all shared similar experiences. As one record store manager put it "Those guys [Clap] pressed maybe 1,000 copies before Pitchfork reviewed them and created such a stir. They weren't on a label. Because of Pitchfork, they were able to sell CDs without having to share the money with a label." (quoted in Thomas, 2006) Even Tapes' frontman Josh Grier has been more than content in admitting the role played by Pitchfork in his own band's rather overnight success. "The day the [Pitchfork] review went up we saw a big spike in sales. [...] I took

the morning off from work so I could stay home and help with all the additional activity.” (quoted in Thomas, 2006) Of course, the ‘Effect’ also appears to cut both ways: after receiving a dismal 0.0 rating on his solo debut *Travistan* in 2004, many noticed how artist Travis Morrison’s career took an instant dive, including not least, Morrison himself. In an interview with J. Freedom du Lac, he laments:

Up until the day of the [Pitchfork] review, I’d play a solo show, and people would be like, ‘That’s our boy, our eccentric boy.’ Literally the view changed overnight.... I could tell people were trying to figure out if they were supposed to be there or not. It was pretty severe, how the mood changed. (quoted in Freedom du Lac, 2006)

The so-called ‘Pitchfork Effect’ is therefore being felt not just in an online context, where bands are discussing the measure of internet traffic now running through their websites, but also in an *offline* context, where bands are equally noticing an increased/ decreased ability to book gigs, sell records, and relate with their audiences in person. In this respect, where software like iTunes has been shown in previous chapters to drive music fans to their home computer systems in order to effectively organize their private collections, download new music, and update their portable audio devices, it appears that parallel internet usage has become equally important to how more traditional offline practices of music fandom are now transpiring. As quoted above, Kevin Drew describes not just how Pitchfork ‘gave his band an audience’ in posting a favourable BSS review, but how this review then initiated personal contact with new fans who then used it as a topic of conversation in a similar live context. In the more tragic case of Travis Morrison, the opposite effect was shown. The bond Morrison once had with fans, which ironically was initiated in the first place when Pitchfork had christened his previous band (The

Dismemberment Pan) with a 9.6 rating and ‘Best New Music’ tag only five years before, was effectively broken. As Morrison himself confirmed, fans stopped buying his album and many stores refused to carry the record once hearing about the lowly Pitchfork review. In turn, Morrison lost the connection he once had with his audience, since many became self-conscious as to whether or not they should even be seen attending his concerts. As voiced by Morrison: “The review isn’t the story. The reaction to it is.” (quoted in Freedom du Lac, 2006) The point seems to be that indie fans are not merely sitting at home alone in their pyjamas, letting the convenience of their computer hard drives or iPod devices “discourage [them] from seeking the distinct pleasure of hearing music made, not merely replayed” (Rosen, 2005, p. 67), but are rather using such online resources to help themselves *gauge* what is truly worth collecting and, by extension, what corresponding offline experiences (read: live gigs) are truly worth their time and money.

5.3 The Pitchfork Effect... on Indie Fandom

As expressed in Rosen’s egocasting argument discussed at length in chapter three, concerns over the negative effects of digital audio technologies often seem preoccupied with the idea that ‘unlimited choice’ always and necessarily leads down a straight path to myopia. What these critical opinions appear to lack, once placed in the context of the internet especially, is an understanding of the sheer complexity and open-ended nature of such digital media. In this respect, many recent technological developments have been shown not to ‘limit’ musical availability and choice, but rather to *encourage* fans to increasingly use the internet as a way of networking with other music lovers, challenging critical authority, improving their own individual tastes, protecting the integrity of the

music they enjoy, and even pushing others to expand their own respective musical horizons as well. In the following three subsections, such issues will be discussed at further length, specifically in reference to online fan networks, download communities, and indie blogging fora found readily on the internet today.

5.3.1 Indie Fan Networks

As mentioned in chapter three, over the last few years there has been a steady trend in the development of online software which has tried to consolidate various modes of internet usage by integrating user-friendly audio, video, and textual features into individualized and highly simplistic online displays. These displays, which can be thought of as user-friendly personal web page templates, give the average internet user the ability to connect with friends and family online in ways that were simply not possible before. Ten years ago, making a web site required skills in web development and design, an expert understanding of hosting and bandwidth concerns, as well as enough time and money to manage each effectively. Today, internet users need only register with one of the many free social networking sites located online to instantly receive their very own personal site, along with the special perks and benefits that accompany it. For example, after taking a few minutes to sign up with Myspace.com, the average internet layperson finds it easy to post details and pictures of themselves on their own personal page. Once a seasoned user, uploading audio and video files, adding links to other web addresses and internet destinations, updating or subscribing to personal blogs, joining groups of people with similar interests, sharing comments and messages with others, staying in touch with old friends, and even making new ones, become extremely simple tasks. In reference to

indie, and Pitchfork's website in particular, the availability and extensive usage of such social networking sites by indie bands and fans have become one of the integral reasons for their popular influence and widespread success in the music scene as of late.

Where time/ space concerns used to limit the potential of periodic music magazines, the internet has since opened the floodgates for ambitious entrepreneurs like Ryan Schreiber to push music criticism to a brand new level. On Pitchfork today, tours, concert line-ups, upcoming festivals, and new releases are posted immediately when publicly available (rather than just once a week or once a month, as with the conventional print magazine) and most new pieces of information are accompanied by instant links to other sites where fans can obtain any supplementary information they desire. In fact, it is often the sites of the individual bands themselves that are cited – and hypertextually referenced – as primary sources in this context, thus making Pitchfork's news both accurate and well-supported by backing documentation. This not only lends credit to Pitchfork's ability to stay well informed and abreast of new developments before others seem to have the chance, but also its ability to link visitors *directly* with specific artist pages and fan sites where they too can discover new information for themselves. Crucially, such band sites are not usually expensive (and isolated) professional web sites per se, but rather those same free 'friend pages' maintained by millions of individual indie fans on integrated networks like Myspace. Under these circumstances, fans are encouraged to not just snoop around, as per the traditional web site, but to sign up for their *own* personal accounts where they may add such artist pages to a personal list of 'friends' as well. Here they can then post messages, read other fan comments, and interact on a far more personal level.

Of course, such privileged access to their fans is precisely why bands have embraced these technologies in the first place.

In the case of more popular indie artists, fans will typically seek them out either through popular search engines like Google or Yahoo, or those built into programs like Myspace themselves. Once the artist's page is found, the individual will usually then add the band to a personal 'friends list' where the page can be more easily linked back to later for tour and music updates. In the case of lesser-known acts, often more effort is required; however the results of such viral 'friend marketing' are often quick and extremely beneficial to a band's overall popularity. Described by Thomas:

Myspace has rendered professional publicists irrelevant. The new do-it-yourself PR requirements are simple: a few uploaded songs and the patience to spend hours at a keyboard, checking out kids' favourite bands and inviting the right demographic to the musician's circle of friends. [...] That's how Quietdrive, a Minneapolis band virtually unknown in the local scene, found almost 40,000 online supporters across the country and signed a deal with Sony BMG subsidiary Epic Records – despite a lack of radio play, press coverage, or endless touring. (Thomas, 2006)

This process often unfolds as follows: a person visiting Pitchfork becomes intrigued by a new band and, after following the link to a few sample songs provided on the site, ends up on the band's Myspace page. If they like what they hear, the option is presented to sign in and either add the band as a 'friend' on their own personal page or choose one of the songs featured on the band's site to add to their profile. Any time another person stumbles across their own personal account, the visitor will then be treated to the featured track which is set to play automatically when the page loads (also known as 'track

hosting'). Once this occurs, others visiting this personal page can then see the band's link and picture, and then decide whether or not they to feel like giving their music a listen. If they too decide they like what they hear, they also have the option of adding the band's link and music to their page, and hence the cycle continues. In this respect, Pitchfork can be seen as far less of an internet 'destination' than a place for indie fans to begin: a portal where indie ears and indie minds can become easily synched, much like their portable audio devices, to a culture and community of individuals with similar tastes and musical interests.

Though one could write an entire dissertation on Myspace and its relationship to the indie music scene alone, the important thing to note in this section is the ease by which users can pass freely between individual pages and outside social networks. New programs are being developed every day to help integrate the experience of collecting music with the experience of sharing it online, both through already existing programs like Myspace, and in their very own rights as well. New trends in track hosting, often through the 'embedding' of already-written programs onto personal web pages both in and outside of prescribed friend networks, allows companies like Imeem to let users upload songs onto their own personal music web pages, and then transfer them individually – along with little music players that track how many times people have sampled the tracks since they were posted – onto their personal Myspace pages or blog sites. Taking this a step further, others like Mog.com and Last.fm have discovered how to allow users to create personal radio stations and ongoing music profiles by electronically tracking their listening habits

through iTunes and iPods, and then ‘scrobbling’ their personal music playlists for others to see. As explained on the Last.fm website:

Just listen to your music with your computer's music player or your iPod and Last.fm will "scrobble" your playlists. This means that every song you listen to with Last.fm will become part of your music profile. Your music profile is the key to the world of Last.fm. Once you've started scrobbling, you can: Create personal music charts automatically; Find your musical soulmates; Discover and explore new music; Generate your own personal radio station; See what your friends are listening to. (Last.fm, 2007)

Equally important, each of these sites allow users to do many of the same things first-generation friend networks like Myspace have already made popular: profile building, blogging, and photo/ video sharing, to name only a few. In fact, even the kinds of peer-to-peer downloading programs made popular by the likes of Napster and Kazaa in the late 1990s are finding themselves more and more integrated within such platforms in recent years by developing more quality-regulated tools for the sharing and exploring of music online.

5.3.2 Indie Downloading

Given the nature of indie as a ‘history of record collectors’ bent on the ‘discovering of tomorrow’s music, today’, one should not be surprised to learn that the indie music scene has since embraced the newest manifestation of the download revolution with open arms. As it stands now, there are two general categories used to describe practices of music downloading as they are found on the internet today: those that are legal, as represented by programs like iTunes and the second-generation Napster (which now doles out

Microsoft's WMA files exclusively for a monthly membership fee), and those that are not, as represented through BitTorrent programs and more traditional peer-to-peer networks like Kazaa. In this section, an example from each of these categories will be discussed in reference to Pitchforkmedia.com and the greater indie music scene, namely eMusic.com in the case of the former, and DC++ of the latter.

As far as indie online goes, it is important to note that iTunes and the second-generation Napster have never been the number one choice of fans. The reasons for this range from the obvious, where iTunes' and Napster's selection of indie music is sparse, to the not so obvious, as indie fans tend to resent the fact that Apple and Microsoft add Digital Rights Management (DRM) 'watermarks' to their AAC and WMA files, limiting their ability to be readily shared or played on other portable audio devices. For these reasons, indie fans have been far more likely to invest their time and money in eMusic.com, arguably the largest and most well respected independent legal digital music retailer on the internet today. On eMusic, memberships are purchased from ten to twenty dollars a month, depending on how many songs one wishes to download over that span of time, and though unused songs cannot be carried forward, eMusic compensates by giving users total flexibility with the music they download. As mentioned previously, many major online music retailers like iTunes and Napster take great pains to restrict the handling of their songs, ensuring use only as prescribed by the copyright holders themselves (Apple and Microsoft respectively). In contrast, eMusic provides all of its music in the traditional and highly flexible mp3 format, thus allowing its customers to freely exchange their music as they see fit. In this respect, eMusic caters more to the spirit of the original indie

movement, working within an honour code that puts trust in the hands of its users. By offering songs at cheaper rates than other online retailers, and giving paying customers the ability to use and trade music downloads as they so desire, eMusic and its affiliated artists hope their generosity will be reciprocated with increased brand loyalty in the form of heightened membership and download figures. As indicated in the 'About eMusic' section on the site itself:

eMusic is a subscription-based service, allowing members to download tracks for substantially less than they would pay with other download services. Various pricing plans allow customers to pay as little as 27¢ per track, encouraging them to sample new artists and as a result, purchase more music — eMusic customers typically buy more than 20 tracks per month, while iTunes users average only 1 – 2 tracks per month. (eMusic, 2007)

Though only time will tell whether this business decision is a savvy one, indie fans and artists have thus far been receptive: many labels have already signed their bands over to be available on eMusic, and Pitchfork continues to show its support by hosting advertising banners for the site. Looking again at the broader picture of music collecting as a whole enterprise, it seems clear that the indie scene is not only condoning a move to digital file sharing and accumulation as a respectable practice, but is actively *supporting* it – both on the 'inside', as in the independent labels and their bands that permit eMusic to sell their songs, and on the 'outside', as in the indie websites and fan pages that continue to direct traffic to the cause.

Despite such strides, there are currently still plenty of illegal sites of music downloading which continue to operate in significant numbers on the internet today. One such site,

DC++, could be thought of as a second-generation Napster, only without the membership costs, DRM-enforcement, or Microsoft affiliation. By functioning within a closed software-controlled network and requiring a specific hub address and/ or password to enter, DC++ connects users in a highly-stable peer-to-peer network where individuals can gain access to entire *libraries* of digital music located on other indie fans' computers, while filtering out those who do not meet its high quality of standards in terms of music sharing itself. Each site within the DC++ platform often goes as far as restricting access to those with a certain quota, approximately five to ten gigabytes of carefully organized music, and usually restricts passwords to members and their friends 'in the know'. In fact, volunteer 'Ops' (short for 'Operators') even go as far as 'kicking' users from the network for not participating in ways deemed mutually respectful by the group, such as actively faking shared content or publicly harassing other members for unrelated media, such as pirated videogames or pornography. In this regard, the entire environment around sharing music online is increasingly pressuring users to share music in large quantities (thus forcing those shy of quota to import more music into their digital libraries), and also conform increasingly to social norms and rules regarding the manner by which music should be shared and consumed online.

5.3.3 Indie Blogging

Turning the focus back to the sharing of information on music for a moment, we find ourselves back at Pitchforkmedia.com. As should be recalled, Pitchfork has been widely credited and criticized for making, but also breaking various indie acts based largely on the strength of its reputation as a trustworthy arbiter of indie music. It is at point where

the discussion must be turned back on the scene itself, which has been shown to value its ability to use technologies to participate in the formation of the genre as much it values sites like Pitchforkmedia.com for helping to guide indie taste on a broader scale. As Pitchfork's managing editor Scott Plagenhoef admits, "We probably accelerate the process [...]. But people will like what they're going to like regardless of how they found out about it." (quoted in Itzkoff, 2006) In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that Pitchfork attracts supporters and detractors in such equal numbers that an entire dialogue has arisen between fans and artists online over whether or not Pitchfork should even have the *power* to judge music so absolutely, and by extension, where the true source of indie connoisseurship and critical judgement should instead be found to reside. In this final section, a brief look at some dialogue occurring through a few Pitchfork-related fan blogs will shed light on the truly contestable and indeed polemical nature of such practices as they are frequently taking place online today.

As alluded to in previous chapters, the indie music scene can be seen to share one major attribute with new digital music technologies: each empowers music fans to control their experience to the full extent of their abilities, but only while functioning within the implicit boundaries maintained by each. In respect to the former, iPod owners are free to experiment with their music, but only to the extent that the unit itself permits: for example, users cannot yet choose to completely eliminate the vocal or bass tracks from a particular recording or reorganize their genre settings on the fly. They can however shuffle their albums or create 'On-The-Go' playlists whenever they see fit. In a similar manner, members of the indie music scene can not directly edit the content on Pitchfork's

website or prevent fans from taking such reviews seriously, but they can certainly strike out in many other ways, most effectively through the use of personal blogging software.

As defined in Holtz and Demopoulos (2006), blogs are “short “posts” or articles, which are displayed in reverse chronological order and tend to contain personal opinions as well as facts. [... They] are powerful tools because they are easy to use and offer a range of features that make it easy to spread ideas, engage in a conversation, solicit feedback, and be found on the web.” (pp. 20-39) While certainly rudimentary, this definition suffices in outlining clearly enough why it is that blogging has become such a popular activity within indie music circles as of late. In this section I will briefly discuss three broad types of Pitchfork-related indie blogs found readily online today. The first is the ‘individual disagreement’ blog, which usually takes issue with a particular album review and uses this to question Pitchfork’s critical aptitude or proficiency in judging indie records on the whole. The second is the ‘academic dialectic’ blog, which usually brings forth evidence of Pitchfork’s negative effect on certain aspects of the indie scene, and encourages dialogue between visitors as to whether or not the site should be viewed as helpful or detrimental to indie music as both a genre and community of fans. The third is the ‘personal vendetta’ blog, which usually amounts to a passionate and emotional listing of all the reasons why the author despises Pitchfork, and typically incites others to add similar comments or argue alongside it. Though by no means all-encompassing, these few short examples should help make clear that while referring to sites like Pitchfork to help guide their music choices and decisions, indie fans equally use the internet and its

related technologies as an opportunity for community involvement and dialogue as to how such filters should be managed and understood within the scene itself.

As indicated above, the ‘individual disagreement’ blog typically begins as a reaction to a particularly bad Pitchfork review, usually for a band or album the author feels has been unjustly condemned, and ends by questioning Pitchfork’s authority as a reliable source for indie music information on the whole. Titles range from “No! Fuck You, Pitchfork!” to “For Shame, Pitchfork!”, and include comments such as the following:

[T]hanks to the review on Pitchfork, we were all very interested, if not somewhat secretly enamored, with Tapes 'n' Tapes' mediocre as hell album, The Loon. I mean, even Vice had a bad review of the record. (Scroll down about halfway down the page to get to the review.) Yeah, I know Vice isn't known for its good taste, but at least they're funny. Pitchfork, on the other hand, gives a hearty 8.3 to a heartily mediocre album. I'd like to think that Clell Tickle's behind this one because that is seriously fucked guys. [...] Seriously. Fuck you, Pitchfork. (Digital-to-Digital, 2007)

In line for the Film School/ The Cloud Room/ Birdmonster/ Send for Help show at Slim's last night, I overhear someone saying that Pitchfork Media gave Two Gallants new album, What the Toll Tells, a 4.7 rating (turns out its a 4.8.) This piece of news almost ruins the rest of my night. I still couldn't believe it until I read it this morning. I encourage all of you to read it too. Because it speaks to a distressing problem in independent music: Pitchfork has become the equivalent of a critical monopoly and this is not good for us, the indie rock consumer. (Noise Pop, 2006)

It becomes clear from reading these remarks that indie fans are often not just upset about a bad review or two, but more with the ability of Pitchfork to have the last say in judging new music. In these articles, bloggers voice dissent over Pitchfork’s mode of writing, its rating system, basis of judgment, consistency of opinion, and overall position of authority

within the scene itself. The general conclusion of these blogs tends to sit somewhere along the lines of: “if Pitchfork messed this review up so bad, then how can we trust them at all?”

In the category marked ‘academic dialectic’, such concerns take a more reflexive and balanced approach. Bloggers are not so obsessed about whether Pitchfork is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, but are rather interested in starting online discussions between fans as to whether or not they have a valid reason to be upset over Pitchfork’s influence in the contemporary scene. For example, one such blogger writes:

So we’ve seen the emergence of a single website with enormous market power – Pitchfork. The barriers to entry [to the online fanzine market], of course, are still low. But to prevent a rival from emerging, Pitchfork doesn’t need to be perfect – it just needs to be good enough. Which it is. [...] A website that regularly recommended bands that turned out to suck would be a real problem. [...] But if the website merely *fails to recommend* albums that are, in fact, good you won’t notice. You just won’t buy them. (Yglesias, 2006)

Responses to his comments by others are typically thoughtful and often long-winded, including comments like: “it seems that you’re *almost* making an argument that the dominance of Pitchfork is bad, yet conceding that there isn’t any harm. If, ultimately, there is harm, low barriers to entry will make it very easy for people to create a competitor that mitigates the harm.” (SomeCallMeTim; from Yglesias, 2006) and “With bittorrent, myspace, mp3 blogs, amazon music snippets, etc, there’s really no need to read a review at all when you can pretty easily just listen to some songs yourself.” (jerry; from Yglesias, 2006). The above dialogue has since sparked another major discussion where a

PhD student blogging from Italy has used his familiarity with the Sicilian Mafia to suggest that perhaps, directly in light of Yglesias' blog, Pitchfork could be considered an 'Art Mafia' of sorts (Brighthouse, 2006). His careful and well researched comparison has drawn much attention from indie fans worldwide, and over thirty comments had been added to the online discussion just three days after the original post had been made. If nothing else, these blogs certainly indicate that although Pitchfork's status as an indie filter is recognized to some extent on a global scale, many fans are consistently going to great lengths to ensure this does not lead to any uniform indie culture. In fact, most such blogs take the aversion of a 'deadening of taste' as their main prerogative: in openly challenging Pitchfork's authority as the 'last word' on indie music, they encourage lively debates regarding to the extent to which one should passively and uncritically adopt the judgments of others, however authoritative they may purport to be.

The last type of blog, which I have labelled as the 'personal vendetta', is one usually riddled with expletives, and more concerned with 'flaming' (internet vernacular for the flinging of insults online) than with achieving any measure of calm, objective debate. Blogs of this type are typically found sporting titles such as "One More Reason Why Pitchfork Sucks" and "Pitchfork Media Can Suck My Cock", and are generally written in a stream-of-consciousness manner with little attention to spelling, grammatical, or objectivity concerns. In the former case of "One More Reason...", the author kicks off by disagreeing with a recent Pitchfork review, and then ends up on a three-hundred word rant about the problems with the site on the whole:

[L]ast week Pitchfork posted a review of Paul Simon's latest venture "Surprise" released May 9th. They gave it a 5.1/10 and generally panned it as unimpressive attempt of an old man to depart from his folksy past and adopt a pseudo-electronic tack. Simultaneously, they then give compilations like Jens Lekman "Oh You're So Silent Jens" an 8.5 or Bonnie "Prince" Billy a perfect 10. Jens would not exist without Paul. If Paul wants to experiment a little at the age of 64 I think he's fucking earned that right. And who is some 24 year old punk ass Pitchfork reviewer to pan Simon's album. (Llamapus, 2006)

In the latter case of "Pitchfork Media Can...", the author's annoyance is even less structured and unrestrained:

Pitchfork Media can lick my ass crack; how is it that the only rock music that qualifies as decent has to be on some spock ass Canadian indie label, yet any fucking major-label hip hop drivel has some immense cultural significance? I know it's super ironic in that Urban Outfitters kind of way to listen to the Arcade Fire then turn around and listen to Snoop Dog, but is it really making you "a respected and reliable part of the independent music community," as you purport to be? I know Kanye West is the new Chuck D or whatever but fuck if I wanted to hear about how "crunk" fucking T.I. is I'd turn on fucking MTV. FUCK YOU PITCHFORK AND YOUR FUCKING 3,000 WORD REVIEWS. (Taylor, 2004)

Reader responses to blogs of this sort are typically equally blunt and aggressive, often causing readers to align themselves in a sort of flaming war between those who side with the writer, and those who do not. In this type of arena, those posting comments typically hide their identities to protect themselves from any possible backlash after the fact. In response to the latter blog mentioned above, the first reader to comment does so quickly and to the point: "Fuck you you ungrateful piece of shit! I'm sorry you cannot handle record review in excess of 20 words, faggot." (Anonymous; from Taylor, 2004) From here, the conversation snowballs into a veritable war of words, with another reader

responding: “Posting little hissyfits full of uppercase letters and italics to show everyone when you’re ANGRY and “ironic” is funny, especially when you’re criticizing someone else’s writing. If you hate everything about Pitchfork, you’re an idiot” (Anonymous; from Taylor, 2004). It is worth noting that a few readers do make the effort to bring the discussion back into the realm of meaningful debate, despite the majority who simply wish to argue and complain. One such reader posts what appears to be a well-organized essay on the topic, organized into paragraphs no less, urging other readers to truly think about what it is that is wrong with Pitchfork as a source of information before jumping to any conclusions; however after finishing with such thoughtful comments as “I think the people at pitchfork media are good people, and I think they do love music, but I feel they are misguided when they’re expressing that appreciation” (Anonymous; from Taylor, 2004), another sees fit to post “PITCHFORK IZ FAGGITZ!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” (Anonymous; from Taylor, 2004), and the momentum of the attempted debate is lost.

The point to make in listing these three (but by no means all-inclusive) blog-types is not to try and divide the indie scene into fan groups, nor attempt to use user comments as a representative ‘transparent window to the indie world’, but to instead show how it is that new technologies are being used by regular people in everyday contexts to help negotiate the manner by which the scene is being conceived in both online and offline environments through the lens of one particular filter located on the internet.

5.4 Conclusion

Although Rosen and other critics may be quick to assume that a linking of like-minded people through dedicated musical networks online may lead to exactly the kind of widespread egocasting she warns of so readily in her critique, I continue to recommend using caution when dealing out such sweeping and premature charges in an environment far more complex and versatile than one would likely appreciate at a first glance. As an example given in chapter three illustrated, a classical music fan could always retreat into their own personal tastes and easily avoid the heavy metal section in a traditional local music shop; but contrary to what one might expect, such deliberate ignorance is often far more difficult to achieve when exploring sites like Myspace and Pitchfork today. As discussed at some length above, new practices in audio-embedding and track-hosting often make it far more difficult for other genres to be so easily avoided or ignored, as visitors cannot usually choose to turn such music off until being exposed to at least a few bars. Furthermore, most members of social network communities are almost always linked to individuals outside of their chosen musical sphere, such as friends from work or school, who often maintain widely disparate musical tastes. In these instances, leaving a comment or reading a blog on a friend's page often leads to at least some measure of exposure to a different style or genre that one may never have considered sampling before.

In short: the conflation of private and public aspects of music sharing and connoisseurship in both online and offline space is becoming increasingly widespread with each passing day, thus refuting any notion that new technologies are necessarily

leading to 'narrower forms of individualism' or any subsequent 'deadening of music taste'. The communal aspects of such inter-networked media usage are instead lending credit to arguments to the contrary, such as those forwarded by Watson and Bennett who suggest that "In recent years, the Internet has given rise to a range of new creative strategies for the articulation of fandom and the creation of fan discourses." (Bennett, 2004, p. 169) In this respect, as the various programs discussed above continue to become increasingly integrated with other technologies, both vertically, as with iPod and iTunes, and horizontally, as with Pitchfork, Myspace, Mog, Imeem, eMusic, and DC++, it makes far more sense to suggest that the result should be nothing less than a widespread *expanding* of popular music tastes. Sites like Pitchfork do not simply recommend new music, but rather integrate users into an entire network of music fans and connoisseurs who take it upon themselves to help shape and maintain reliable critical standards for how music itself can, and should, be judged. In this light, it becomes plain to see that indie fans are actually finding it increasingly challenging, if not impossible, to maintain shallow personal convictions while participating in online communities where privacy must often be sacrificed for access ('downloading' presupposes 'sharing') and where overt (sub)cultural codes are made extremely difficult to ignore.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Over the last few years, practices in collecting and consuming digital music media have become extremely important cultural activities. Compressed audio formats like the mp3 have risen in prominence, allowing users to transfer and store music at speeds and scales unprecedented in the history of audio recording, while new technologies have relocated traditional music collections from the milk crate or CD booklet to the computer hard drive and portable audio device. Peer-to-peer downloading software and online music retailers have granted everyday music fans the ability to purchase and retrieve music from the comfort of their own homes, while increased hard drive capacities, faster internet connections, and improved social networking software have contributed to an increased emphasis on the collecting and sharing of musical artifacts online. In this manner, computers that only a decade ago did not come standard with speakers are now being converted into veritable audio command centres, linking music fans together in online and offline environments where albums can be more easily apprehended and shared, both horizontally, through dozens of interactive programs online, and vertically, through one of many fully-functional portable audio players now available on the consumer market. With so many changes occurring at such a rapid pace however, it is no wonder that academic discussions have only now begun emerging in an attempt to forge a more thorough understanding of how it is that such digital technologies are affecting the broader landscape of popular music culture today.

Over the course of this project, several key arguments and ideas were introduced to help shed light on the changing dynamics of this increasingly complex affair. In chapter two,

issues of audio fidelity and definition were discussed, exposing some important shortcomings of a popular perspective that I have chosen to label the ‘lament of the audiophile’. This lament, often shared by communities of self-proclaimed music aficionados, was shown to evolve around the specific belief that digital audio files, by nature of being compressed and relatively intangible, were also of lower musical integrity than traditional music media, and therefore of lower worth. In this chapter, several arguments were introduced to help counter such opinions, including Julian Dibbell’s (2004) observation that intangible media still maintained fetish potential as ‘bodies of information’ to be hunted and acquired; Tom McCourt’s assertion that digital audio collecting was actually a “more intense and intimate experience than owning physical recordings” (Mccourt, 2005, p. 250); and Jonathan Sterne’s (2006a) reminder that compressed audio files should be judged not in terms of their lower sonic definition or fidelity, but by their potential for increased mobility and sociability instead. Extending from these points, several examples of contemporary iPod and iTunes features were discussed at some length to further illustrate how it is that digital artifacts are changing the face of new listening and collecting practices, most often for the better. These features were shown to include, amongst others, popular shuffle and playlist capabilities, which have truly given users the ability to access and manipulate their musical artifacts at speeds and in manners previously impossible.

In chapter three, the more social aspects of portable audio device usage were discussed, particularly with respect to what I chose to call the ‘egocasting fallacy’, in reference to Christine Rosen’s extremely influential 2005 “Age of Egocasting” polemic. In this

section, several arguments made by Rosen regarding the potentially adverse effects of digital technologies on music and society were targeted, specifically those insisting that the proliferation of devices like the Apple iPod were necessarily contributing to an increase in ‘masturbatory’ listening practices, as well as a widespread devaluing or deadening of popular music tastes. By framing the digital collection as a unit in and of itself, and then dividing portable audio device usage into two main categories (the public and private), this chapter showed that these technologies neither stripped traditional music collections from their ‘place’ in the home, nor lead to privatized or egocentric listening habits. In fact, by illustrating that even the most rudimentary of iPod users were invariably tied up in many time-consuming and highly demanding domestic practices of categorizing and labelling their digital artifacts (a prerequisite to the actual functionability of the devices themselves), it was made clear that such technologies did not serve to ‘limit’ an individual’s ability to appreciate art, but rather promoted a heightened sensitivity and curiosity towards it. Finally, in describing the symbiotic relationship existing between a portable audio device (iPod) and the computer library software which controls it (iTunes), it was shown that the general practice of collecting music had never really ‘left the home’ at all – though an increased use of such devices and higher levels of internet access have certainly played a major role in how such collecting and listening practices are now transpiring.

Giving context to the arguments expressed above, chapter four introduced the indie music scene as a relevant example of where contemporary practices in digital music collecting and more traditional concepts of musical community collide. Describing the changing

dynamics of the scene as it has developed over previous decades, indie was shown to manifest itself as a 'history of record collectors', build solidly on a foundation of shared connoisseurship, musical canon, and a corresponding economy of (sub)cultural capital. In chapter five, these elements were placed in an even more contemporary context through the introduction of several Pitchforkmedia.com 'Effects'. These effects served to illustrate that despite, or perhaps *because* of such current developments in new digital technologies, indie fans were continuing to frame their own sense of being through an awareness of ideological supports (often referred to as 'music filters') found readily online. Contrary to the belief that such bodies of information could ever 'dictate' popular tastes on a mass scale however, it was suggested that sites like Pitchforkmedia.com were often utilized not as music 'destinations', but rather as important online portals linking fans to various other social networks where they could utilize blog pages, track-hosting devices, download programs, and other software to further contest the power and widespread influence of such purported 'authorities'.

Though the main goal from the outset was never to provide an extensive overview of the *entire* landscape of contemporary digital collecting (a task far beyond the current scope of this project), I hope to have at least provided a preliminary foundation for the questioning of many negative assumptions that seem to have plagued the study of digital music media in recent years. In saying this however, there are still many important aspects of this topic still left to be explored, not least of which include how variables such as sex, age, race, and social class might fit into such a broad and complex cultural equation. For example, future scholars would be encouraged to look more deeply into

issues of whether the flexibility and relative anonymity of current digital collecting practices might actually be encouraging women to become more involved in what has traditionally been a very masculine pastime. Others might choose to look more closely at how it is that certain under-theorized musical communities, such as those of different language backgrounds, lower social classes, or older age categories (like the 50+ demographic), are being served by new digital technologies – especially if such practices as online fandom and sociomusical inter-networking may in fact be greatly reduced in these contexts. Issues of music generics are of equal importance: in this paper I chose to focus specifically on the indie music scene, the one with which I am most familiar, but other scholars may discover there are in fact many other fan communities that may be choosing to utilize technologies in widely disparate ways, and with equally diverse results. As for my own research pursuits, I will soon be delving more deeply into issues of branding and copyright enforcement as they pertain to various corporate digital formats currently being sold online. Since all legal downloads are presently tied up in expensive licensing agreements favouring the major record companies, sales until this point have proven unprofitable to corporate retailers like Apple and Microsoft, suggesting that, for the first time in history, the plea for consumers to switch media will soon be based largely upon the selling of high-end portable audio players, rather than on any purported increase in the value of the recordings themselves. This shift should have a major effect on the average music listener who may soon be forced to download and use only those music formats that correspond with his or her specific audio device, especially if that consumer is potentially one of several million indie fans, artists, and label owners

already committed to the genre's thirty-year history of rejecting such outwardly monopolistic corporate endeavours.

To offer one final comment on how the landscape of digital music collecting and indie music connoisseurship has developed to this point, I would suggest that it is perhaps Tim Harrington, lead vocalist for indie mainstays Les Savy Fav, who put it best when he penned these lyrics for a song titled 'Hold on to your Genre':

Hold on to your genre, your genre's got a hold on you.
Get up on the vapour, 'cause the solid's tough to hold on to.
(Harrington, 2004)

Like the digital audio devices discussed at length in this paper, the indie music scene exists not to create a bubble wherein scene members can affix their aesthetic blinders (or iPod ear-buds) and stumble around in their own convictions, oblivious to the evolving musical landscape unfolding all around them. Much as the iPod user is never truly free from iTunes, the indie music fan is never truly free from the culture itself: a thirty year existence that has taught him or her that is often far better to embrace flexibility and nebulousness than to get caught holding on to something that is easily cooptable or stolen away. Since the 1970s, the indie scene has maintained its identity as more of a 'fan discourse' than a 'musical genre': an outlet for music aficionados to battle for intellectual aesthetic superiority through a sharing of personal collections and taste preferences, a challenging of popular consensus and critical authority, and a communal defining of what the phrase 'good music' truly means. In this manner, by pushing members to expand their musical tastes outwards, all the while reflexively looking inwards towards one's own preconceptions and biases, the indie scene has show that new digital technologies can be

used effectively as a way to continue learning, growing, and finding absolute pleasure and potential in music.

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