

EXILED RECORDS AND OVER-THE-COUNTERCULTURE: A CULTURAL
POLITICAL ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF THE INDEPENDENT RECORD STORE

by

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This study examined the cultural political economic significance of the physical “brick and mortar” independent record store in the digital era. The research was built upon two critical frameworks — the political economy of communication and critical cultural studies.

The political economy of communication situated the independent record store within the dominant music industry, and was concerned with the corporate structuring and standardization of music culture. The study analyzed the extreme market concentration involving the “big four” major record labels (in terms of vertical and horizontal integration, diversification and product synergy), their interconnectedness to the major corporate music retailers, and the implications for the manufacturing of popular musical artists. The independent record store (to varying degrees) counters these tendencies by offering greater cultural diversity in terms of “independent,” local, used

and obscure music. However, the independent record store is influenced by the policies and practices of the major label system, distribution channels, big box chain retailers, and on-line commerce. The study examined the dominant industry policies and practices, including buying (centralized versus localized), music as a loss leader, co-op advertising, retail “payola,” retail censorship, and the overall range of musical diversity, vis-à-vis the practices and semi-autonomous nature of the independent record store.

This project was equally invested in the cultural aspects of the independent record store in terms of communities and scenes. Various subcultures gather and *connect* with each other at independent record stores, where anti-corporate and counter-hegemonic narratives circulate, and individuals learn about the depths of musical history and culture. This project explored the physical atmosphere and vernacular culture associated with the stores, as well as the cultural significance of vinyl record collecting. However, these cultural attributes are framed in terms of the harvesting of commodification, where the perception of “independence” is rendered problematic in terms of the economic realities associated with the logic of capital.

The primary ethnographic field sites for this study included the House of Records in Eugene, Oregon; Music Millennium in Portland, Oregon; and Amoeba Music in San Francisco, California. Numerous specialty independent record stores within these geographic areas were also included in the study.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

While visiting my hometown of Buffalo, NY, in the winter of 2006, the local independent record store, Home of the Hits, closed its doors after 25 years of service. What might have appeared as a minor event in a city familiar with the disappearance of heavy industry and blue-collar employment, the store's closing had repercussions on a minor yet culturally significant level. A writer from the local alternative weekly paper, *Artvoice*, claimed, "Retelling the story (of Home of the Hits), from my journalistic standpoint, feels a lot like what I'd imagine it would be like to write the obituary of one of my best friends" (Kuntzbach, 2006, p. 2).

Since the store's closure that winter, the old house that sold out-of-print punk rock vinyl records, homemade demo tapes¹ and 7" records from the bustling local indie³ and

¹ Demo tapes are essentially self-produced cassette tapes often with a black and white photocopied insert. They are cheap to produce and duplicate.

² Chapter II will explore the nature of music formats in more detail. However, the 7" vinyl record was a cheap alternative to pressing LP vinyl records, and was the medium of choice for independent punk, hardcore, and indie bands. Bands would sometimes create a split 7", where two different bands would split a side to the record.

³ Indie music is shorthand for independent or indie rock. Indie rock artists are known for placing a premium on maintaining complete control of their music and careers, releasing albums on independent record labels (sometimes self-owned and operated) and relying on touring, word-of-mouth, airplay on independent or college radio stations and, in recent years, the Internet, for promotion. Indie bands are featured on independent labels such as Merge, Matador, and Touch and Go. Well known indie bands include Pavement, Sebadoh, and Guided By Voices. Tugboat Annie was a well-known indie band in Buffalo

hardcore⁴ scene, new and used CDs separated by hand-drawn plastic dividers, gritty, self-published photocopied fanzines,⁵ and a variety of colorful t-shirts featuring the iconic black bars of Black Flag and Minor Threat,⁶ currently sits in idle silence.

Gone are the quirky conversations at the counter about bands coming through town and the merits of the latest new release from some obscure independent record label. Gone is the atonal dissonance blaring from the speakers, music from the nearby Buffalo State college radio station WBNY, as shoppers brushed shoulders with each other in the narrow confines of the used CD section. Gone are the colorful, hand-scrawled and crudely produced cut-and-pasted flyers advertising an underground punk concert in someone's basement, or a show⁷ at the local VFW post or in a church basement. There are no more spontaneous conversations or accidental meetings with friends, and chats about records, bands, concerts and things happening around town. Gone are the casual conversations about corrupt local politicians, the Buffalo Sabers making the hockey playoffs, and the cynical and often scathing comments regarding

during the 1990s. Their DIY loft space was also a music venue that showcased various indie bands from around the country.

⁴ Hardcore music has several waves and definitions. By the end of the 1980s, hardcore became more diverse, branching off into two sounds: one traditionally punk-based, referred to as old school hardcore, and the other evolving into something heavier, slower, and influenced by heavy metal, known as new school hardcore. With the Buffalo hardcore scene of the 1990s, the band Snapcase had a large following, and hardcore bands were featured on the Victory and Revelation record labels.

⁵ A fanzine, or "zine" (an abbreviation of the word fanzine, or magazine), is commonly a small circulation publication of original or appropriated texts and images. The term encompasses any self-published work of minority interest, usually reproduced via photocopier. Zines are small-scale productions, and economic profit is generally not the intent of publication. Zines will be discussed in more detail in the literature review (Chapter III).

⁶ In the 1980s, Black Flag and Minor Threat were considered two of the most important and influential bands in the history of American punk and hardcore music.

⁷ Concerts and live music have the same meaning as going to a "show."

celebrities and the banalities of mainstream popular culture. Gone is that moment when you discovered a record that in some way altered your way of seeing the world —like when I first discovered bands such as Fugazi,⁸ Sonic Youth and Sebadoh.⁹

The closing of Home of the Hits raised many questions for those involved in independent record store culture, such as the storeowners, employees and customers. On the one hand, the store closure affected me on a personal level. But it could be related to what C.W. Mills called the “sociological imagination,” when individuals are inextricably linked to the larger social and institutional structuring of society. Thus, some questions from this store closure emerged: What social and economic forces led to the demise of the store? What are the sociological implications of this closure in terms of the availability of cultural diversity of musical product? Is the closure of Home of the Hits a byproduct of how the larger music industry is organized and structured? What effect did this have on local music culture and subcultural scenes? What effect has the store closing had on the greater community of Buffalo?

Overview of the Research Problem and Research Questions

This study analyzed the independent record store from both a political economic and critical cultural studies approach. Political economy is a structural approach concerned with how the independent record store is located within the dominant music

⁸ Ian Mackaye of Minor Threat later formed Fugazi, a very political and influential post-punk band in the 1990s. He was also the founder of the independent label Discord Records based in Washington D.C. The label is still in operation as of this writing.

⁹ Sebadoh’s early recordings “The Freed Weed” (1990) and “III” (1991) embodied the aesthetic spirit of indie rock with the use of distortion, atonal feedback, odd guitar tunings, audio collage, and lo-fi, or inexpensive four-track home recording techniques. The band developed a cult following over the years.

industry and impacted by the logic of late capitalism. The critical cultural studies approach was concerned with the everyday meanings of the independent store in terms of community, subcultures, and as a place where corporate culture was actively contested. Also of concern were the various meanings of store design and atmosphere, and the transmission of musical knowledge in the stores. These cultural attributes were considered in terms of their relationship to commodification, thus creating a cultural link to political economy. Both of these approaches are discussed in more detail below.

First, the political economic approach analyzed how the independent record store is located within the dominant music industry. In brief, the political economy of communication is a critical approach that examines the relationship between media and political economic institutions, and how this interconnectedness is implicated by power relationships that can result in anti-democratic ideals and the homogenization of information and culture. Mosco (1996) claims, “One can think about political economy as the study of social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources” (p. 25). The political economy of music explores the nature of markets, monopoly practices, and the corporate consolidation of power, wealth and control associated with the dominant music industry. This meant locating the independent record store within the context of the dominant music industry, and how such stores exist somewhat autonomously to, but never completely outside of, this industry.

The dominant music industry is characterized by extreme market concentration in terms of the “big four” major record labels, three of which are a subsidiary of multi-national conglomerates. These major labels include Warner Music Group, Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and EMI. The major corporate retailers of music such as Apple, Wal-Mart and Best Buy control an overwhelming majority of the music market. As a result of this extremely concentrated market, the major record labels and corporate retailers have an inordinate amount of control over the type of music produced, released and stocked in both physical and virtual retail outlets in the United States, and the world over. Most of this music is popular in scope, and is designed to appeal to a mass audience. The bottom line in this corporate structure is to maximize profits. As a result, music culture is largely determined and standardized according to these corporate structures.

Corporate music is rendered popular through its simultaneous exposure on MTV, Clear Channel radio stations, motion picture soundtracks, television commercials, social media outlets, and the popular press. It is argued in this project that popular music is a manufactured product of corporate entities, and a variety of major label and retail policies and practices systematically reinforce this extreme market dominance. As a result, the overall range and diversity of music promoted by these dominant systems is relatively narrow in scope.

As an alternative, the independent record store offers much greater cultural variety in terms of music. What is considered “popular” at the mainstream retail outlets is generally not of interest at the independent record store. Indie stores specialize in

“independent” and back catalog music generally not stocked at the major chain stores. They sell used music on a variety of formats, and support local musical scenes by stocking their releases. Indie stores often have depth in a variety of musical genres, or they specialize in one particular musical form such as hip-hop, classical, world or indie. Indie stores stock the obscure and the unexpected, such as self-produced and hand decorated noise cassette tapes and local hip-hop DJ mixes. They carry releases that are out of print, or only available on vinyl. Indie stores counter the myth that everything is available on the Internet by stocking music not available via download. The music found at indie stores is rendered “popular” through college or community radio, independent fanzines, blogs, word of mouth and indie press. However, indie music is increasingly found on television commercials, and many “independent labels” are distributed by the major record labels. As a result, the nature of “independence” has become increasingly difficult to define as it has become assimilated into the dominant culture.

This study examined the cultural and political economic significance of the “brick and mortar” independent record store within the context of the dominant music industry. It explored how the independent record store has struggled to remain economically relevant amongst a variety of socio-economic forces ranging from digital downloading (both illegal and legal), to the corporate oligopoly and the economic structure of the major record labels, and both virtual and physical retail chain stores. This study involved an examination of the economic consolidation and power associated with both the major “big four” record labels and the major music retailers. The policies and practices of the

“big four” major labels, such as pricing tactics, censorship issues, co-op advertising, “buy ins,” retail “payola,” the range of music diversity, and music buying practices were examined vis-à-vis the semi-autonomous (to varying degrees) practices of the independent record store. The study explored how independent record stores, to varying degrees, do business differently, but at the same time, are affected by the structure of the dominant music industry.

Unpacking the music industry entailed a critical understanding of how the music industry is organized in terms of corporate structure, and in terms of music distribution, and the nature of record labels — as well as how the practices and policies of the dominant music industry affect the socio-economic sustainability of the independent record store. These policies and practices over the years have contributed to the closure of independent record stores. According to Keen (2007), in the first five months of 2006 alone, 378 record stores closed nationally, against 106 closures in 2005 (p. 100). There are now 25 percent fewer music stores in America than there were in 2003 (p. 100). Since late 2003, about 900 independent record stores have closed nationwide, leaving about 2,700, according to the Almighty Institute of Music Retail, a marketing research company in Studio City, California (Williams, 2006).

This research explored the policies and practices of the major music retailers, which ultimately affected the economic sustainability of the indie record store. For example, it examines how big box chain stores such as Wal-Mart and Best Buy have distinct economic advantages in terms of music pricing and buying power. These chains utilize co-op advertising and sell music as a loss leader, where profits are earned through

the selling of expensive electronics, not recorded music. Issues related to “buy ins” and co-op advertising, where the retail space of a corporate big-box retailer is paid for, usually by the major labels, helps to explain why popular musical acts are essentially manufactured by the dominant music industry. Because of co-op advertising, the big-box retailers can sell musical product for cheaper prices, thus undermining their independent counterparts. Also, buying practices are explored, and how the difference between centralized and local buying essentially determines the musical variety within a given retail outlet. Lastly, the practice of exclusive-only releases is explored in terms of the control of culture, as well as the ambiguities of “independence.”

Control also comes in the form of retail censorship. According to Rodman (2009), artists who want to challenge the status quo by writing controversial songs about race, religion, politics, or sex will be hesitant to do so in fear of being banned from large retail stores (p. 241). As large retail stores comprise a large share of the music selling market, they have the power to dictate musical content by encouraging artists to self-censor, or provide edited versions of their album. Thus, the notion of censorship within music retail was one of the issues explored through the political economic analysis.

The existence of the independent record store implies a cultural situation influenced by power relations, where the desire to be “independent” suggests an intentional cultural difference from the mainstream channels of music selling and consumption. However, the nature of “independence,” a term always in transition, is impacted by the economic structuring of major record labels and music distribution. This study explored the tensions regarding “independence” as a kind of commodified brand

among independent record stores. I explored the nuances between how “independence” is socially perceived amongst those affiliated with the independent record store versus economic realities associated with the term. “Independence” is analyzed within the context of a shrinking number of record companies and distribution outlets in terms of media concentration, the centralization of radio ownership and playlists, and the increasing integration of popular music into the broader advertising and commercial aspects of the market (Media Education Foundation, 2001). Indie stores are impacted by economic forces, and their existence is dependent on the dominant channels of music distribution and promotion (to varying degrees). Likewise, many “independent” record labels are actually distributed by one of the “big four” major record labels. Thus, the notion of “independence” needs to be problematized.

What are some types of questions political economy would ask within this context? In terms of political economy, the following questions emerge: How is the dominant music industry currently organized and structured? How is the independent record store affected by the policies and practices of the dominant music industry? How does the dominant music industry affect cultural variety? To what degree do independent record stores foster the commodification of culture? What is the role of independent record stores in music distribution? How is music censorship part of retail chain culture? What are the barriers to entry for physical stores selling downloadable music files? What is the meaning of “independence,” and how is this term connected with processes of commodification?

Secondly, this project was concerned with the critical/cultural meanings that the stores have on a fundamental social and human level for those associated with the stores. This critical cultural studies approach illustrated how agents used and made sense of the spaces and cultural artifacts within the stores, while political economy illustrated the structural makeup of the music industry and how the stores are affected by the dominant music industry. Through this cultural exploration, it was never assumed that social practices are occurring outside of a capitalist framework; rather, they are very much part of the dominant economic system. Consequently, the study explored the cultural aspects of the independent record store in terms of communities, and as a place where subcultural scenes gathered, *connected* with each other, and learned about music culture. The study was concerned with the design and atmosphere of the stores, and the cultural significance of vinyl records in an increasingly digital world. Lastly, the possibility of social resistance or oppositionality in the stores was addressed, as well as the co-option and commodification of indie culture by the larger cultural industries. However, all of these cultural aspects are considered in relationship to processes of commodification.

Cultural aspects of the store were drawn from and situated within the economic base. Therefore, the study explored the nature of the music commodity (tangible vs. non-tangible), the use and exchange values of commodities, for the commodity has social-political symbolic value associated with its consumption. Thus, economics, culture and politics are integrated in the research project.

But culture as a term is difficult to define, as it can be “an informing spirit,” “the whole way of life of a distinct people or other social group,” as languages, styles of art,

and kinds of intellectual work (Williams, 1981). According to Williams, the “sociology” of culture can be defined as new kinds of social analysis of cultural institutions and formations, and the exploration of actual relations between these and the material means of cultural production, and actual cultural forms. Within this definition, culture is influenced by a political and economic order. Hall (2003) claims, “the use of ‘culture’ refers to the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the lives of ‘ordinary people’ — what is called ‘mass culture’ or ‘popular culture’ of an age” (p. 2).

There are some overarching themes in the definition of cultural studies.

According to Kellner and Meenakshi (2001), cultural studies considers how cultural artifacts and commodities are not only produced by a culture, but how such objects contain ideologies that contribute to social formation. At the core of cultural studies is the notion of power, and essentially how power is negotiated and contested within culture. Cultural studies is intended to arm individuals with a critical understanding of how mechanized society and the commodity system works, and to seek critical alternatives. Media artifacts can reinforce or normalize dominant or ruling ideologies; this form of power can become hegemonic in scope, but can also be challenged and contested.

The study examined how the independent record store was related to community, and how such communities led to a more humanizing experience of space and culture. However, it is noted these communities could be exclusive to outsiders. This meant looking at how the store had meanings beyond simply selling things and commodity exchange. For instance, these spaces were used for meeting and gathering, as well as for

alternative musical education and information exchange. The display of flyers at stores promoted a kind of community outside the store. In other words, it was a vernacular or unsanctioned cultural space. It also meant looking at social investments in the store, as well as the store as a social marker of independence and subcultural space. Also of interest was the notion of supporting locality, or the idea of keeping business within the local community by supporting local merchants. An additional issue was how local culture is still implicated by corporate culture, and how they are not always separate from each other.

The independent stores' notion of challenging cultural predictability with a diverse selection of cultural products was indicative of a different orientation and preference towards the musical fringes and underground musical scenes. The cultural variety of product also related to the preservation and conservation of music that occurs at such stores, especially with the availability of rare or out-of-print releases. This was especially true with the preservation and sale of vinyl records, an "obsolete" format of choice for many record collectors, which has been considered the savior of some independent record stores (as opposed to digital formats and digital downloading). But record collecting itself needs to be considered as a commodity pursuit (as rare records can be very expensive), and perhaps a form of nostalgia and/or resistance to new media technologies.

The fact that stores sell a particular kind of musical product suggests much about musical diversity and the desire to supply cultural objects not widely available elsewhere. Thus, independent record stores challenged notions of cultural diversity, as opposed to

what is deemed “popular” by the conventions of the dominant music industry. At the same time, a small number of major label vinyl records are being remanufactured on a small scale, along with turntables to profit from this nostalgic niche.

This project explored how counter-hegemonic value systems are constructed and negotiated within the space, and why people have such belief systems (and how they were formulated). For example, the research at the House of Records suggested that those associated with the store generally maintained a staunch anti-corporate philosophy, and thus shopping and interacting at the store reinforced a kind of “otherness.” This otherness suggested locality and an independent attitude that was fundamentally different from a corporate or mainstream cultural sensibility — yet its very definition depends on the existence of corporate culture. The study explored these oppositional views as part of the “independent” brand associated with indie stores as well as how “independent” culture is often co-opted by the dominant industry. For example, independent record labels have been increasingly formed into hybrid labels, where a corporate parent owns them. Corporate retail chains (such as Best Buy) currently stock indie and punk music and have recently decided to sell vinyl records, as they have had a subcultural “resurgence.” In other words, these subcultural trends have been co-opted for economic gain. This project also explored the nature of independence as a form of commodification, and how buying differences are implicated by a capitalistic ideology, a dialectical relationship where the tensions between independence and subcultural difference are co-opted and absorbed into the dominant system.

In terms of critical cultural studies, the following kinds of questions emerged for this study: What kinds of communities are associated with the independent record store? Do the stores foster subcultural communities? Are communities harvested as a form of commodification by the independent record store? Is shopping at an independent record store a form of resistance to corporate culture? To what degree do the cultural attributes of an independent record store facilitate an “independent” brand? To what degree is this brand commodified? What happens to a community or culture when independent record stores close?

The goal of this research project was to integrate the study of political economy and critical cultural studies. While this approach may have been ambitious, a complete analysis of independent record stores was impossible by only using one of these approaches. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. While cultural studies (American cultural studies, in particular) tends to valorize cultural objects with little regard to its economic context or base, this project explored the political economy of indie stores and the economic structuring of culture. It also considered how the social actors made sense of and used the independent record store as it constituted a social practice within this economic framework. While political economy is sometimes considered overly deterministic, the project examined the social practices and ideologies that occurred within the stores on an ethnographic level.

In sum, there were two parts to this study. The first explored the political economic relationship between independent record stores and the dominant music

industry, and how the stores are impacted by the policies and practices of the dominant music industry. Secondly, the project analyzed the various cultural meanings of the stores and how people actively made meanings from and engaged in community interaction at the stores. At the same time, the cultural context was considered in terms of its relationship to commodification and the logic of capital. Four main research questions guide this project:

Research Question #1

What is the political economic makeup of the major record labels and dominant retail outlets, and what are the implications of these structural arrangements?

Research Question #2

From a political economic framework, what are the practices and policies of the dominant music industry and corporate music retail — and how is the independent record store affected by such practices? As a result, how is the “independent” nature of the store affected by such structuring?

Research Question #3

Under the auspices of commodification, what are the cultural meanings and narratives within the independent record store and what are its major defining characteristics in terms of community, subcultures, and as an educational space?

Research Question #4

Under the auspices of commodification, what are the cultural meanings and narratives within the independent record store and what are its major defining characteristics in terms of space and place, vinyl records, anti-corporate narratives and gentrification?

Methodologies

This study utilized four methodological approaches: field ethnography, ethnographic interviews, visual ethnography and political economic methods. This

variety of methods was designed to obtain a variety of multilayered data, each with their own qualities and insights into independent record store culture.

The project utilized a variety of independent record stores in three geographic locations: Eugene, Oregon; Portland, Oregon; and San Francisco, California. The justification and rationale of the field and geographic locations is detailed in the methods chapter (Chapter IV).

For the political economic analysis, I analyzed company annual reports and the trade literature related (*Billboard* and *Variety* magazines) to the record industry to get a sense of the trends and patterns of music production, distribution and consumption for independent music stores. This required some quantification in terms of obtaining national statistics on the number of independent record shops in existence and the number that have closed in recent years. I also looked at the statistics related to actual CD/vinyl production and sales from the point of view of major and independent record labels, and charted the decline of the musical object, especially the CD. I also utilized sources from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), SoundScan, NDP Group and the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry in order to obtain a political economic overview of the dominant music industry. Field interviews and ethnography also were pivotal in terms of gathering data and informing the political economic analysis.

The study included semi-structured and in-depth face-to-face interviews with independent record store owners, buyers, managers, employees and customers. In these three geographical locations, the majority of the niche or specialty record stores in

operation were included in the study. A niche store specializes in a particular musical genre such as punk, world music, hip-hop or classical, and is a small operation with a low number of workers. In this case, the owner or manager of the store and a small number of customers were interviewed. Interviews (some of which were conducted via telephone and/or email) were also conducted with owners of stores that have closed, representatives of independent and major labels, channels of physical music distribution (both major label and indie), and various bands and artists, as well as employees at corporate chain stores, academics, a vinyl design agency and other experts and stakeholders related to the music industry.

For three primary stores (House of Records in Eugene, Music Millennium in Portland, and Amoeba Music in San Francisco), I conducted an ethnography of the space, where I spent up to two weeks observing the behaviors and social patterns in the store. At Amoeba Music in San Francisco, I was limited to four days of ethnography. My goal as an ethnographer was to obtain a deeper immersion into independent record store culture in order to understand what others (customer, store owners and employees) experience as meaningful and important. This entailed evaluating and experiencing the ordinary routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives. I often sat behind the check out counter and took field notes of the kinds of conversation that took place in the store, as well as how customers and employees used, interacted, and communicated in the stores. At times I would sit in a corner and/or some elevated space where the overall activities occurring in the store could be observed. I also analyzed the stores as a text, as the physical space contained attributes and a variety of cultural

meanings and signifiers. When exploring the store as a text, I examined the store atmosphere, the layout of the space, the sounds and smells, how the stores were decorated in terms of posters and promotional materials, as well as vernacular culture in terms of drawings and hand written music reviews and flyers.

I also incorporated visual ethnography. I documented the research subjects and physical space via digital still photography. The digital photographs were then analyzed as ethnographic field data. Select images have been included in the appendix of this project, and provide visual evidence of the cultural and economic aspects of the independent record store. These images captured the exterior of the stores, the stores' layout, design and decoration, interactions between workers and customers, and images of the interview subjects.

Significance of the Study

This research project is significant on a number of levels. Music serves as a catalyst for social change and is a reflection of cultural values. Music as a media form is ubiquitous. We encounter music in our private worlds while listening to an iPod, while driving in our cars, listening to the radio, watching MTV and YouTube music videos, and on film soundtracks. We encounter music in retail shopping spaces, at sporting events, and dancing at clubs. People get married to music and others experience religion and spirituality via music. But although music is ubiquitous, it is a highly fetishized commodity that needs further analysis. In the documentary *Money for Nothing: Behind*

the Business of Pop Music (McLeod, 2001), Robert McChesney frames popular music and the related music industry within a broader socio-cultural and economic context:

If you look historically right through the present day, its social movements, movements for social justice, movements for peace, for democracy invariably popular music has played a large role in communicating ideas through songs, popular songs, just sort of unifying people, bringing people together. It has a very rich important tradition and legacy that still exists today. But even though music is the popular medium, it's the people's medium, it really isn't the people's medium in our society today. It's the property of four or five companies who have inordinate control over what sort of music gets produced and what sort of music doesn't, and it made it much more difficult for it to be the people's medium, and this is the problem we face. This is the crisis we face.

Despite the ubiquity and social influence of music in our culture, music as an area of study in the academic field of communication is underdeveloped. Under the umbrella of critical cultural studies and ethnomusicology, the retail side of the music industry is vastly neglected. Breaking this down further, there is little to no academic research done on music retail, especially in terms of the brick-and-mortar independent record store. While a small number of books (written for a general audience) have been written on the topic of independent record stores, none have a concrete grounding in political economy or critical cultural studies. While these texts document the current state of the independent record store, they tend to focus on nostalgia and valorize the stores and record collecting culture. From an academic perspective, there is next to no literature on the topic; thus this project is filling an important gap. This project is also extremely timely, as it explores the intersections of new and old media and how technological change impacts the indie record store. This project also makes a significant contribution to the field of communications as it bridges political economy and critical cultural studies.

The topic is also significant because it is symbolic of independent media in general, vis-à-vis the dynamics of corporate power and new media flows. Not only are independent record stores disappearing, but a similar pattern is evident with other media related “brick and mortar” stores as well. The local video store is impacted by changing formats, most notably DVDs (rented through the mail) and digital streaming through services such as Netflix and iTunes. Movies can be downloaded via BitTorrent, much like digital MP3 files. The impact of these changes is evident with the declining number of chains such as Blockbuster and Hollywood Video, as well as the relative disappearance of the independent video store. Bookstores are also in the midst of a major transition, as new media devices such as the Amazon Kindle and Apple’s iPad are paving the way for the digital distribution of books. As a result, “brick and mortar” bookstores are facing a precarious future.

Whether it is a local video store, used bookstore, or an old house that sells vintage vinyl records, such places have a variety of complex social meanings for their communities. When the stores vanish, something happens to the people and communities involved. This project explores how media artifacts intersect with space and place, and how our rapidly evolving media environment is altering social relations.

Personal Relationship to Independent Record Stores

As a teenager in the early 1990s, the Nirvana video for “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was my first exposure to punk rock, or at least, a vastly popular and hyper-commodified form of punk rock. At the time, I didn’t know the difference between “authentic” punk

and the kind displayed on MTV. Regardless, their energy was raw and anarchistic, and I had never heard anything like it. Before discovering Nirvana, I listened to heavy metal, and the 1980s pop music that my older siblings enjoyed. I remember purchasing my first CDs from a suburban department store, or through the Columbia House mailing record club. Unknown to me at the time, as I lacked a “sociological imagination,” music retail was linked to larger social structuring and economic systems. The mainstream retail music outlets and department stores familiar to me only catered to popular mainstream music. It was the same music played on corporate radio and MTV and featured in major music magazines such as *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*. They were the same artists known for holding arena-sized performances and tours. It was major label music produced for a mass audience. I had no conception or framework of music existing outside of these narrow yet dominant cultural boundaries. This range of music was what the hegemonic media landscape offered, and this shaped my perception of what the music world was.

Nirvana was also part of the machinery of the dominant music industry. Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” officially “broke” punk music for a broader mainstream audience, which led to the further commodification of underground music, and the social construction of “alternative” music, a nebulous phrase suggesting difference, when in reality many “alternative” bands had a similar sound and aesthetic. “Smells like Teen Spirit” became a radio hit and the band was prominently featured on MTV and was commodified through various media outlets as “grunge” music was the latest musical commodity to be exploited by the major record labels.¹⁰ Regardless, discovering

¹⁰ The documentary film *Hype* (1996) by Doug Pray highlights the major label commodification of underground “grunge” music in Seattle, Washington, that occurred in the mid-to late 1990s.

Nirvana was a defining moment of my youth. Because of Nirvana, I was eager to learn about the history of punk music, and I wanted to hear the bands that influenced their sound. Around this same time, I had heard about Home of the Hits from some friends.

A small group of friends and I packed into a car (with a friend's parent driving) and traveled from the suburb of Hamburg into the city of Buffalo — a small pilgrimage to the record store known as Home of the Hits. The trip from the homogeneous suburbs to the city crossed through miles of industrial wastelands and dilapidated steel mills, and we eventually entered into one of the most impoverished and socially segregated cities in the United States. While we were going to a record store, the experience also exposed us to racial and ethnic diversity, and the glaring urban decay and social stratification of the inner city. While the suburbs have their share of social problems, this geographical segregation kept us relatively sheltered from such urban social realities. The nightly news often perpetuated the city as being extremely dangerous and violent via simplistic media representations, and common suburban stereotypes of Buffalo being threatening were reinforced by unresolved racial tensions perpetuated by the overt social stratification that continues unabated to this day.

In opposition to the ubiquitous strip-malls and corporate chain mono-culture of the typical suburb, Home of the Hits was located on the colorful and eccentric Elmwood Avenue, a strip characterized by punks with green hair and knee high Doc Marten¹¹ boots, coffee shops and bohemian culture, youthful college students from Buffalo State College —and a wide variety of independent shops and boutiques.

¹¹ The leather boots and shoes have been especially popular among skinheads, punks, and members of a few other youth subcultures.

I remember the feeling of excitement upon entering the store, but I also felt like a novice. I remember feeling nervous because I was new to the culture, and didn't know how to "act" within the space. The social codes were unfamiliar to me.

My first purchase was the newly released *Dirty* record by Sonic Youth, and I remember going home and listening to songs like "Youth Against Fascism," where the singer/guitarist Thurston Moore insisted, "Yeah the president sucks/He's a war pig fuck"; these lyrics informed me that questioning power and authority should be encouraged (Moore, 1992, track 9). And the track "Swimsuit Issue," where the bassist Kim Deal screamed, "Don't touch my breast/I'm just working at my desk/Don't put me to the test/I'm just doing my best," introduced me to feminism before learning the meaning of the term (Gordon, 1992, track 2).

The political messages provided by Sonic Youth were politically challenging, and such overt critiques were not explored or openly discussed in my high school social studies curriculum, heard on the nightly news, or addressed within my home. While family, movies, and books had an impact on my socialization, it was mainly through punk, hardcore and indie music, not through my high school education, that I learned to question and challenge power structures. It was through this music and culture that I developed a rudimentary political discourse. Punk and indie music taught me to question racism, class, gender, war, and the nature of imperialism and capitalism. The music also gave me a space in which to explore youthful feelings of alienation and anomie brought about by family problems and a banal suburban environment characterized by malls and monoculture.

It was the independent record store that acted as a gateway to music and subcultural scenes. I gained knowledge about an underground musical community either completely out of, or on the periphery of, the mainstream media — one happening in my own backyard. As I spent more time in Home of the Hits, I began to critique the world around me and explore new cultural terrain.

Future visits to Home of the Hits led to my introduction to bands such as Fugazi, Quicksand, the Dead Milkmen, The Clash, and the Sex Pistols. While these bands were rather iconic and popular in underground culture, I also learned about locality or the “scene” of hardcore and indie bands in western New York who were part of the DIY, or do-it-yourself, ethic. DIY is a powerful notion where people can take it upon themselves to actively make their own culture and cultural spaces — and not merely be passive consumers of media and culture. According to Sinkler (2007) and O'Hara (1999), the punk philosophy is in part a reaction to a cultural landscape that is overly commercial and is often termed “alienating.” In the context of DIY culture, bands release their own music, form record labels, and book their own tours as a way to exist autonomously from the dominant music industry. It was the practice of making “free” spaces that spoke to us and over which we had a sense of control. This prompted me and my friends to go to shows and all-ages¹² events at the local VFW Post, in church basements, and un-sanctioned loft spaces that doubled as music venues.

The Buffalo hardcore scene, with bands like Snapcase and Earth Crisis (from Syracuse, NY), had a brutal and often masculine intensity, and the fans slam-danced

¹² The all-ages concert is an important element to punk and indie culture, as it provides a space for those under the drinking age to be exposed to live music. Thus, it is a more inclusive social space.

maniacally to the music. There was also an ostensible politic at the shows, as some people were militantly straightedge (a sub-culture that does not do drugs or drink alcohol) or vegan animal rights activists, while others were affiliated with Food Not Bombs and other activist groups. Bands would pause between songs to disparage racist skinheads, oppose war and government policies, raise awareness about social issues, and politicize the personal (the tragic death of a friend, breaking up with a loved one, family strife, or the politics of friendship). People at the shows sold fanzines or photocopied magazines, which acted as mouthpieces to underground culture and the politics of the community or scene. As opposed to a top-down model of culture where the participants are passive consumers, this scene encouraged everyone to do-it-themselves. This meant forming bands, creating zines, and participating in culture.

Home of the Hits acted as an ad hoc subcultural center to this scene and community. At the store, you could examine flyers and posters announcing local underground shows, and thus, the store connected you to the local music scene. At the store, you could buy the music, local demo tapes, and 7" vinyl records. You could overhear talk about music releases, live shows and news of the scene that enabled a connection outside the retail space.

The store featured a wooden shelf devoted to punk magazines such as *MaximumRocknRoll*¹³ and *Punk Planet*,¹⁴ but also had a row devoted to locally produced

¹³ *Maximumrocknroll* is a widely distributed, monthly not-for-profit fanzine based in San Francisco. It features interviews, columns, and reviews from international contributors about punk culture.

¹⁴ *Punk Planet* was a punk zine based in Chicago, Illinois, that focused most of its energy on looking at punk subcultures rather than punk as simply another genre of music. In addition to covering music, *Punk Planet* also covered visual arts and a wide variety of progressive issues — including media criticism,

independent fanzines. Here I discovered *The Avenue Player*, a zine published by the staff at Home of the Hits. Its satirical humor and biting take on independent music, popular culture, and personal and often hilarious stories had a strong impact on me. At the time, I wrote for my high school paper, and didn't like the fact that someone had editorial control over my work, so I decided that I could make my own fanzine and have total control over the entire creative process. It was titled *Ape* fanzine, which sold well at the store. By creating this zine, I became connected to other zine makers and we formed a micro-community with our shared interest in zines. This practice turned me into an active producer of culture and it was my introduction to do-it-yourself culture, a powerful notion that people could be more than passive media consumers, but rather could be active producers of culture. This was a very powerful notion to me, and it still is today.

It was Home of the Hits that connected me to this underground culture and provided a roadmap to becoming an active participant of culture. The store introduced me to more obscure and underground music with a political sensibility, which in turn led me to a larger subcultural scene of concerts, fanzines, and communities. The store was more than a retail space where music was bought and sold — the store also had a social significance and it *connected* participants in the subcultural community.

Today, the former Home of the Hits is a mundane business office that rents apartments to college students (see Appendix A., Figure 1). Upon my last visit to Buffalo in the winter of 2010, I drove past the former store and felt a genuine sense of loss, similar to the *Artvoice* writer who compared the store's demise to the loss of a best

feminism, and labor issues. The most notable features in *Punk Planet* were the interviews and album reviews.

friend. There was a palpable change in energy and spirit, as this small section of Elmwood Avenue had been permanently altered by the store's closure. What remains is one less social space in which to interact, socialize and connect with people, and one less place to learn about non-mainstream musical culture and politics. The closure of Home of the Hits symbolized the disconnect between space, place and community — a kind of personal anomie brought about by a variety of sociological and structural forces. While the store's closure was symbolic of loss, Home of the Hits nonetheless introduced me to DIY, or do-it-yourself culture, and connected me to alternative forms of media containing informative and inspiring political insights.

But why did the store close? Jennifer Preston, the former owner of Home of the Hits, claimed that in the 1990s, the widespread use of Napster and the illegal downloading of free music radically altered the music sales for her store. Napster was the main factor in terms of the store's eventual closure, as obtaining music for free via the Internet appeared to be an assault on the hegemonic nature of a dominant music industry known for high CD prices and corporate greed. Also the simultaneous popularity of the iPod had ushered in a new paradigm in which consumers of music no longer needed to patronize a physical record store to obtain music. Music had become an instantaneous commodity of the Internet era and digital world. Legal downloading sites such as the Apple iTunes store, and on-line stores such as Barnes and Noble (both online and physical) and Amazon.com, as well as the commodification of obscure new and used music via Ebay, had also deeply affected the sales at Home of the Hits. The economic influence and price advantages of large chain stores, such as Media Play, Best Buy,

Target and Wal-Mart, also contributed to the demise of Home of the Hits — and the indie store simply couldn't compete with the inexpensive CD prices at the average chain store.

According to her interview, Preston ran Home of the Hits because of the “honor of selling good music” and because “she loved her customers.” But as time passed, fewer young people visited the store. And why would they, when they could obtain the same music for free via the Internet? As a new generation of customers had grown up in the digital world, the Internet consumption of music had become normative. Young people these days are less likely set foot inside an independent record store, although some have become interested in collecting vinyl records. However, these youthful vinyl collectors are a minority. Thus, store traffic dwindled at Home of the Hits, and sales became so minuscule that the owner was forced to permanently close the doors.

Home of the Hits was clearly more than a place of commodity exchange, as it reinforced a spirit of independence (both real and imagined), one that was at least somewhat autonomous, however not completely free from the economic influence of the dominant music industry. The store was unique. It was situated in an old house and was one-of-a-kind. In an era of homogeneous retail and mass consumption, there was only one Home of the Hits in the world. Only one. The store maintained a cultural grittiness that emphasized the obscure fringes of underground music, as well as supported the local music scene. It was a unique place where a subcultural community (although not all shoppers fit within a specific subculture or considered themselves subcultural) could gather, exchange ideas and learn about bands and musical scenes that existed on the

cultural margins. It was a place that existed outside of the narrow margins of what the dominant music industry considered to be popular and marketable. Within this cultural context, individuals learned to consider alternative pockets of music and culture associated with non-mainstream and “underground” media.

When Home of the Hits disappeared, it inspired me explore the culture of the independent record store. I wanted to develop a more complex understanding of why independent stores are closing, and how these closures are connected to the larger music industry. At the same time, I was equally interested in the people and communities affiliated with the independent record store. These two thematic streams evoked the sociological imagination, where individuals are affected by larger social structures. What started as a single field observation for a graduate level methods class eventually turned into a doctoral dissertation.

After visiting Buffalo in the winter of 2006, I returned to Eugene, Oregon, to continue with my graduate studies. To provide a brief context, Eugene is a small city known for its progressive and left leaning politics, strong sense of environmentalism, organic food, miles of bike trails, and the University of Oregon. While different in terms of the range of musical genres for sale, Eugene’s equivalent of Home of the Hits is a few blocks away from the University of Oregon campus on 13th Avenue, a street characterized by a variety of coffee shops, an indie cinema theatre, vintage clothing stores, and other independent businesses. The store known as House of Records is locally owned and situated in what used to be an old house that was converted into an independent record store in 1971. After meeting some of the store workers, their

enthusiasm for my project was infectious. I completed a case study of this particular store (Gracon, 2009), and decided to explore other stores located on the west coast to obtain a more representative picture of independent record store culture.

I expanded the project to include other record stores based in Portland, Oregon, and San Francisco, California. I was curious to find out if other stores in other geographic locations were also facing a precarious economic future, and I sought a deeper understanding of what independent record store culture means to its owners, employees and customers. From this foundation, some basic questions emerged: Why do people go to indie stores, and what social meanings do the stores have for these individuals involved in the culture? Are the stores a form of community? What happens to a community when such stores disappear?

Moving beyond a micro-sociological analysis, I wanted to examine what social and economic forces the stores are up against, and what they are doing to stay in business. This meant exploring how indie stores are connected to the larger music industry in terms of distribution and the practices and policies associated with the major record labels and various corporate music retailers. It also meant exploring the nature of “independence” (in terms of record labels and the stores themselves) and commodification within this indie retail context.

This project as a whole was nonetheless conceived from my youthful experiences at Home of the Hits in Buffalo, New York, where my interest in musical subcultures led to a greater understanding of punk culture, history and politics. Those experiences resulted in agency, as I created a fanzine, and learned that culture could be produced from

the bottom up, a common theme amongst do-it-yourself indie/punk musical scenes. I didn't have to be a passive consumer, where culture was manufactured from the top down by major corporations. Culture was something that everyone could make and participate in, and I learned this at Home of the Hits. There was local music and what I perceived to be independent music from which to choose. There were powerful messages and counter-hegemonic ideologies in the music. There was fanzine culture and I sold my zine *Ape* at Home of the Hits. Gradually, it occurred to me there were alternatives to uniform mall culture, and the corporate model could be resisted. These were influential times for me, and shopping at Home of the Hits embodied a challenging spirit. This train of thought continues to this day, and had eventually led to this academic study on independent record store culture and its relationship with the dominant music industry.

Chapter Preview

After this introduction chapter, **Chapter II** maps the dominant music industry and paints a picture of what it currently looks like in terms of rapidly evolving music formats (most notably the MP3 music file), and both virtual and physical music consumption patterns and statistics by channel, format, and age. This overview begins with a look at musical eras and music formats, from the early phonographic discs to the digital MP3. The chapter outlines media ownership and the oligopoly of the “big four” major record labels, independent record labels, and modes of distribution — both physical and digital. The rapidly evolving nature of music retail — from virtual on-line sales and illegal file sharing, to the political economic influence of large multinational, corporate chain and

big box stores, down to independent “brick and mortar” stores – is outlined. A brief historical timeline of music retail is provided with a description of various types of independent record stores, including current trends and themes.

Chapter III provides the theoretical framework that informed the research questions and examines the following areas: political economy of communication, political economy of communication and music, cultural studies, defining culture, cultural studies beginnings, hegemony and ideology, subcultures, punk and DIY culture, vinyl records and collecting, the merging of political economy and cultural studies, McDonalozation and rationalization, space and place, community, civic engagement and vernacular culture, and independent record stores. Four research questions are discussed at the end of this chapter.

Chapter IV is an overview of the research methods used in the study. This chapter examines the various qualitative methods used to analyze independent record store culture, and how the methods address the research questions. This includes an overview of in-depth interviewing, ethnography, visual ethnography, political economic methods, and action research. The chapter also explains the research sample, the rationale for the three field locations, how the information was gathered (gaining entry, building rapport, snowball sampling, exiting the field), procedures and selecting sources, the analysis and coding of data, limitations of research, IRB approval, and the politics related to these various methodologies.

Chapter V entails a political economic analysis of the corporate structuring of the “big four” major record labels and their economic intersection with “big box” stores, as

well as the major on-line music retailers. The primary goal of this analysis is to reveal the economic and structural mechanisms that bring musical objects into being — a situation predicated on the viscous corporatization of culture.

This chapter also provides a structural overview of the corporate ownership of the “big four” record labels, which includes Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and EMI. These concise corporate profiles examine market share and concentration, both vertical and horizontal integration, diversification and synergistic practices. This is followed by a breakdown of “indie” labels within this economic framework. Following the breakdown of the major record labels, the major music retailers are profiled, including Apple’s iTunes Store, Wal-Mart, Target, Amazon, Best Buy, FYE, Borders, Barnes and Noble, and Rhapsody. Each of these retailers is examined in terms of their market share, number of locations (if it has a physical location), both vertical and horizontal integration, as well as diversification and synergistic practices. Independent stores are also addressed and how independent stores are categorized by type.

Mapping this political economic foundation enables a more sophisticated analytical reading of the independent record store under the auspices of the dominant music industry and a social epoch indelibly marked by neo-liberalism.

Chapter VI addresses the specific corporate practices and policies utilized by the dominant music industry and corporate music retailers, along with their ability to affect the political, economic and cultural aspects of music retail in the marketplace. These corporate policies and practices have both positive and negative consequences for the

independent record store and their sustained ability to exist and find a niche within the capitalist structuring of music culture. The inherent tensions or give and take within the dominant music industry is analyzed in terms of the problematic and often-ambiguous nature of “independence” within a capitalist framework. This is followed by a systematic analysis of corporate policies and practices in terms of major labels and corporate retail that have both positive and negative ramifications for the independent record store. This section includes an analysis of pricing practices and loss leaders, centralized versus individualized buying practices, exclusive only releases, co-op advertising, forms of retail “payola,” barriers to “digital” entry, tactics of forced obsolescence and issues related to retail censorship.

Chapter VII explores the nature of communities that form around the independent record store, and how such spaces serve a particular social function in terms of socialization and act as an educational space in terms of music culture. These communities are comprised of a series of subcultures, and the indie record store accommodates the facilitation and fostering of practices that link people to other social spheres within the community — or, as I conceptualize it, the stores act as a *subcultural connector*. At the same time, these cultural aspects are considered in terms of the harvesting of commodification and the development of an ‘independent’ brand.

Chapter VIII analyzes the cultural meanings and narratives regarding the physical space and atmosphere of the stores (in terms of the anti-McDonaldization of culture, or processes that challenge the standardization of culture), and the primacy that vinyl records and tangible music recordings have in indie record store culture. I also

trace the ideologies and cultural narratives associated with counter-hegemonic or anti-corporate beliefs of those associated with independent record stores, as well as how indie stores are connected to processes of gentrification. Lastly, I analyze the inherent contradictions between the existence of the counter-culture associated with indie stores and the inevitable connection to commerce and the harvesting of commodification — thus linking the culture of the stores to the larger economic system and the logic of capital.

Chapter IX is a summary of my conclusions and recommendations for the survival of the independent record store. I suggest new research directions and questions to be explored in future research on the music industry and independent musical retail.

Summary

This research project is a timely exploration of the independent record store as it exists in a political economic system and how the dominant music industry impacts the sustainability of such stores. In other words, the study explores how physical music retail and the independent music store are connected to a larger economic system. This means exploring the nature of the “big four” major record labels as well as the dominant music retailers in terms of market power, as well as an analysis of their policies and practices that work to reinforce the status quo of the music industry.

The stores are also explored via ethnographic fieldwork (both field ethnography and interviewing) that provides insight into the cultural meanings of the stores in terms of community and as a subcultural gathering space where *connections* occur. It explores

how the stores provide cultural variety and musical difference, as opposed to traditional, corporate retail outlets, as well as how indie culture has been co-opted by corporate culture. Other cultural aspects of the stores are considered in terms of education and learning about music culture, the unique design of space and place, and anti-corporate narratives, as well as the significance of vinyl records in terms of commodification, and the development of an “independent” brand.

A multi-perspectivist approach has been designed to explore independent record store culture from multiple cultural and economic vantage points. Within the digital world, the anachronistic nature of the independent record store is a strong metaphor of the nature of technology and how people make sense of our rapidly changing social environment. Whether or not the independent record store is becoming a fleeting memory or here to stay long into the future remains to be seen.

CHAPTER II

MAPPING THE MUSIC INDUSTRY, MUSIC RETAIL AND THE INDEPENDENT RECORD STORE

This chapter maps and contextualizes the dominant music industry and paints a picture of what it currently looks like in terms of rapidly evolving music formats (most notably the MP3 music file), both virtual and physical music consumption patterns, and statistics regarding music consumption by channel, format, and age. The chapter outlines media ownership and the oligopoly of the “big four” major record labels, independent record labels, and modes of distribution, both physical and digital. The rapidly evolving nature of music retail — from virtual on-line sales and illegal file sharing to the political economic influence of large multinational, corporate chain and big box stores, to independent ‘brick and mortar’ stores — is also explored. A brief historical timeline of music retail is provided, including a description of various types of independent record stores, as well as current trends and themes. This overview begins with a brief look at the history of musical eras and music formats, from the early phonographic discs to the digital MP3.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview and industrial description of the music industry, providing the political economic and cultural context for understanding

the current state of music retail. In sum, this chapter addresses the following question: What is the current state of the music industry and what are the key trends and patterns for music retail?

A Brief History of Musical Eras and Formats

What follows is a brief description of the historical development of the recording industry, including the mechanical, electronic, cassette and digital eras. This overview provides a context for understanding the key themes in terms of technological change and the history of musical eras and formats. It touches upon music industry ownership and concentration over the course of the past century.

Before the printing era, musicians composed, played, and sang songs for their own enjoyment or for whatever payment they might receive from live performances. During the European Renaissance, which began in the 14th century, composers began to create and write down what we now call classical music (Rodman, 2009, p. 221). In the 1800s, the industrial revolution ushered in high-speed printing, and printed music became a commodity. At the time, music was a communal experience and people bought music to play on their pianos and other instruments at home (for those who could afford them), while family and friends sang along. Thus, music was an active and performative act.

The Mechanical Era (1877-1923)

According to Albarran (2002), the ability to reproduce sound has captured the imagination of engineers and scientists since the 19th century. In 1877, Thomas Edison

made the first recording of a human voice, using what he called the phonograph, which provided the foundation and basic principles for analog sound recording. According to Eisenberg (2005), Edison patented his phonography in 1878, and thus, “music began to become a thing” (p. 13). The initial sound quality from the original machines was of poor quality, yet the sound improved in 1888 when Edison switched to wax cylinders, realizing the device might have some entertainment potential. He set up several “phonograph parlors,” where customers could listen to recorded sound for a nickel a play, a paradigm that later incorporated moving images and became known as nickelodeons (Rodman, 2009).

According to Sirois and Wasko (in press), there was a proliferation of companies interested in the commodification of recorded sound. However, by the turn of the 20th century, three dominant companies emerged in the U.S.: 1) Edison’s National Phonograph Company; 2) the Columbia Phonography Company; 3) the Victor Talking Machine Company. These “big three” companies dominated the early industry because they were large enough to manufacture and market their products on a large scale, support research laboratories, and control almost every important patent for talking machines and records (Chanan 1995; Morton 2000; Millard 2005). Because of the high culture tastes of the men owning the “big three,” the music manufactured and produced by their record companies reflected such values (Morton, 2000, p. 29), signifying that in the nascent days of the record industry, those in control of the means of material production also influenced the ideological production of the era.

Format wars are nothing new in the history of recorded music, as one of the first conflicts was between cylinders and discs for the phonograph. In 1888, Emile Berliner invented the gramophone, which played flat discs that were easier to mass-produce and that were less expensive than cylinders, despite the better sound quality of the cylinder. Soon, both Victor's gramophone and Edison's phonographs were selling well, as were the cylinders and discs people played on them. Owners extolled the virtues of their choice and denigrated the competition, while collectors began to build libraries of recorded music, mostly classical and Tin Pan Alley pieces (Rodman, 2009). The Victrola, introduced by the Victor Company in 1906, was designed as a presentable piece of hardwood furniture to be situated in one's home. In terms of the format wars, the disc eventually won the first format war.

By 1910, according to Sirois and Wasko (in press), a mass market for recorded music was rapidly growing as Victor sold 94,557 machines (compared to 7,570 in 1901). The authors contend that as Victor's value grew to \$33 million in 1917. Most of the basic patents for the phonograph and gramophone expired that same year, thus opening the market in 1918, when 166 recorded sound companies made \$158 million in profit (a 500 percent increase in four years). According to Chanan (1995), the low cost of entry into the business stimulated new labels, catering to relatively small markets, and thus a distinction appeared between independent companies and the majors (p. 54).

After the end of World War I in 1918, the record player became a popular form of home entertainment. In the absence of commercial radio and in the early years of film, the money spent on records exceeded all other leisure time expenditures (Chapple and

Garofalo, 1977). However, the birth of commercial radio in the 1920s caused major changes in the recording industry. At first, it spurred sales because people wanted to hear the records at home that they were hearing on the radio. Jazz and country music was popular. Dance crazes also sold records, as people bought the records and then practiced the dances at home. However, the sales of radio sets in the U.S. nearly doubled from 1921-1922, which cut into the record industry's sales (Sirois and Wasko, in press). Hit by falling sales and overproduction, as well as the introduction to new radio technology providing free music, the 1920s was the first decade in which the recording industry felt its first real economic hardship.

The Electronic Era (1924-1960s)

RCA converted most of its phonograph factories to radio factories, as live radio caused a big dip in record sales during the 1930s. During the Great Depression, people had little money to purchase records. A radio, on the other hand, could provide music, comedy, drama, and news at no cost (except for the hardware). Even though the music industry suffered during this time, jukeboxes contributed to the popularity of swing music and jitterbug dances such as the Lindy Hop. More than 50 percent of the records being produced were destined for jukeboxes across America, and the 13 million discs used actually saved the music industry (Sirois and Wasko, in press).

During World War II, records were no longer manufactured from shellac (as the material was needed for the war effort), and the base material changed to vinyl, which eventually led to the long play (LP) record. LPs ran at a speed of 33.3 rpm, which

allowed much more music to be placed on each record. Sales at first were slow, as the new format required the purchase of a new record player.

By 1947, the popular music industry had come under control of five large record companies: Columbia, Victor, Decca, MGM, and Mercury. In the 1950s, the recording industry again had a flurry of independents (similar to the “indie” proliferation in 1918), as LPs and 45s were relatively cheap to press, and there were fewer barriers to entry. The “big four” major record labels has a 75 percent share of the \$277 million U.S. market in 1955 (Sirois and Wasko, in press). By 1959, this share dwindled to a mere 34% of the booming \$603 million market. The indies were producing most of the popular and profitable music and were marketing their records through radio disc jockeys. However, independent retailers and distributors began disappearing as the majors controlled most distribution outlets and started their own record clubs for direct sale. At this time, big-box stores expanded.

While the big labels pushed a mainstream music style that was epitomized by the crooning of Bing Crosby and Perry Como, many teenagers of the era rejected these popular sounds. The rock and roll era was highly influenced by Sam Phillips, who propelled the career of Elvis Presley and helped to define rock music through the 1950s until the 1960s, when the Beatles and other British groups such as the Rolling Stones entered the picture. According to Rodman (2009), in the 1950s, conservative ministers sponsored bonfires in which rock records were burned, and citizen’s groups were formed solely to fight the menace of rock music (p. 239). With rock, the music industry became

big business, and teens the world over bought into the sound. Since the late 1950s, at least 60 percent of record sales have been in some form of rock music (Rodman, 2009).

However, the major players solidified their dominance through vertical integration. The majors “owned their own manufacturing plants and directly controlled their distribution outlets in addition to simply producing records” (Chapple, 1977, p. 15). Previously, market control had come from technological innovation and musical production, but, in the end of the 1950s, market domination was firmly in control of those firms with distribution power. Thus, controlling the means of production was no longer enough; instead, the most powerful companies controlled distribution and the means by which a recording made its way to retailers and eventually into the hands of the consumer.

By 1967, the U.S. market was controlled by CBS Records, RCA-Victor, and Capital, each with a 12 to 13 percent share of the market. Behind the “independent” labels were a small number of integrated entertainment corporations; thus the multitude of independents was merely an “illusion” (Millard, 2005). As the majors became further horizontally integrated, “label federations,” or what is commonly called a “music group,” emerged, which involved loosely affiliated labels setting up divisions (usually by genre) within major conglomerates. This strategy offered the majors greater leverage in coping with market uncertainty by spreading their risks and reaping synergistic benefits by creating company wide manufacturing and distribution in order to exploit economies of scale. In the 1970s and into the 1980s, these media conglomerates grew even larger; however, several small indies continued to exist. In addition, many observers have

argued that the logic of the corporation took over the creative logic of music making (Chapple, 1977). According to Chapple and Garofalo, the merger movement of the 1960s was:

...a “natural” process of centralization in which the successful companies joined to save expenses, to control prices and the market more effectively, and to amalgamate companies specializing in different types of music into one corporation that provided greater financing and simpler, central distribution (1977, p. 82).

Cassette Era (1970-1982)

Cassette tapes did not produce major consumer waves until the oil crisis of the 1970s caused a shortage in the vinyl used to manufacture LPs. As Japanese manufacturers (Sony and Matsushita) began incorporating cassette players into home stereos that could rival the reel-to-reel format, the sale of blank cassette tapes soared to 125 million in 1970 (Sirois and Wasko, in press). After complaints of piracy by the RIAA and its representatives, Congress enacted the Sound Recording Act of 1971 to finally give mechanical recordings federal copyright protection. With the growth of cassette piracy, music was for the first time circulated en masse outside of its intended market.

In 1979, the precursor to the iPod, the Sony Walkman, was developed, which assured the popularity of the eight-millimeter cassette, and music became more portable than ever. The tape formats represented a major change for consumers; for the first time, listening to their favorite recordings could now take place away from their home stereo system, and separate from radio broadcast. In the early 1980s, tape sales were almost

equal to LPs, but by 1986 the sale of pre-recorded cassettes surpassed records and most home stereos came equipped with two cassette decks.

Philips and Sony had released the compact disc (CD) as early as 1978. However, the music industry did not support the new digital format until 1982. The industry viewed the new format as a way to curb piracy and also to encourage consumers to replace their LP and cassette collections with CDs. The arrival of a new format prompted the consumption of new hardware, and record companies benefited from the sale of music on a new format.

Many mergers took place in the 1980s, which were partly motivated by the profitable promise of acquiring extensive copyright catalogs. Not only did major companies become interested in owning the rights to sound recordings; they also began to purchase publishing companies so that they could fully exploit music through other media outlets such as television, radio and film.

The Digital Era (roughly 1983-present)

Cassette tapes were eventually usurped in the early 1980s when compact discs (CDs) were introduced to the market. This new format revolutionized the industry as many consumers replaced their collections of analog vinyl discs and cassette tapes with the “better” sound quality and greater durability of this new high-tech medium (Rodman, 2009). However, the dominant music industry devised a policy that essentially forced CDs on customers, as vinyl records became non-returnable for music retailers. This policy forced retailers to exclusively stock the CD format (Negativland, n.d.).

The 1980s was a decade marked by mergers and acquisitions. In 1988, Sony bought CBS Records for \$2 billion, an acquisition that gave the electronics company a roster of artists and back catalog (Sirois and Wasko, in press). Three years earlier, General Electric had purchased the RCA Corporation, then sold 50 percent interest in RCA Records to Bertelsmann (soon renamed BMG Music).

According to Frith (1988) and Dannen (1990), the increased consolidation of the 1980s had its effect on musical diversity as fewer titles were being released into the market. In the 1970s, 4,000 to 5,000 titles were released annually, while in the 1980s, that number dropped to about 2,000. Gonrow (1983) observed the industry's corporate structure and mode of operation in the early 1980s was similar to that of the early 1900s. These large sound empires spent the better part of the century swallowing up smaller competitors, and the 1990s would be no different as "this feeding continued at a faster pace in the digital era" (Millard, 2005, p. 367).

In 1990, the Japanese electronics manufacturer Matsushita paid \$6.13 billion for MCA Inc. Thus, by 1995, Sony, Matsushita, and Philips were the modern equivalent to the original "big three" as these companies developed hardware, software and talent. In 1998, Seagram, in what was then the largest merger in the industry's history, bought PolyGram for \$10 billion. Two years later, Vivendi bought Seagram's entertainment assets for \$34 billion, and the Polygram and MCA family of labels eventually became Universal Music Group.

In 1992, the Motion Pictures Experts Group introduced the MPEG-1 format as the standard for storage and retrieval of moving images and audio on various types of storage

media, including computer servers. By 1994, the original MPEG had been refined, and the MP3 came into existence. The MP3 would cause concern for the recording industry, which continues to this day, as the new format allows users to convert and copy audio tracks from a CD to MP3. The files can then be shared through peer-to-peer services such as Napster and, more recently, Limewire. Currently, legal paid-for MP3s are primarily sold through Apple's iTunes online store, which is responsible for 70 percent of all paid-for MP3 music downloads. More recent data from the NDP (a leading North American market research company founded in 1967 that provides consumer and retail information to manufacturers and retailers) claims that CDs comprised 65 percent of all music sold in the first half of 2009, compared to paid digital downloads, which represented 35 percent of the market (Graham, 2009). Despite falling sales in recent years, the CD is still the main format (at least for now) for sound recordings, followed by the MP3 and vinyl records.

Current Trends in the Recorded Music Industry

This music industry is in the midst of a tumultuous flux due to the changing nature of music-related technologies such as file sharing (both illegal and paid-for), the prevalence of social networking sites, satellite radio and major shifts in consumption patterns. Technology has altered how music is delivered, how people listen to it, and how it is promoted. According to *On the Media* (2010), the major record labels sold about \$13 billion worth of music in 1999, as opposed to 8 billion in 2008. RIAA statistics from 2008 show that the total U.S. dollar value of the overall size of the U.S. sound

recording industry based on manufacturer's shipments (note, this is albums shipped, not *sold*) at suggested list prices show a steep decline in worth from 1999 at \$14,584.5 million down to \$8,480.2 million (RIAA, 2009).

The decline of the music industry is evident in music retail as large chains such Tower Records, Virgin Megastore, and Circuit City have all closed, and the retail space allotted to the sale of physical CDs in large chain and big box stores continues to shrink. Shopping malls no longer feature stores devoted solely to retail music as they did in the 1980s and 1990s. Music retail is now usually lumped in with other entertainment or media commodities such as books, video games and DVDs.

Independent record stores have also been hit hard. Since late 2003, about 900 independent record stores have closed nationwide, leaving about 2,700, according to the Almighty Institute of Music Retail, a marketing research company in Studio City, California (Williams, 2006). Of the independent stores that remain, many struggle to survive in the new media/digital world, even though many indie stores also sell music online. Most indie stores are hybrid stores, where the physical retail location is supplemented with an on-line presence. Others have captured a niche market, and have benefited from the recent resurgence in vinyl records. They often stock second-hand used music and employ knowledgeable workers who know about music history and culture.

There is a persistence of the tangible musical object and many consumers still continue to value physical CDs and vinyl records. One recent trend is the sale of new vinyl records, which are packaged with a digital download card, thus allowing the

customer to import the digital files onto their MP3 device. Thus, consumers have the physical format and its related packaging, as opposed to being objectless. Artists are also holding on to the physical object in an increasingly objectless world. With the latest box set *Under Great White Northern Lights* by the popular rock band the White Stripes, the singer guitarist Jack White claims, “There is more beauty and romance in tangible, mechanical things than in invisible, digital things” (Dombal, 2010). The box set comes with a live CD and DVD documentary, as well as a photo illustration book, a 7” vinyl single, and a silkscreen print. Numerous bands are using physical extras and bonus material (extra songs, posters, etc.) with the promotion of the tangible musical artifact.

However, the persistent march of new media, participatory culture, viral media flows, and Internet-based digital distribution of both legal and illegal MP3 music files has radically altered the nature of the music industry. Ten years ago, the major labels backed by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) fought over illegal peer-to-peer file sharing via Napster, but have since embraced paid-for digital downloading. Apple’s iTunes is currently the largest retailer of recorded music in the United States with an estimated 25 percent of the market in 2009, as it surpassed Wal-Mart as the nation’s largest retailer of music (Graham, 2009). In 2007, the industry was shocked when the band Radiohead dropped their label and offered their new album via their website. Fans of the band were encouraged to download the record for free or pay what whatever price they wanted, thus shunning the old media model of having a label with physical distribution and dealing with physical retail stores. However, not all bands have the

audience size and following to imitate this practice; Radiohead's album was later sold as a CD and vinyl record in physical retail stores.

The invention of the Apple-based iPod has single-handedly revolutionized the online music business and has changed the way people listen to and consume music. People can download their favorite songs and hit the "shuffle" function to get a whole new appreciation of how their musical choices fit together. This is radically different than the "old media" paradigm when people bought a CD or vinyl record which was consumed as a whole entity or concept. The recent introduction of the Apple iPhone and other related smartphones allow phones to double as MP3 players, as well as to provide Internet access, where music can be downloaded directly. The iPod has also revolutionized the concept of legal downloading via the iTunes store. By 2006, some claimed that there were almost as many legal downloads as illegal ones (Rodman, 2009, p. 224). Other sources, such as the RIAA, claimed, "illegal downloads continue to dwarf paid-for music sales" (RIAA, 2009).

Commercial radio in the U.S. has also witnessed a huge drop in audience size, and reports the smallest audience in history (Toller, 2008). The homogenization of the airwaves was influenced by the 1996 Communications Act, which deepened the economic consolidation of media outlets and altered the traditional means of promoting music. In terms of commercial radio, local DJs have mostly disappeared as the large radio corporations have attempted to cut costs by prerecording DJ talk and broadcasting it in many markets. Radio play lists have been greatly restricted as a result of increasing market research; few stations venture beyond playing the same handful of hits.

According to Bagdikian (2004), the two largest radio groups, Clear Channel (the largest radio chain in the country with 1,200 stations) and Cumulus are committed to a daily flood of far-right propagandistic programming along with automated, narrow music play lists (p. 15). According to Freepress (2010), the radio market is dominated by Clear Channel (1194 stations), Cumulus (313 stations), Citadel Broadcasting Corp. (223 stations), Entercom (100 stations), as well as major holdings by large corporate players such as CBS, Viacom, Walt Disney and Bertelsmann. As a result, the radio market is extremely concentrated.

Meanwhile, MTV no longer airs music videos on television, but focuses on non-music based programming. Today, contemporary bands break by having their songs played on the radio, but also serve as soundtrack music in television programs and commercials, video games and films. In conjunction with these outlets, music also breaks through viral media flows on Internet blogs, various social media outlets such as Facebook and MySpace, and the rampant spread of illegal MP3 downloads.

It is vital to consider how new technologies such as the iPod and digital downloading has altered the independent retail landscape. Changes in music consumption are likely to affect sales at physical record stores; however, such stores also act as places for face-to-face gatherings, as opposed to Internet consumption, which suggests social isolation. As recorded music has rapidly become objectless, the notion that a large number of music enthusiasts continue to purchase the tangible objects (such as CDs), and the recent resurgence in vinyl records, suggests a more complex portrait of music formats and retail. Contrary to popular belief, not everyone is downloading music

(for free or paid-for) and, for some people, that very system has driven them to the physical independent record store as some prefer the tangible music object.

Contemporary Ways to Obtain Recorded Music

To provide a better idea of the various channels or venues for music retail, it is interesting to consider the myriad ways to obtain an “album” these days in the physical and digital world. As an example, I traced all of the channels where one can or *can't* obtain an album, and the cost at each channel, using as an example the album *Repeater* (released on their own independent label, Dischord), originally released in 1990 by the band Fugazi, a post-punk band known for its anti-corporate stance and strong do-it-yourself philosophy.

First, I went to the oldest independent store here in Eugene, Oregon, House of Records. I could buy the album on vinyl for \$12.95 or on CD for \$11.95 (they don't have either in stock, but they could special order it, and I would get it in a few days. However, they had several other Fugazi albums in physical stock). Another local indie store in town, CD World, sells the CD for \$11.99, and they claim the vinyl is out of print.

The local Wal-Mart Superstore does not stock Fugazi, and I was told by the clerk that they cannot even special order the CD or LP. However, they do have a different Fugazi title, *The Argument*, that can be purchased only online in CD format (no LP vinyl versions are available); the audio tracks for this album can be previewed online. The Wal-Mart webpage states “Not Sold in Stores.” Best Buy offers the CD version of *Repeater* (no vinyl copy) online for \$11.99 (plus shipping), and has a link connecting to

Napster (now owned by Best Buy), where the album can be downloaded for \$9.99. Best Buy has several other Fugazi non-*Repeater* (both CD and vinyl) albums available *only* online. The Best Buy clerk told me that you cannot special order it (for an in-store purchase). It is in their system, but only available online, not in the physical location. Target only offers the CD (no vinyl versions available) online at \$10.99 (plus \$2.99 for shipping), and you are able to sample the songs as well; however, it is not possible to buy a Fugazi album in a physical Target store, nor can it be special ordered. Wal-Mart, Best Buy and Target are unable to special-order Fugazi CDs or LPs, and they simply can't be obtained at their physical retail stores.

The Fugazi *Repeater* album can be ordered directly from the band's record label, Dischord Records, either through mail-order (by sending them a check and getting the CD/LP in the mail), or through its website. Going directly through its label, the vinyl LP is \$11 (plus postage), the CD \$10 (plus postage), and the digital download is \$7. The album can be downloaded for \$9.99 (or individual tracks for \$0.99) from iTunes, or at Amazon.com for \$8.99. I can buy the CD on eBay for \$6.67 (new) and \$3 (used), and a collectable first pressing LP sells for \$26 (plus shipping).

There are numerous ways to stream the *Repeater* album online for free. Each of the album's songs can be streamed for free on YouTube. At Pandora.com (LastFM offers a similar service), when I enter Fugazi into their search engine, the Internet radio station will play a song from the album, and then play other related artists with a similar aesthetic. If I happen to like a particular song or album through this service, I can download it instantly with a link that connects to iTunes and Amazon. On MySpace

Music, over 200 fan profiles claim to be “Fugazi,” and various Fugazi songs can be streamed for free and shared as content on other users’ pages. Users can then purchase music files from other users with an account/page; thus the everyday MySpace user acts as a potential distributor of music. From here, songs can be purchased from iTunes and Amazon.com as a form of viral music distribution. Facebook also has a Fugazi fan page where live clips and links to YouTube versions of songs can be viewed and listened to.

If Fugazi were to make a new album (if they were still a band), and were reviewed on the influential Pitchfork.com, an online music criticism publication, the tracks could be sampled and streamed on the Lala website (after the user signs in), and could be purchased instantly via digital download through the site. Fugazi’s *Repeater* is also available at downloadpunk.com, othermusic.com, e-music, rhapsody.com, shockhound.com, thinkindie.com, and a host of other online stores (both independent and corporate). Another way I could obtain the record would be to burn a CD copy of the album from a friend, or download it illegally for free from Limewire, a web-based file sharing service.

I could try to listen to Fugazi on a local terrestrial radio station; however, none of the corporately owned stations play the album as it is outside their rigid programming format. KWVA, the local college station for the University of Oregon, is the only local radio station that would potentially play a Fugazi song.

In sum, there are many ways to obtain music today, both legally and illegally. When it comes to a more obscure band such as Fugazi, it is impossible to acquire the album at big box stores as it is outside of their ordering system, but possible through

some of the on-line versions of the box store, or a myriad of other online stores. If one wants the album on a particular format such as vinyl, the only physical store that would stock it would be an independent record store. Not only could they stock it, or special order it, but they would also be able to articulate information about the band in terms of its history and cultural context.

Current Trends: Music Consumption by Channel

As noted above, there are more ways than ever to consume music and, as a result, consumption patterns are rapidly shifting in the digital world. However, big-box chain stores, when total sales are combined, sell the most recorded music in the United States. According to RIAA statistics from 2008, chain/big box stores comprised 30 percent of the overall recorded music market (RIAA, 2009). However, these figures are down from 44 percent of the market in 1999 and 32.5 percent in 2004. Independent stores in 2008 comprised 28.4 percent of the market, down from 38 percent in 1999, and down a staggering amount from 53.8 percent in 2004. Thus, physical brick and mortar retail (indie and chain stores) still comprised 58.4 percent of the total market as of 2008. However, these overall figures are down from 82.8 percent of the market in 1999, and 86.3 percent of the market in 2004. In sum, music sales in the brick and mortar sphere have declined sharply over the last decade.

On the other hand, digital downloads (paid-for) have radically increased in sales. According to the same RIAA statistics from 2008, paid-for downloads constituted 13.5 percent of the market, up from 6 percent in 2005. Internet consumption via stores such as

Barnes and Noble and Amazon comprise 14.6 percent of the market, which is up from 2.4 percent in 1999. Thus, Internet-based music consumption is increasing dramatically. Other modes of selling include live concert sales, which constitute 3 percent of the market, as well as record clubs that claim 7.2 percent of the market.

According to the “NPD Music Watch Survey” from February 2008, the retail market is an extremely concentrated market consisting of big box corporate chains in combination with Apple’s iTunes with 71 percent of the market, as opposed to 29 percent for independent record stores (Smith, 2009). Refer to Table 1 for a breakdown of retail music by market.

TABLE 1. Music Retail Market Share Breakdown. 2008 NPD Music Watch Survey (Smith, 2009).

RETAIL OUTLET	PERCENTAGE OF US MARKET
iTunes	19%
Wal-Mart	15%
Best Buy	13%
Amazon	6%
Target	5%
FYE/Coconuts	4%
Borders	3%
Circuit City	3%
Barnes and Noble	2%
Rhapsody	1%
“Other”	29%

According to the NPD research group, as of August 2009, Apple’s iTunes store comprised 25 percent of all music units sold, and Wal-Mart remained in second position

with 14 percent (Graham, 2010). iTunes comprised 69 percent of the digital music market in the first half of 2009, followed by AmazonMP3 at 8 percent. As a result, Apple is currently the largest retailer of recorded music in the United States.

Within the context of music sales by channel, it is important to note that some independent record stores don't utilize SoundScan (a bar code scanning technology that tallies sales for the Billboard music charts) technology, or they only sell used music. Thus, sales from some independent record stores are not necessarily counted by Billboard or noted in industry statistics. As a result, sales from indie stores may in fact represent a larger portion of the overall music market, but these sales are not reflected in the market statistics compiled by Billboard.

Current Trends: Music Consumption by Format

For this project, it is vital to understand current patterns of consumption in terms of music formats. According to RIAA statistics from 2008, full length CDs still constituted the majority of sales by format with 77.8 percent of the market (RIAA, 2009). Digital downloads (paid-for) were second with 12.8 percent of the market. While there has been much hype about a "vinyl resurgence" over the past couple of years, the sale of vinyl records only constituted 1 percent of the overall market.

While the CD continues to be the dominant format, overall CD sales are on the decline. While they constituted 77.8 percent of the market in 2008, this was down from 83.2 percent in 1999. According to the RIAA 2008 Year End Shipment Statistics, for units shipped (net after returns), the CD was down 24.7 percent from 2007, and the CD

single was down 71.7 percent from 2007. Paid-for digital downloads have rapidly increased in sales. Downloads constituted 0.2 percent of the market in 2001, but comprised 12.8 percent of the market in 2008. The downloaded album in terms of units shipped was up 33.9 percent from 2007, and the downloaded single was up 27.5 percent.

Vinyl record sales were up a staggering 124.1 percent from 2007, but still only comprised 1 percent of the overall music market. According to a Nielsen SoundScan 2009 report, more vinyl albums were purchased (2.5 million) than any other year in the history of SoundScan (1991), and two out of three vinyl records were purchased at an independent record store during the year (“Nielsen Company,” 2010). Singles (all formats including digital download) constituted 3.8 percent of the market.

More recent data from the NDP claimed that CDs comprised 65 percent of all music sold in the first half of 2009, compared to paid digital downloads, which comprised 35 percent of the market (Graham, 2010). According to *Variety*, physical album sales continued to decline and digital album sales grew during the first six months of 2010, according to data released by Nielsen SoundScan (Morris, 2010).

Current Trends: Music Consumption by Age

The consumption of tangible musical objects (CDs, digital downloads, vinyl records) is also strongly correlated with age, as younger consumers are buying fewer CDs, whereas the older or graying audience is purchasing more tangible music.

According to the 2008 statistics of the RIAA, several significant consumption patterns (in terms of paying for music) by age have emerged (RIAA, 2009). In 2008, 63% of all

music was purchased by consumers aged 25 and above. Ages 45 and over constituted the largest portion of the music buying market at 34 percent. In fact, the age group 40+ was the only segment where there was growth in sales between 1999 and 2008. In contrast, all age segments between 10 and 39 have experienced a decrease in music sales between 1999 and 2008. Generally, the market size for music consumption has declined each year. For example, the segment between 15 and 24 constituted 25 percent of the buying market in 1999, as opposed to 21 percent in 2008. Those between the ages of 25 and 34 constituted 26 percent of the buying market in 1999, compared to 17 percent in 2008.

What is missing from these RIAA statistics is information regarding the illegal downloading of MP3 music files. It might be suggested that those below the ages of 39 have been influenced or socialized in a culture where digital downloading, or obtaining music for “free,” has become normative. In sum, the youthful portion of the population between 10 and 39 is buying less music every year, and therefore, there is a consistent pattern of decline. The “graying” population, or those ages 40 and over, have been increasingly buying more music and constituted a majority of music consumption sales in 2008. The age group 45+ now constitutes the majority of the music buying market. This prompts one to wonder: if the market for physical musical objects is said to be graying, who will sustain the independent record store for future generations?

Illegal Music Downloading/File Sharing

In 1999, a college student named Shawn Fanning developed Napster, the first free file-sharing program. Fanning’s website made use of MP3 technology, which consists of

compressed digital audio files that enable music to be downloaded from the Internet. Napster became hugely successful and CD sales dropped precipitously. As a reaction, the RIAA filed a lawsuit and the site was consequently shut down, and the RIAA later went after colleges by sending “take down” notices to administrators on several campuses where high-speed Internet connections were being used by “music pirates.” The RIAA also went after other P2P (peer-to-peer) networks. As of mid-2007, “the RIAA has sued more than 20,000 individuals for sharing songs online, with 4,500 settling for about \$4,000 per case” (Rodman, 2009, p. 225). In 2006, the head of the RIAA declared that unauthorized song swapping had been “contained.” While the previous statistics referred to “paid-for” music (see section in this chapter titled “Current Trends: Music Consumption by Format”), the numbers regarding illegal peer-to-peer file sharing and the downloading of MP3 music files are difficult to gauge, due to its illegal nature. Current modes of illegal downloading include Limewire and BitTorrent.

One analysis by the Institute for Policy Innovation (2010) concluded that global music piracy causes \$12.5 billion of economic losses every year, 71,060 U.S. jobs lost, a loss of \$2.7 billion in workers' earnings, and a loss of \$422 million in tax revenues, \$291 million in personal income tax and \$131 million in lost corporate income and production taxes (p. 17). The RIAA website claims, “We do know that the pirate marketplace currently far dwarfs the legal marketplace, and when that happens, that means investment in new music is compromised.” According to the IFPI Digital Music Report 2010, the growth of illegal file sharing has been a major factor in the decline of legitimate music sales over the last decade, with global industry values down 30 percent from 2004 to

2009. The report goes on to claim that one in four P2P file-sharers typically spend nothing on music.

According to Shuker (2008), there are several core issues in these developments and debates. An immediate question is the impact of downloading on “legitimate” recording sales. The industry point of view (for example, the RIAA) is that illegal downloading is clearly hurting the industry. Some argue that consumers who download music illegally are disempowering recording companies by resisting inflated CD prices. Others are not so convinced that the industry is being hurt by these practices. Some arguments suggest that with the wide range of free music available, it exposes more listeners to a broader range of music, and as a result, they buy more music.

The report by the IFPI also suggests that new forms of piracy have emerged. Although P2P file-sharing remains the most damaging form of piracy due to the volume of files shared by users, the last two years have seen a sharp rise in non-P2P piracy, such as downloading from hosting sites, mobile piracy, stream ripping, instant messaging sharing and downloading from forums and blogs (p. 17).

Major Record Labels

In the music industry, a record label is a brand and a trademark associated with the marketing of music recordings and music videos. Most commonly, a record label is the company that manages such brands and trademarks, coordinates production, manufacture, distribution, marketing, promotion, and the enforcement of copyright protection. They also conduct talent scouting and are responsible for the development of

new artists ("artists and repertoire" or A&R), and they maintain contracts with recording artists and their managers.

Four major corporations collect around 89 percent of recording industry revenue each year ("Nielsen Company," 2010). In other words, the music industry is a highly concentrated market. The four major corporate players, also known as the "big four," are Warner Music Group, EMI, Sony Music Entertainment, and Universal Music Group. The "big four" are all international in scope, but receive most of their revenues from big-name American performers. These four corporations are profiled in Chapter V.

Record labels are often under the control of a corporate umbrella organization called a music group. A music group is typically owned by an international conglomerate, which often has non-music divisions as well. A music group consists of music publishing companies, record (sound recording) manufacturers, record distributors, and record labels. As of 2009, the "big four" music groups control about 70 percent of the world music market, and about 89 percent of the U.S. music market ("Nielsen Company," 2010).

Music collectors often use the term "sublabel" to refer to either an imprint or a subordinate label company (such as those within a group). Vanity labels are those that bear an imprint that gives the impression of an artist's ownership or control, but in fact represent a standard artist/label relationship. In such an arrangement, the artist will control nothing more than the usage of the name on the label, but may enjoy a greater say in the packaging of his or her work. Under the umbrella of the "big four" is a web of smaller labels; however, not all labels dedicated to particular artists are completely

superficial in origin. Many artists, early in their careers, create their own labels that are later bought by a larger company. If this is the case, the artist can have greater freedom than if they were signed directly to the big label. There are many examples of this kind of label, such as Nothing Records, owned by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails. There are also “hybrid” labels, which on the surface appear to be independent, but are in fact a subsidiary or partially owned by a major label. For example, the Seattle based “indie” label Sub Pop is half owned (49 percent) by Warner Music Group.

Figures from 2009 compiled by SoundScan suggest a highly concentrated market (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Music Sales (Total physical/digital albums sold, including back catalog) by Label. 2009 Nielson Company SoundScan Year End Music Industry Report.

Record Label	Percent of US Market
Universal Music Group	30.20%
Sony Music Entertainment	28.58%
Warner Music Group	20.55%
EMI	9.20%
Other	11.47%

According to these SoundScan statistics, almost 89 percent of music sold in the year of 2009 was through one of the “big four” record labels. In terms of digital albums in 2009, the sales breakdown, according to SoundScan, is as follows: Eighty-four percent of all digital albums sold in 2009 were through the “big four.” In terms of market concentration, almost 87 percent of all paid-for digital tracks (individual tracks) in 2009 were connected to one of the “big four” record labels (“Nielson Company,” 2010).

For the first six months of 2010, figures compiled by Nielson SoundScan continued to suggest a highly concentrated market. According to these statistics, 84 percent of music sold in the first half of 2010 was through one of the “big four” record labels, while digital albums accounted for 27.4 percent of all albums purchased (Morris, 2010).

Major label titles get the most exposure through advertising and radio play, and thus have a major influence over what tastes will be popular and the manufacture of musical trends. According to Toller (2008), in a market where power is concentrated in the hands of a few, competition and the diversity of output suffers. Labels tend to sign bands with a popular and marketable aesthetic, providing customers with few alternatives. According to Shuker (2008), the market share exercised by the majors varies from country to country, but in some cases is over 90 percent. There is considerable debate over the economic and cultural dominance of such market accumulation, especially regarding the strength of local music industries. Shuker (2008) claims some critics view such concentrations of ownership as an ability to essentially determine, or at the very least, strongly influence the nature and demand for particular forms of popular culture (p. 19).

Critical political economists would argue that the conditions of oligopoly mean a lack of incentive for firms to depart from the status quo, resulting in a high level of product homogeneity. However, from a cultural studies perspective, it is suggested that audiences are active, and have human agency. Audiences are capable of rejecting

mainstream music in favor of more localized musical scenes or music outside the margins of the dominant industry. In other words, just because a mainstream record is heavily promoted and distributed, it is not guaranteed that a mass audience will purchase it.

Independent Record Labels

Defining an independent label can be difficult as the meaning of the word “independence” is polysemic. Record companies and music publishers that are not under the control of the big four are generally considered to be independent (indie), even if they are large corporations with complex structures. Some prefer to use the term “indie label” to refer to only those independent labels that adhere to arbitrary, ill-defined criteria of corporate structure and size, and some consider an indie label to be almost any label that releases non-mainstream music, regardless of its corporate structure. According to Shuker (2008), the term “indie” denotes not just a type of economic entity, but a musical attitude as well, with authenticity at its core — the indie ideology views its music as raw and immediate, while mainstream music is regarded as processed and mediated by “overproduction” (p. 21).

Indie labels are frequently considered to be more flexible and innovative in their roster of artists. For the purposes of this study, a “true” independent record label is defined as being financially independent from the major record labels, as well as having independent music distribution. However, this notion of “independence” is murky as many indie groups distribute their music digitally via Apple’s iTunes, a major corporation.

An industry practice is for the majors to acquire any independent labels that become successful (either an individual band or whole labels). These independents then continue to produce their “own” records, which are then distributed by the parent corporation. In effect, former independents become not only laboratories for new ideas, but also talent scouts for the corporate owner. Many independents become successful by handling specialized genres, like jazz, punk, hip-hop, electronica and indie rock, that are not profitable for larger companies. Several independent labels have become successful by handling material that a major label won’t acquire because of its controversial nature. According to Rodman (2009), “The independent label Priority distributed N.W.A.’s first album, a record so obscene that it prompted a letter of complaint from the Federal Bureau of Investigation” (p. 230).

Contract structuring can vary with independent record labels, but generally once all the expenses have been recouped (production and marketing), many indie labels utilize a 50/50 contract. With this contract, the label and artist split all revenues from album sales. This system is much more generous than the major label system, where artists are frequently in debt from expensive production and marketing. However, indie labels tend to sell smaller quantities of albums.

Hundreds of “true” independents exist without corporate ownership. Together, independent labels collect 16 percent of the market share left over from the big four labels (Morris, 2010). According to Shuker (2008), these labels stay independent because they feel that corporate ownership would be corrupting and limiting in terms of creative expression. Established independent labels, such as Touch and Go, K Records,

Dischord, Kill Rock Stars, Alternative Tentacles, Arts and Crafts, and Righteous Babe are true independent labels as they have no corporate sponsorship and utilize independent forms of distribution.

Music Distribution (Physical and Digital)

According to Schwartz (2009), a “physical” music distributor is a wholesaler of CDs, vinyl records, and tapes; it stocks product from labels and gets it into retail stores (p. 136). Physical distributors, in a sense, consolidate music product from a variety of labels and sell it to record stores. Many “physical” distributors today also distribute digital content and get music into the digital realm for artists. Distributors are not responsible for promotion, as that is up to the artist and label.

Digital distribution entails using the Internet and the digital downloading of MP3 music files via legal downloading sites such as Apple’s iTunes store directly to personal computers. Digitally distributed content may be streamed or downloaded. Streaming involves downloading and using content "on-demand" as it is needed (although there are technologies that allow users to “rip” or steal the content of streaming media). Meanwhile, fully downloading content to a hard drive or other form of storage media allows for quick access in the future. By opting for digital distribution, an artist can get his or her work into the public sphere of interest easily with potentially minimum business overhead. This occurs by cutting out traditional physical distribution and physical retail store sales, as digital distribution doesn’t involve a physical wholesaler, nor is product shipped in the traditional sense. This often leads to cheaper goods for the

consumer and increased profits for the artists. Most contemporary musicians and labels today utilize a combination of both physical and digital music distribution.

According to Schwartz (2009), although sales of CDs continue to decline, they are still selling, and many labels are a 50/50 business — digital and physical retail. Some artists are only selling CDs at live concerts to diehard fans, and sell the rest of their wares online. But if an artist wants to sell their records on a broader scale, physical stores are still considered a strong direction. As Eric Speck of the independent label Ace Fu Records claims,

So I do think CDs are becoming less and less relevant and convenient for people, but it's still important to get them into stores. There's something still magical about going to a record store and seeing the energy and new releases with cool artwork. There's still something there that won't go away soon, but it's becoming more niche (Schwartz, 2009, p. 135).

The big four record labels control approximately 95 percent of the music being shipped to “retailers” (digital, Web, brick and mortar stores). In the industry a record label is considered a “true” independent if it self-distributes or goes through an independent distributor (i.e., E1 Entertainment Distribution (formerly Koch Entertainment), Revolver, or Redeye). Therefore, a label owned by the big four may utilize independent distribution and still be deemed a “true” indie while, conversely, a label that is independently owned but relies on the major's distribution infrastructure is not distinguished as a “true” indie.

There are only a few main venues for corporate “major label” distribution. Universal Music Distribution is owned by the Universal Music Group. Alternative Distribution Alliance (ADA), 95 percent owned by Warner Music Group, and 5 percent

by Sup Pop, distributes for the following independent labels: Domino Records, Sup Pop, Merge, Thrill Jockey, Touch and Go, and Epitaph. ADA has merged with WEA, a prominent distributor under the Warner Music Group. Caroline Distribution, a former indie distributor is now owned by EMI, and Red is a distributor owned by Sony Music Entertainment.

In terms of independent music distribution, the largest North American distributor is E1 Entertainment Distribution (formerly Koch Entertainment), although its record labels are distributed under Universal Music Group in Europe and Asia. Another notable channel of distribution of independent labels is Revolver/Midheaven (distributor of Dischord, Alternative Tentacles and Slumberland records), although they are distributed by Universal Music Group in the UK. The indie Redeye distributes for Kill Rock Stars and Warp Records, as well as artist-run indie labels by David Byrne, Public Enemy and Anti-flag. Other indie distributors include Carrot Top, Secretly Canadian and Forced Exposure.

Independent distributors have a strong relationship with brick and mortar independent record stores and chains that support indie music. According to Schwartz (2009), independent distributors are often more knowledgeable than the majors about specific niche genres, and they can act more quickly, as independents can hit appropriate markets much faster than the majors when a buzz is created. Indie stores give indie labels more personal attention, especially with records with good promotion. Mom-and-pop stores are better at creating a grassroots buzz faster than a chain store, whereas chain stores do well with records that have high visibility and promotion. Fans tend to go into

chain stores already knowing what they want, whereas mom-and-pop indie stores get the word out on records that their customers *should* know about. However, it is important to note that independent labels, distributors and indie record stores often share a similar philosophy in terms of challenging corporate hegemony and supporting “independence.” But in the end, an indie distributor will sell to anyone willing to buy. This includes the big-box chain retailers who have massive economic advantages and market dominance, which actually undermines the economic viability of the independent record store (this will be addressed in more detail in Chapter V).

One-stop distributors such as Super D cater to smaller neighborhood independent record stops, as the typical indie store doesn’t need large numbers of every record title. Schwartz (2009) notes that larger major label distributors do not want to break up boxes to sell a few units of a single title to a store, and thus, it is more profitable and efficient to sell large quantities of music (usually of a very narrow and mainstream range) to the big-box stores. One-stops buy realistic quantities and sell to indies their desired quantity, which can mean a lot fewer returns. Records are ordered as needed, as opposed to ordering extra. Many small indie retailers must utilize a one-stop distributor as the “big four” major labels won’t sell directly to small accounts.

According to Schwartz (2009), returns are an ongoing problem. One downside of using a major/large distributor is the potential for large returns, as music that doesn’t sell in retail stores can be returned to the distributor — a system unique to the music and book industries. No matter how many copies are ordered by a retailer, there is no guarantee of sales. A substantial amount can be returned to the distributor and the record

label eventually has to cover the bill. In the end, it is not the distributors who lose money if a product comes back, as it is returned to the label or artist for a credit for what they owe for the order. Retail stores can return albums to a distributor for a refund with few restrictions, but labels get stuck with eating the returns in the end.

Schwartz (2009) claims most distributors allow labels to set the retail price. The standard invoice is 150 to 180 days, which is the amount of time the distributor has to pay the invoice. Distributors usually take product on a consignment-type basis, although smaller ones might buy product if they have orders. When a product sells, distributors are paid by stores and then, in turn, pay the label a price per unit. If a product doesn't sell, it is returned to the label for a credit against the amount the distributor owes for the order.

Obtaining visibility in the stores in terms of shelf placement on display racks or in listening booths can be bought through a distributor, who puts up the money and recoups it with the sales. CDs don't end up on displays by accident; the space is bought like ads in a magazine. It can be expensive, but indies claim it can get good results (especially if a band is touring, playing on radio, etc.). Robb Nansel of Saddle Creek Records (an independent record label) claims, "There are stores that won't take your stuff unless you get into their program. A lot of stores have automated systems" (Schwartz, 2009, p. 246). By buying into a listening station (a listening display prominently located in a retail store where CDs can be sampled by customers), a store will take 15 copies of a record, as opposed to just a few copies, and the computer will buy 20 more (as opposed to selling a

copy or two, and it can take weeks to order refill copies). This is a system for which labels must pay, which can be expensive endeavor.

Distributors can also arrange co-op advertising, where a select number of records are promoted (including information about the product, label and store) in a local newspaper. In exchange for the distribution company and label selecting which records will be sold and advertised, the record store gets the advertising for free, and thus stocks and displays those particular records in a prominent location. This practice is analyzed in more detail in Chapter VI.

Music Retail

According to Shuker (2008), music retail includes the sale of sheet music, musical instruments, music related merchandise, concert tickets, music DVDs, music magazines and books. But, primarily, the term “music retail” refers to the sale of sound recordings to the public. Recordings are distributed and sold through a variety of retailers, including traditional and online outlets.

Information on the history of music retail is sparse, but a quick sketch is presented here. According to Shuker (2008), sound recordings were first available through shops selling sheet music and musical instruments. Calamar and Gallo (2010) provide the most comprehensive history of record stores. In the early 1900s, chains of department stores began supplying hit songs (on the disc format), along with sheet music, and contend that at the end of the 20th century, even Bloomingdales had a record department (p. 34). In 1905, the prices for discs were determined by Victor and Columbia – \$1 for a 12” record,

\$0.60 for a 10” and \$0.35 for a 7” record (p. 34). The authors note that, in 1906, there were 25,000 record dealers, a total that was reduced to 7,500 fifty years later, and to below 3,000 a half-century after that (p. 35). Records in the 1920s were not cheap, as an album of a classical 78 was about \$7, when the average salary in the U.S. was about \$100 a month, while individual 78s ran between \$0.65 and a dollar (p. 34). The Five and Dime stores, however, were serviced by another collection of labels that brought prices down to below \$0.50 a disk (p. 34). Meanwhile, in 1922, early “race records” were given away when customers bought furniture, an early product tie-in (Calamar and Gallo, 2010).

According to Calamar and Gallo (2010), four stores became models for the modern day record store: Commodore, Colony, Sam Goody’s and Wallichs Music City. Two of these stores went on to become two important record labels — Commodore, the first independent jazz label, and Capitol Records, which was founded by the owner of Wallichs Music City in New York. In 1955, Sam Goody stores accounted for 7 percent of the total national sales of LP records (p. 46). Later, small independent shops emerged, and by the 1950s and the advent of rock and roll, record retailers included independent shops often specializing in particular genres, along with chain stores and record clubs.

According to Wolff’s (2006) history of the Cleveland music scene, in the 1950s and early 1960s, one could buy Top-40 singles and some albums at most large drugstores, along with Five and Dime stores like Woolworths (p. 121). It has been suggested by Wolff (2006) that the British invasion brought about by the Beatles in the mid-1960s spurred the growth of independent record stores in the United States, as people wanted sheet music and 45s. Several stores in this study began in the late 1960s (for example,

Portland's Music Millennium opened in 1969). Meanwhile, the early 1970s spawned countercultural "head-shops" that sold tie-dye shirts, drug paraphernalia, and underground newspapers, and later began to sell vinyl records not commonly available at drug stores and department stores. According to Calamar and Gallo (2010), in the final years of the 1960s, local music shops underwent a transition. Previously they sold guitars and sheet music, but recorded music soon became the primary focus. Records were now in the front of stores, as water bongos and rolling papers were pushed to the side cases.

Independent stores have a history of selling music not widely available elsewhere. For example, the sale of punk and experimental krautrock (a general name of experimental German music) records from the UK and Germany that were not distributed in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s became available at independent stores, such as Rather Ripped (located in Berkeley, California), as they developed specialized *import* sections.

Record stores kept getting bigger and bigger in the 1970s as the owners bragged about their size and selection (Calamar and Gallo, 2010). For instance, Tower Records in Los Angeles advertised itself as "the largest record store in the known world." In the 1970s, the explosion of suburban malls meant that several types of record stores were available in cities and towns across the country. National chains were taking up space in indoor malls and regional chains were finding homes in strip malls. Meanwhile, the mom and pops were scattered around, usually wherever they could find cheap rental space.

Independent chains grew as well. For instance, in the 1980s and 1990s, Newbury Comics became the most powerful and popular chain in New England, eventually operating 28 stores within a hundred mile radius of the Boston flagship. Co-owner Mike

Dreese explained, “The energy of punk and new wave was completely unaddressed by mainstream retail” (Calamar and Gallo, 2010, p. 129).

CDs and cassettes were firmly entrenched as the formats of choice in the 1990s, which spawned a new breed of store: the lifestyle store. In the 1990s, the record store chains cut into shelf space formerly dedicated to music, bringing in DVDs, trinkets and band merchandise such as posters and t-shirts. Also, in the late 1990s, the indie superstore was born with Amoeba Music in Berkeley, California.

Today, traditional brick-and-mortar stores (including chain and big box stores) still sell the largest number of recordings in the nation, but online stores are quickly growing. It should be noted that many traditional brick and mortar stores are also hybrid stores, meaning that they sell records both online and at a physical store.

Big box discount stores such as Wal-Mart, Best Buy, Target and F.Y.E (formally known as Sam Goody), as well as bookstores such as Borders and Barnes and Noble, also sell CDs. One of the top specialty stores, Tower Records, declared bankruptcy in 2006, as did the Virgin Megastores and the Circuit City chain in 2009. According to Keen (2007), in the first five months of 2006 alone, 378 record stores closed nationally, against 106 closures in 2005 (p. 100). There are now 25 percent fewer music stores in America than there were in 2003 (p. 100). Since late 2003, about 900 independent record stores have closed nationwide, leaving about 2,700, according to the Almighty Institute of Music Retail, a marketing research company in Studio City, California (Williams, 2006).

Online stores include websites where you can buy traditional CDs, such as Amazon.com, and sites where you can order custom CDs, such as Mixonics and

Rhapsody.com. Online stores also include those that specialize in digital downloads, such as Apple's iTunes, where pages are devoted to genres and individual artists. Songs can be previewed before being purchased, and there are tools to help users find the music they like by showing them the choices of other people with similar tastes. According to Rodman (2009), both iTunes and the new legal Napster Inc. (which is owned by Best Buy) offer 500,000 licensed songs from all the major labels and most independents, usually for around \$0.99 per song (p. 230). Consumers have the ability to purchase individual songs or complete digital albums. Online distribution has the potential to produce a much higher profit margin than traditional retailing. The labels save the cost of packaging and don't have to worry about having unsold overstocks or losing sales because a title is sold out. While the labels benefit from this practice, the physical independent record store is impacted, as more emphasis is placed on digital MP3 files as opposed to the tangible musical object.

More literature on music retail will be provided in the Theoretical Framework and Literature Review in Chapter III. The specific economic makeup and policies and practices of the major music retailers are examined in Chapters V and VI.

Charts and Payola

The relationship between record charts and music retail should also be noted, as the charts provide a crucial link between retail and radio. According to Shakur (2008), the popular music chart is a numerical ranking of current releases based on sales and radio airplay, usually over one week. The charts are affiliated with the various trade

magazines (*Billboard*, *Variety*, *Music Week*), and provide a key reference point for those working in sales and promotion. For example, Nielson SoundScan, a point of sale scanning device, records album sales for the *Billboard* charts. It should be noted that while most major retailers utilize SoundScan, some independent stores don't utilize the service. As a result, records sold at non-SoundScan retailers are not configured by the *Billboard* charting system.

The record charts play a major role in constructing taste. According to Schwartz (2009), to the fan of popular music, the charts are not merely quantifications of commodities but rather a major reference point around which their music displays itself in distinction and in relation to other forms.

In the United States, album charts are based on the sale of records, whereas singles charts are based on radio airplay. This represents a form of circular logic, in that the charts are based on a combination of radio play and sales, but airplay influences sales, and retail promotion and sales influences radio exposure. Historically, there has been frequent controversy over "payola" attempts to influence the charts, and debates still occur over perceived attempts to manipulate them. Calamar and Gallo (2010) claimed the "SoundScan" scanning system has been manipulated in a number of ways by major labels and retailers. Retailers are compensated with free product or other various gifts by the record labels (Jones, 2009). The notion of retail "payola" and the music charts is discussed in greater detail in Chapter VI.

The charts continue to provide the music industry with valuable feedback and promotion that helps set the agenda for consumer choice. This is particularly true in

terms of big-box retailers who cater to Top 40 music and who are very influenced by the charts, whereas independent record stores usually focus on music outside of the dominant Top 40 charts. Indie stores are more in line with the charts related to college radio. Some niche/specialty stores are indifferent to what music is popular and what music is charting, as their music selection reflects a different sensibility and cultural orientation in terms of underground or subcultural music scenes.

Types of Independent Record Stores

The independent record store continues to have cultural and economic meaning despite its anachronistic and, at times, intersecting relationship with the digital world. But what exactly is meant by an independent record store?

An independent record store is defined by its ownership, and thus an independent record store is independently owned and operated. Independent record stores are not corporately owned; thus they are not directly influenced by fluctuations in the stock market, nor are they responsible to shareholders. This study focuses on “brick and mortar,” or physical retail spaces where customers can buy and sell tangible musical objects such as CDs or vinyl records, as well as more obscure formats, such as cassette tapes, 8-tracks, 7” records, 78 rpm records.

Besides a small number of exceptions, physical record stores are also supplemented by online sales, and an indie store may also sell tangible musical artifacts via Amazon.com, Barnesandnoble.com or eBay.com. Most physical “brick and mortar” stores are “hybrid” stores with both a physical and online sales presence. While most

indie stores supplement their income via online sales, a small number of stores reject online selling as it requires much time and energy, as well as potential negotiation with a buyer. There can also be discrepancies over the condition and value of the musical object, which involves refunds, and the mailing and packaging of product. Online sales have been criticized because they can deplete the unique stock of a physical store due to the global scope of the on-line market. It is also important to note that there are “independent” record stores that only exist online such as CD Baby and Thinkindie. However, this project focuses primarily on “brick and mortar” physical retail spaces.

Independent record stores tend to be locally owned and operated. An independent record store is usually an individual entity with one location, but there are independent chains with a varying number of locations. As previously mentioned, the largest indie chain is Newbury Comics based in Boston, Massachusetts, which has a total of 27 retail outlets in five eastern states (four in New Hampshire, two in Rhode Island, one in Maine, one in Connecticut, and 19 in Massachusetts). Amoeba Music, with three locations (San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Berkeley), is the largest independent record store in the United States.

This study focuses on three types of independent record stores: generalist stores, niche/specialty stores, and used-only stores (however, there can be some overlap with these definitions). Generalist stores stock a wide range of titles across a variety of musical genres, which appeals to a broad range of customers. For example, Music Millennium in Portland, Oregon, is a generalist store that stocks everything from rock, indie, hip-hop, classical, folk, country, soul, rhythm and blues, and jazz. Because they

stock a broad variety of musical genres, the generalist store tends to appeal to a broad range of customers with varying musical taste.

Niche/specialty stores specialize in a particular musical genre (although they often carry a small number of related genres), and generally have more depth in terms of catalog within this idiosyncratic genre. Niche/specialty stores tend to cater to the needs of a particular subculture. For example, Force of Habit Records in San Francisco specializes in punk and hardcore music; Timbucktunes in Portland specializes in world music; Anthem Records in Portland specializes in avant-garde and experimental music; Groove in Berkeley specializes in electronic music; 360 Vinyl in Portland specializes in hip-hop, and Rookie Ricardo's in San Francisco specializes in soul music (and only stocks vinyl 45s).

Used-only stores exclusively sell second hand music and don't use the traditional methods of dealing with a one-stop or distributor to obtain new merchandise. Essentially, they have no connection to the dominant music industry or big four record labels. For the most part, used-only stores acquire their stock from customers who sell used music to the store directly, or they acquire music at estate sales or other second hand sources. Used stores often stock a wide variety of formats and often specialize in vinyl records. For example, Jack's Record Cellar in San Francisco stocks traditional vinyl records, but also specializes in vintage recordings. This store's particular niche is collectable shellac based 78s, which require a special 78-speed record player.

Current Themes: The Independent Record Store

After reviewing the journalistic literature and a small number of popular books on the topic independent record stores, it is clear that there are two distinct camps in terms of the current economic sustainability and representation of indie record stores. In the first camp, the independent record store is either dying or has already gone out of business. The second camp suggests that the independent record stores are surviving and, in some cases, is even thriving. What follows are some key themes and patterns represented by these two perspectives. These themes will be explored in more detail in later chapters.

Independent record stores are going out of business for a variety of reasons. Mainly, indie stores can't compete with free. The physical record store can't compete with the free distribution of MP3 digital music files via such sites as Limewire. In conjunction, the portable Apple iPod music player has altered how music is distributed and consumed. No longer do consumers need to own tangible music objects, or go to a physical store to purchase them. Because of the popularity of the iPod (as well as the iPhone and various smartphones), the online iTunes store is currently the largest music retailer of recorded music in the U.S. The CD's decline in popularity and sales due to its expensive price, along with the cultural/technological shift towards the MP3 format, has affected the independent store. Also, corporate competition in the form of big box chain stores such as Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy and FYE sell music cheaply as a "loss leader." They also offer exclusive only releases. Major record labels cater to the big box stores due to their large market presence and offer price discounts and marketing synergies not

offered to indie stores. However, some indie stores have closed because their rent becomes unaffordable. For example, when a neighborhood becomes gentrified, the rents increase and small independent businesses are forced to close or relocate. Lastly, because of the economic recession since 2007, people are buying less in general, and have less disposable income to purchase music.

The other camp suggests that independent record stores are succeeding and staying open for a variety of reasons. The first reason is the cultural diversity of musical product. Indie stores emphasize niche, obscure, rare, local and non-mainstream music outside of the fringes of the dominant music culture. There is primary emphasis on independent music and major label back catalog. For example, a chain store may stock the most popular release of a particular artist, but the store won't have that artist's early albums (possibly on independent labels), or more obscure albums of that artist (live album, b-sides, various formats, etc.). There is continued interest in the tangible musical object, cover art and packaging of CDs, vinyl records and cassettes. According to 2009 SoundScan statistics, two out of three vinyl records were sold in independent record stores ("Nielsen Company," 2010). Used music adds to the cultural diversity and variety of a store's music selection. The merchandise is constantly shifting and rotating, and there are opportunities to find the unexpected. Used merchandise also has higher profit markups as opposed to new product. Other reasons include the knowledge and expertise of music amongst store employees, and the stores act as a community gathering space. Lastly, the stores supplement in-store sales with a global on-line presence, and many stores have diversified merchandise (DVDs, T-shirts, concert tickets).

Summary

In sum, this chapter explored how the music industry is organized and currently structured. It does so by exploring the structural and industrial makeup of record labels and distributors, and the current state of music sales and trends. It also explores the current state of corporate music retail and the independent record stores. This foundation provides the basis for the political economic and cultural analysis in Chapters V through VIII.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A variety of critical theoretical approaches serve as the foundation of the exploration of the independent record store from a cultural political economic perspective. According to McQuail (2002), the critical paradigm in the field of communication studies is concerned with the concept of power and how power is implicated and reproduced by social institutions and the logic of capitalism.

The very notion of an independent record store is determined by power relationships. Using the political economy of communication to study indie record stores involves exploring how these stores are connected to record sales, music distribution, and independent and corporate record labels, as well as the nature of markets, commodification, monopoly practices, and the corporate consolidation of economic wealth and power in the music industry. After the political economic foundations are established, the cultural aspects of indie stores can be drawn from and situated within this economic base. This is accomplished by exploring the nature of the music commodity (tangible vs. non-tangible), and by exploring the commodity in terms of use and exchange value. It is also possible to analyze the potential for the commodity to have a

social-political symbolic value associated with its consumption, thus integrating economics, culture and politics.

This chapter provides the theoretical framework that informs the study's research questions and examines the following areas: political economy of communication, political economy of communication and music, cultural studies, the definition of culture, cultural studies beginnings, hegemony and ideology, subcultures, punk and DIY culture, vinyl records and collecting, political economy and cultural studies, McDonalidization and rationalization, space and place, community, civic engagement and vernacular culture, and independent record stores.

Political Economy of Communication

As previously defined, the political economy of communication is a critical approach that examines the relationship between media and political economic institutions, and how this interconnectedness is implicated by power relationships that can result in anti-democratic ideals and the homogenization of information and culture. Mosco (1996) claims, "One can think about political economy as the study of social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (p. 25). According to the Mattelarts (1998), a primary goal of political economy is to "recognize and clearly state the issue of an imbalance in communication flows, and to evolve strategies for overcoming it" (p. 19). Political economy examines how the communications industry maintains and reproduces a concentration of wealth and power, and how processes of integration, diversification

and internationalization function to reproduce the economic status quo in capitalist society.

According to McQuail (2002), the political economy of communication is based on Marxist principles. Marx and Engels (1932) claimed that those who own the economic means of production also influence and dominate the ideological structures and systems of society. History is conceived as a series of class struggles, where the dominant class owns the means of production, and the subordinate classes sell their labor power to capitalists. This system perpetuates “alienation” or a loss of control over one’s social relations. Individuals exist with “false consciousness,” or are unable to see how exploitation reproduces social stratification. The economic mode of production determines how social reality is defined through capitalist structuring.

Similarly, Smythe (1977) describes media institutions as a “consciousness industry” that provides monopoly capitalism with “psychological manipulation.” Ewen (1976) explores how the advertising industry essentially manufactures desires, habits, and needs which fluctuate with the expanding marketplace, and thus is linked to capitalist expansion (p. 37). McChesney (2008) claims that all human needs, relationships, and fears – the deepest recesses of the human psyche – become means for the expansion of the commodity universe of modern marketing (p. 264). Wasko’s (2001) analysis of the Disney Corporation ardently critiques how Disney’s magic and fantasy are deliberately manufactured by one of the largest media and entertainment corporations in the world (p. 1). These texts embody the thoughts of Marx and Engels, in that the ruling class controls

the “means of mental production,” which thus reinforces the nature of capitalist exploitation and the economic status quo.

According to McQuail (2002), communications industries essentially reproduce the economic status quo of a capitalist society. Political economy is a theoretical framework highly critical of the corporate consolidation of economic and ideological power, as well as the concentration of power that can lead to undemocratic ideals. The political economy of communications is concerned with the monopolistic tendencies of the culture industries, which leads to standardization and the commodification of media products. It also considers how audiences are constructed by market forces; it considers labor issues within the communications industry, as well as global flows of economic power and consolidation.

To emphasize the consolidation of economic power, Bagdikian (2004) claims that five global firms (as of 2003, Time Warner, Walt Disney Corporation, News Corporation, Viacom and Bertelsmann) strongly influence how the population learns about society. He claims, “This gives each of the five corporations and their leaders more communications power than was exercised by any despot or dictatorship in history” (p. 3). He also writes, “The major media only have marginal differences among them, and this leaves the majority of Americans with an artificially narrowed choices in their media” (p. 7).

According to Golding and Murdock (1991), the political economy of communication must address the integration and diversification of media companies. Diversification is a practice where a corporation diversifies its products or business to

maintain economic stability. Horizontal integration is when one company purchases another company within the same thematic area. For example, one book company purchases another book company. Vertical integration occurs when various modes of the production and consumption process are owned by the same company. For example, EMI consolidated its filmic power by owning and controlling pre-production, production, distribution and the exhibition of its film products. Overall, these economic practices highlight media consolidation and economic control.

As Meehan, Mosco, and Wasko (1993) claim, “This research uncovers connections between ownership, corporate structure, finance capital, and market structures to show how economics affects technologies, politics, cultures and information” (p. 347). It is a structural approach that examines how culture and audiences are manufactured, providing the tools to critically explore the conditions under which manufacture and distribution occur, along with the nature of commodification. The political economy of communication also includes uncovering the connections between ownership, corporate structure, finance capital and market structures. Political economy is concerned with the nature of capitalist expansion and public intervention in terms of moral questions of justice, equity, and the public good. For example, this means examining how advertising affects the kind of “news” information we might receive, as the ads are the main source of funding of a news station. It examines how media conglomerates and their interconnectedness to power, class, and the perpetuation of social inequalities are part of a cyclical economic system that reconstitutes the ruling class system of domination. Political economy also explores the practices of alternative

and independent media that are resistant to dominant trends in the media industry — but ultimately how the narratives of dominant media forms are implicated by the hegemonic nature of corporate interests (the systematic reproduction of economic power) and the consolidation of power.

Murdock and Golding (1974) examine the practice of diversification, where larger companies have increasingly diversified their interests and acquired holdings in a range of leisure and information-providing facilities. This enables companies to hedge their bets and to cushion the effects of recession in a particular sector. For example, the Disney Corporation owns a television network, theme parks, animation/film studios, many different products and merchandise, record labels, and hotels. As a result, Disney has greater leverage during economic downturns, as well as a dominant presence in the media and entertainment industries.

According to the Mattelarts (2004), media must be studied in terms of its global reach. In this context, the first world acts as the economic center and the third world acts as the periphery. Unbalanced flows of information and media power and consolidation are ultimately imperialistic in scope. This approach looks to find ways to overcome such imbalances.

The term “late capitalism” originated in the Frankfurt School and now dominates our postmodern culture. It is characterized by new forms of business organization, such as transnational corporations and new forms of media interrelationships (Felluga, 2003). This macro framework refers to a pervasive and complicated web of bureaucratic control that is less perceptible, but more permanent precisely because it is all-pervasive – a

process which renders itself hegemonic in scope. For purposes of this study, late capitalism is characterized by new forms of media interrelationship, consolidation of power and product synergy (Felluga, 2003). According to Wasko (2001), synergy is a practice where companies increasingly realize the benefits of promoting their activities across a growing number of outlets, creating a *synergy* between individual units and producing immediately recognizable brands (p. 71). The media constitutes one of the more influential products of late capitalism (print, internet, television, film, music), and a new means for the capitalist takeover of culture. Through the mediatization of culture, we become increasingly reliant on the media's version of our reality, a version of reality that is filled predominantly with capitalist values and contradictions.

Political Economy of Communication and Music

Suisman (2009) suggests that music has historically entered people's homes and lives in exciting new ways, but this expansion has depended on a complex set of social and cultural changes, whose meanings reach far beyond music proper. This means viewing music as a commodity within a broader structural and economic context of production, distribution and consumption. Within the tradition of the political economy of communication, there has been little emphasis on the music industry, although there are a few exceptions.

Several key texts deal specifically with the political economy of music and the music industry. Attali (1977) addresses political economic themes on a number of metaphysical and psychological levels, especially in terms of the standardization and

corporatization of music – in other words, music as a form of social control and an agent in reproducing social relations. Building upon Marxist principles, the idea of “reproducing social relations” as a result of the economic structuring of society reinforces how the economic mode of reproduction also reproduces social relations (Attali, 1977).

In Attali’s (1977) chapter called “Repeating,” he argues that the notion of recording music and sound is a form of social control, as recordings reproduce the rules of society. Vinyl records were first utilized to disseminate the voices of leaders, and are a form of military art. “Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany,” wrote Hitler in 1938 in the *Manual of German Radio* (Attali, 1977, p. 87). Thus, power is incorporated into the very process of the selection of repeatable molds and formulas, and mass production leads to mass repetition and standardization of cultural molds. Attali contends that because white capital owns the means of production and dissemination of music, black music, such as jazz, was sanitized and “molded,” and the sense of alienation expressed in the music was silenced and exploited for profit. Through the “production of demand,” specific musical molds can be marketed, as their sheer repetition allows them to have mass appeal. Attali claims this has a hypnotic effect, which is the murder of creativity. The author also suggests that “death should be accepted for what it is: an invitation to be fully oneself in life” (p. 127).

Chapple and Garofalo (1977) explore the political economy of the music industry and how the commodification of rock and roll is linked to oligopolistic corporations. The authors explore how corporations are interconnected with the military establishment and defense contracts. For example, the profits that the Rolling Stones made for Decca

Records during their early years were funneled into a corporate division which produced radar equipment used by the U.S. Air Force in their bombing strikes during the Vietnam War. The text explores the history and economics of the music industry, and considers how it grew as a business. They explore various themes such as marketing, the influence of radio, payola, live concerts, promotion, and the rock press, as well as the politics of race and gender in the music industry. Race politics, in particular the history of black music and the political economy of music, is explored in Kelley's (2005) collection of essays. He explores the commodification of black music, noting that blacks have developed many musical genres, yet have no real control or ownership in the recording industry.

Cvetkovski (2007) offers a contemporary look at the political economy of music and examines the role that new digital technologies will have on the future organization of the music industry. Cvetkovski claims that the music industry's processes are highly integrated and its business model is complex because it centers on sophisticated management and the aggressive appropriation of intellectual property (via copyright) for repeated exploitation of music for decades after its initial acquisition. While the music industry is one of control, both the positive and negative impacts of emerging technologies (mainly, the digital MP3) have created a serious dilemma in terms of product commodification for the controllers of the industry. Furthermore, illegitimate and legitimate technological challenges are at play. The reorganization of the industry is taking place in a multidimensional manner.

According to Cvetkovski (2007), in Australia (much like the United States), the music retail market is remarkably concentrated. A variety of techniques connect major retailers and the major record labels in the form of price negotiations, bottom line price negotiations, delayed payments, return policies, the use of television advertising, and privileged returns (pp. 158-159). This text also explores the changing nature of music retail outlets (both major and indie retail), as “technology has assisted in the fragmenting of consumer’s tastes and desires, as the stores are stocking more non-traditional products, thereby displacing the prominence of traditional music products, and as a result have become multimedia outlets” (p. 165). In sum, technological change is causing a fundamental shift in the relationship between the major labels and music retailers, as the industries move away from the tangible object and towards digital downloading and utilizing music as a branding vehicle (for example, music located in television commercials, in-store Muzak and ring tones).

Shuker (2008) claims increased consolidation of ownership has been a feature of the music retail industry. An increasing proportion of physical recordings are sold through general retailers (Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy, FYE). This concentration influences the range of music available to consumers and the continued economic viability of smaller retail markets. The general retailers frequently use music as a loss leader, reducing their music CD and DVD prices to attract shoppers whom they hope will also purchase other store products with higher profit margins (p. 139).

Allain and Waelbroeck (2006) discuss the recent decrease in the number of new releases and the possible role of the retail structure in the decrease of music variety. The

authors contend that, according to SoundScan (a system that totals record sales within retail outlets), there were a total of 38,900 releases in 1999, as opposed to 31,734 in 2001 (p. 2). This decrease in music variety offered to consumers should be connected to two factors: the increasing concentration of the retail segment with the emergence of large superstores selling to the masses, and their increasing share of total music sales to customers. For example, Wal-Mart accounted for 13.5 percent of music sales in 1998, which jumped to 34.8 percent in 2003 (p. 2).

Fox's (2005) work on Wal-Mart examines the effect such mega stores have in terms of music retail, and claims that "the typical Wal-Mart store stocks around 5,000 titles, whereas the average Tower Records store stocks around 60,000 records" (p. 513). It is suggested that if Wal-Mart is a success and small independent stores close in smaller towns, then Wal-Mart is largely dictating what consumer demand will be through the products it makes available, which is disproportionately geared towards Top 40 music. In smaller towns where Wal-Mart may be the only music retailer, consumers – particularly those consumers without Internet access – will have a limited ability to buy music outside of what Wal-Mart deems as acceptable.

According to Klien (2000), the band Nirvana had difficulties selling their *In Utero* CDs at Wal-Mart due to the store's censorship practices. Wal-Mart refused to carry the album (even though their previous album went quadruple platinum) because the back cover art featured artwork with a fetus. Facing a loss of 10 percent (as Wal-Mart is the largest and most influential music retailer in the country), Nirvana and their label Warner backed down and changed the artwork, also changing the title of the controversial song

“Rape Me” to “Waif Me” (p. 167). The situation with Nirvana and Wal-Mart is similar to a media filter, as described in Herman’s (1996) *The Propaganda Model Revisited*. While this version of censorship isn’t related to the news industry, it does suggest how corporate media industries are firmly embedded in the market system where the commodification of media products appear in a supportive selling environment (or the constructed and controlling nature of a “family atmosphere”) where powerful businesses have the power to exert power over the flow of information available within society. According to Murdock and Golding (1974), information control and consolidation contributes to a sense of consensus and the frameworks offered are necessarily articulated with the nexus of interests producing them; in this sense, all information is ideology.

Unless an independent store is in a unique location or is designed to derive revenue from a wide variety of products, it is increasingly difficult to stay in business, especially in terms of competing with the pricing power of the giant retail outlets. According to Kusek (2005), as more physical stores close, product selection narrows, with only the hits and best sellers making it to the shelves. However, this often works hand in hand with a label’s radio and promotion strategies: focus the efforts on the “sure thing” and take fewer chances. Promoting a very narrow range of “proven” artists is more lucrative for the label in the short run, but it leads to homogeneity of the market (p. 87). This situation relates to Murdock and Golding’s (1974) claim that media products are commodities to be packaged and promoted in the same way as any other. Thus, the use value of music means little if it is not economically profitable.

In sum, the scholarship in the area of the political economy of communication, as noted, has not included much work on music. Furthermore, the retail side of the music business has been neglected and there is no scholarly research done specifically on the political economy of independent record stores. Thus, this project is filling a void within the academic literature, and is very timely within the context of a precarious and shifting music industry that is experiencing new digital technologies and new modes of distribution.

Cultural Studies

According to Kellner and Durham (2006), it is increasingly clear that media and culture today are of central importance to the maintenance and reproduction of contemporary societies. The narratives of media culture offer patterns of proper and improper behavior, moral messages, and ideological conditioning, or the sugar coating of social and political ideas with pleasurable and seductive forms of popular entertainment. With media playing such an important roles in contemporary life, it is obvious that we must come to understand our cultural environment if we want control over our lives.

According to Sardar and Van Loon (1997), “cultural studies” is polysemic and one overall definition should be avoided, as cultural studies itself is somewhat of an “anti-discipline.” Cultural studies borrows from a variety of academic disciplines ranging from sociology, anthropology, English, comparative literature, linguistics, women’s/gender studies, media studies and communications. It borrows from a variety of contested theoretical leanings such as Marxism, structuralism, feminism, and post-

colonial studies. Depending on the cultural context, cultural studies can have several meanings. Cultural studies has a different meaning in terms of American, Canadian, British, French, or Indian cultural studies.

There are some overarching themes in terms of “defining” cultural studies. According to Kellner and Meenakshi (2001), cultural studies considers how cultural artifacts and commodities are not only produced within a culture, but how such objects contain ideologies that contribute to social formation. Within this social and cultural formation, cultural artifacts contain ideologies about gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and nationality – and thus their omnipresence in a culture affect how identity is constructed or reinforced by cultural symbols and codes. At the same time, cultural studies insists that audiences are active and capable of resisting dominant media messages and codes and making their own or oppositional readings of cultural objects. Thus, at the core of cultural studies is the notion of power, and essentially how power is negotiated and contested within culture. According to Kellner and Durham (2001), a key question to consider under the umbrella of cultural studies is: What do people do with the cultural commodities they encounter in their daily life?

Defining Culture

But what is meant by culture? Williams (1981) notes the difficulty of defining the word “culture,” and that it exists uneasily in the following ways: “an informing spirit,” “the whole way of life of a distinct people or other social group,” as languages, styles of art, and kinds of intellectual work. According to Williams, the “sociology” of culture can

be defined as new kinds of social analysis of cultural institutions and formations, and the exploration of actual relations between these and the material means of cultural production and actual cultural forms. Within this definition, culture is influenced by a political and economic order.

Hall (2003) also claims that “culture” is difficult to define. He claims, “The use of ‘culture’ refers to the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the lives of ‘ordinary people’ – what is called ‘mass culture’ or ‘popular culture’ of an age” (p. 2). Hall continues with a more social scientific definition: “the word ‘culture’ is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of a people, community, nation or social group” (p. 2). Hall argues that culture constitutes a set of practices, that meaning has a “give and take” effect, and that within a culture there are a great diversity of meanings about any topic. Hall (2003) notes, “cultural meanings are not only ‘in the head,’ they organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects” (p. 3).

Cultural Studies: Beginnings

Early cultural studies was influenced by Horkheimer and Adorno (2001), who are associated with the Frankfurt School of the 1930s, where critical theory met early communications research. Their work contends that the dominant media is an instrument of standardization; that people become pseudo-individuals from this top-down model of control; and that the media perpetuates a “false consciousness.” As a result, people are

removed from their true essence. This concept suggests how the power and nature of the media can be highly deterministic, yet proponents of cultural studies often reject this thesis.

British cultural studies built upon this critical model, but argued that people can actively challenge media messages, create alternative media, and thus are not as susceptible to the “brainwashing” that Horkheimer and Adorno suggest. As Hesmondhalgh (2007) claims, “The culture industries and the texts they produce are complex, ambivalent, and contested, and therefore, not monolithic and standardizing” (p. 4). According to the Mattelarts (1998), the culture industries need to be explored in terms of how culture is commodified and standardized. Such processes are replicated on a global scale, and thus affect how identity is constructed in terms of dominant and socially constructed ideologies. Cultural studies are intended to arm individuals with a critical understanding of how mechanized society and the commodity system work, helping individuals to seek critical alternatives. Media artifacts can reinforce or normalize dominant or ruling ideologies, and this form of power can become hegemonic in scope; but it can also be challenged and contested.

According to Kellner, Durham and Meenakshi (2001), cultural studies began in 1964 at the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Its founding fathers were Hoggart, Hall, Williams and Thompson. At the time, they focused on adult education, as they were from the working class and were highly critical of how the infiltration of media messages and codes from the U.S. were saturating British culture (they were critical of British media as well). Some of the

major tenets of cultural studies consist of ways to critically analyze media texts, and to formulate ways to resist dominant media codes. At CCCS, much emphasis was placed on class relations, and how the working class had the potential for social change. These scholars also focused on subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s in terms of building oppositional cultures vis-à-vis the hegemony of mass culture. Kellner (1995) articulates this situation in the following passage:

The focus of British cultural studies at any given moment was mediated by the struggles in the present political conjuncture and their major work was thus conceived as political interventions. Their studies of ideology, domination, and resistance, and the politics of culture, directed cultural studies toward analyzing cultural artifacts, practices, and institutions within existing networks of power and of showing how culture both provided tools and forces of domination and resources for resistance and struggle (p. 12).

According to Kellner (1995), as cultural studies moved to the U.S., many argue that the approach lost its critical, “left” edge, and lacked an economic and political foundation. The American version created work that often valorized and celebrated popular culture, as opposed to challenging its connection to economics like the early British model. There is sometimes the urge to create linkages with the political economy of communication and cultural studies in order to strengthen American cultural studies, which is a primary aim of this project. According to Kellner and Meenakshi (2001), another tenet of cultural studies is the notion of praxis. In other words, cultural studies research should have some further purpose beyond the confines of academia. The idea is to address the problems of those being studied or utilize forms of action research and ethnography. The research should strive to effect real cultural and political change.

Jameson (1991) explores the rupture or radical break from modernism generally traced back to the 1950s or the early 1960s known as postmodernism. Postmodernism is not characterized as style, but rather as a cultural dominant, especially in terms of late or multinational capitalism, where all human relations are implicated by this cultural mode of production. Postmodernism is also associated with a new flatness, or depthlessness, and pastiche, where cultural forms are re-appropriated at face value as unthinking combinations. It is also characterized by a weakening of history, which is seen as fragmentary, and reduced to representations. Through a process of cognitive mapping, which is vaguely assessed, one can gain an awareness of how such ideologies of the postmodern condition under late capitalism shape and reconstitute us. In regards to music, Jameson (1972) claims that capitalism doesn't just work on musical texts from the outside, but capitalism is at work within the musical material in the form of various musical elements, theme, instrumentation, and harmony, bringing it into a specific commodity form.

I turn now to a brief discussion of the key tenets of structuralism and post-structuralism. According to Assiter (1984), there are four common themes regarding structuralism that formulate an "intellectual trend." First, the structure is what determines the position of each element of a whole. Second, structuralists believe that every system has a structure. Third, structuralists are interested in structural laws that deal with coexistence rather than changes. And finally, structures are the "real things that lie beneath the surface or the appearance of meaning" (Assiter, 1984, p. 272). According to Mizruchi (1994), "Structuralism is often associated with a structural analysis in which

social structures, constraints and opportunities are viewed as having a more pronounced effect on human behavior than do cultural norms or other subjective states” (p. 329).

According to Barry (2002), post-structuralism offers a study of how knowledge is produced, also offering a critique of structuralist premises. It argues that because history and culture condition the study of underlying structures, it is subject to biases and misinterpretations. To understand an object (e.g., one of the many meanings of a text), a post-structuralist approach argues, it is necessary to study both the object itself and the systems of knowledge that produced the object. Barry (2002) continues, a post-structuralist critic must be able to use a variety of perspectives to create a multifaceted interpretation of a text, even if these interpretations conflict or contradict one another. It is particularly important to analyze how the meanings of a text shift in relation to certain variables, usually involving the identity of the reader.

Hegemony and Ideology

Gramsci (2001) explores how subaltern classes are dominated by the ruling class. This occurs through ideology or the “science of ideas.” Gramsci points out that the ruling or dominant ideology is essentially a fiction, or construction of man and a historical epoch in time. The ruling ideas within a culture circulate within education, the media, religion, and the family, and because of this circulation of ideology, ruling ideas become normalized and “common sense” or an active form of consent. Yet, Gramsci argues that dominant ideologies can be contested and challenged through counter hegemonic

practices – power can be altered and changed, and this is a powerful thread that runs throughout various tenets of cultural studies in term of resistance.

According to Lull (1995), hegemony is the power or dominance that one social group holds over others, and dominance and subordination in the field of relations structured by power (p. 31). Its effectiveness depends on subordinated peoples accepting the dominant ideology as normal reality or common sense, in active forms of experience and consciousness. According to Gramsci's (2001) theory of ideological hegemony, mass media are tools the ruling elites use to “perpetuate their power, wealth and status, (by popularizing) their own philosophy, culture and morality” (p. 39).

According to Althusser (1971), the family, schools, religion and the media essentially create the notion of people as “subjects.” Through the ideological state apparatus, economics are not the only constitutive factor in terms of shaping social totality, whereas identity and “self” are implicated by culture. On the flip side, ideology is composed of “texts that are not closed,” according to Hall (1985), who notes that ideological “counter tendencies” regularly appear in the seams and cracks of dominant forms. Thus, hegemony is an incomplete process and power can be lost and cultural assumptions can be challenged. Counter hegemonic practice can be a form of cultural resistance to the dominance of mass culture.

A contemporary example under the auspices of post-colonial studies includes the anti-globalization movement, where activists and protesters demonstrated in the “Battle of Seattle” and the succession of anti-capitalist carnivals, often held symbolically during international summits geared at consolidating global policies of neoliberalism (Worth and

Kuhling, 2004, p. 3). Another example is culture jamming (Lasn, 1999), where dominant media images, such as commercial billboards, are altered and subverted as a form of “citizen art,” which challenges the lack of public space and which is designed to create a dialog about excessive consumerism and civic engagement. While these acts can be counter hegemonic in nature, the amount of real social change from these actions is debatable, especially when the culture industry co-opts these movements and actions.

Hegemony is a logical focal point because it assumes individuals are socially determined, but it also proposes that individuals choose their oppression by rather abstract cultural forces of power – in this case, corporate power or the broader social forces of late capitalism.

Defining Resistance

For purposes of this research, it is vital to explicate how resistance is defined and characterized. According to Hollander and Einwohner (2004), more attention must be paid to the definition of resistance and how it is socially situated in the individual, collective and institutional levels of human life. Various definitions include “acting autonomously in one’s own interests; active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with or submit to abusive behavior and control; and, simply questioning and objecting” (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004, p. 538). Resistance relates to notions of power, inequality and social change. “Resistance can be through talk and other symbolic behavior, it may be individual or collective, widespread or locally confined, and it can take place with little or no coordination among subjects” (Hollander and Einwohner

2004, p. 538). All definitions include a sense of action or active behavior, and contain the words “counter,” “reject,” “challenge,” and “opposition.” Resistance almost always includes activity, and of course that activity occurs in opposition to someone or something else. There are also notions of “everyday resistance” that vary in their visibility.

The question of whether resistance requires recognition by others has been the subject of considerable contention (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). Actors may be unable to fully articulate their motivations in terms that may seem resistant to an interviewer, and furthermore, “the actor may not even be conscious of his or her action as resistance, as it can occur at the level beneath consciousness” (Leblanc, 1999, p. 15). While this project explores notions of resistance related to independent record stores, it doesn’t negate the fact that stores are located within a capitalist system, and the stores exist within larger structural and economic forces. Yet, for purposes of this project, the overlap between resistance and counter hegemonic praxis is the foundation or driving force of subcultural participation, as well as the accumulation of subcultural capital.

Cultural Studies and Subcultures

Gordon (1947) claims that a subculture refers to a sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence. Gordon writes, “They form in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual” (p. 40). According to Gelder (1997, 2007) and Hebdige (1979), subcultures

are essentially "non-normative" groups that are very much aware of their difference from the status quo, and often celebrate such differences. Subcultures, in this sense, reject or are in opposition to the banalities of mass or dominant culture forms. Gelder (1997) explores how early cultural studies theorists examined how subcultures could have a revolutionary potential, but in the end, came to the realization that most subcultures are more concerned with "style" and an overall sense of "rejection" of mainstream society, and thus lack the larger potential to effectively create political or social change.

According to Gelder (2007), Thornton (2005), and Hebdige (1979), subcultures are generally organized around their resistance to mass or dominant culture. In this context, subcultures create a kind of internal structure or organization, or as Hebdige refers to it, a homology. It's a place where history is from the "ground up," and it explores how subcultures want to "win space back" from the dominant culture. While subcultures such as punks are resistant to the status quo, there is the danger that such ideas and fashion can be (or already have been) co-opted by the culture industry, and thus the original meaning of "punk" is defused and massified, and turned into a commodity. Style and forms of rebellion have been historically co-opted by the culture industries. As Harold (2007) notes, corporate and anti-corporate rhetorics do not oppose each other so much as feed off and respond to one another – as oppositionality provides the conditions for novelty and difference for which global markets thrive. The author notes how the resistant act of culture jamming has been co-opted by advertisers and has become part of advertising campaigns.

Gelder (2007) considers subcultures to be more interested in “style” and a general sense of “refusal”; as well, he notes that subcultures are too self-absorbed to create any real or political form of change. Thus, change or opposition is limited to the cultural sphere and does not include the political sphere. For example, the DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic associated with zines (photocopied and personal publications) and punk music (making your own music label, such as Dischord records, where one can have more control over the product being produced), as noted by Sinker (2007), can be very empowering in terms of creating small and localized spaces, or places to deal with and “contest” the alienation of mass culture. As Duncombe (1997) states in his analysis of zine culture, the practice of making a zine can be very empowering and can connect one to a community and critical consciousness. Yet, as Duncombe argues, this niche, however progressive, becomes highly fragmented, and its ability to address critical issues or broader political issues is limited. According to the author, making zines can be pre-political in nature, and such an experience may lead to future political actions or a political sensibility.

Hebdige (1979) analyzes how subcultures seek to define themselves vis-à-vis mainstream mass culture. Hebdige (1979) poses some interesting questions: How do subcultures make sense to their members? How should these subcultures be defined and is there a unifying ideology behind them? To what degree do they seek to define themselves in opposition to mass or mainstream culture? How does this contribute to a sense of identity and community in terms of resistance and opposition?

Choosing not to conform is still a form of conformity, and according to Thornton (2005), the internal structure of any particular subculture is characterized by an extreme orderliness, which is how the subcultural member makes sense of the world. Thus, we may have examples of a kind of reaction, rather than a dialectical or social transformation. Collective self-image is made to reflect, express and resonate with aspects of group life. Thornton (2005) contends that different youths bring different degrees of commitment to a subculture, but in the end, members of a subculture must share a common language.

Thornton (2005) builds on these group dynamics. Crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media, and most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves. “Vague opposition is certainly how many members of youth subcultures characterize their own activities” (Thornton, 2005, p. 185). Subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and carefully assembled record collections. Subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being “in the know,” and puts a premium on the “second nature” of their knowledge. Participants see themselves as outside of and in opposition to the “mainstream.”

Bourdieu (2004) discusses how aesthetic concepts such as “taste” are defined by those in power and shows how social class tends to determine what our likes and interests will be, and how distinctions based on social class are reinforced in daily life. He observes that even though the subordinate classes may seem to have their own particular idea of “good taste,” it must never be forgotten that the working-class “aesthetic” is a

dominated “aesthetic” which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics (p. 41).

Young and Hebdige (1995) later describe the implications of resistance within the framework of capitalism:

The assertion of cultural difference is an essentially progressive gesture, a step in the right direction away from conformity and submission. If one believes that it is in the nature of power to homogenize – then difference can be seen as a good thing in itself. Yet, in a post-industrial world where consumers are incited to individualize themselves and where the operations of power seem to favor classification and segregation, it is hard to regard difference as necessarily progressive (p. 102).

Gelder (2007) claims that subcultures are always in some way non-conforming or dissenting. Through such views, the group gains cohesion and identity. Every subculture, every social group – large or small – which can in some way be considered subcultural, carries a set of narratives about itself. Some of these are generated internally, while others, usually more visible and pervasive, are developed and deployed by the society around it (p. 2). According to Gelder, modern subcultures are in opposition to the banalities of mass cultural forms (p. 4). Here, subcultural identity is pitched against the conformist pressures of mass society and massification. At the same time, however, it is a negotiation with one of mass society’s prevailing symptoms: alienation – where subcultures seek to find critical spaces within the dominant culture. As noted by Sinker (2007), the DIY ethic associated with underground culture (zines, punk music, creating your own music label, or starting an independent record store), where one can have control over the product being produced, can be very empowering in terms of creating

small and localized spaces, or places to deal with and “contest” the alienation of mass culture.

Maffesoli (2005) further describes the social nature of group development and how group dynamics are learned:

The ritual perpetuates itself, and through the variety of routine or everyday gestures the community is reminded that it is whole, or part of a tribe’s collective sentiment. The complex mechanism of give and take that develops between various persons, on the one hand, and between the entity thus created the milieu on the other. Whether they are real or symbolic exchanges is of little importance; indeed communication, in its widest sense, takes the most varied routes. Individual body is an offshoot of the community (p. 193).

Straw (2005) examines how different cultural spaces are marked by the sorts of temporalities to be found within them – by the prominence of activities of canonization, or by the values accruing to novelty and currency, longevity and timelessness. The “logic” of a particular musical culture is a function of the way in which value is constructed within them relative to the passing of time. As local punk scenes stabilized, they developed the infrastructures (record labels, performance venues, lines of communication, and record stores) within which a variety of other musical activities unfolded (p. 471). By relying on small-scale infrastructures of production and dissemination, these spaces are rooted deeply within local circumstances, a feature commonly invoked in claims as to their political significance. This connects to the independent record store as they stock music from independent artists and indie music labels, which are small-scale infrastructures.

It is important to consider how the actions and strategies of subcultures effectively create (or fail to create) political and social change. One major argument that spawns

from the subcultures literature is this notion that subcultures become co-opted by the dominant cultural industries. For example, punk, zines and culture jamming have all been co-opted by advertising, or the dominant media industry. This argument contends that all resistance is essentially co-opted and re-articulated by the ruling capitalist order, and while resistance is a progressive step in the right direction, we must also consider how capitalism co-opts and seeks to profit on notions of resistance and oppositionality. As Best (1997) notes, “contemporary theorizing of popular culture must allow for spaces of resistance, as well as being able to take issues of domination, exploitation and cultural imperialism into consideration” (p. 19).

Building on instances of counter hegemony, Hall’s (2002) *Deconstructing the Popular* discusses the concept of resistance in further detail:

The cultural industries do have the power constantly to rework and reshape what they represent, and by repetition and selection, to impose and implant such definitions of ourselves as a fit more easily the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture. That is what the concentration of cultural power – the means of culture making in the heads of the few – actually means. In our times, it goes on continuously, in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield (p. 187).

Accordingly, this research on indie record stores explores similar lines of resistance and refusal, and views the space as a cultural “battlefield,” with both victories and defeats.

It is also important to note research conducted on post-subcultures (Hollands and Greener, 2006), where it is suggested that, in postmodernity, there is such a fragmentation of homogeneous culture that it is no longer possible to have subcultures, so even smaller groups or neo-tribes, with shared lifestyles or interests,

form and reform (Maffesoli, 2005). It is suggested that subcultural membership is superficial and transient, and only represents a fraction of an individual's overall identity (p. 399). This framework also critiques the romanticizing of subcultures within the CCCS, and that "style" itself offers little in terms of radical or political social change. While the post-subcultural literature has come under fire for being overly theoretical and lacking empirical evidence, this project is a deep immersion into the subcultures located in indie record stores, and will address these concepts in the analysis sections.

Subcultures Part 2: Punk and the DIY Philosophy

The punk subculture relates to this project as early British punk releases were only sold at independent record stores as "imports" of European releases. Early American punk labels, such as SST and Dischord, sold their records predominately at indie record stores, as well as through mail order. Most contemporary indie stores continue to sell punk music in its myriad of stylistic offshoots, from traditional punk to post-punk, hardcore and indie rock. The stores are spaces where punks and other musical subcultures congregate; thus the spaces can act as places of socialization. Hannon (2010) claims that record stores were some of the key places where punks could meet others, hear music, and learn more about performance spaces, fanzines, and radio stations.

In the 1970s, punk music was spawned from a culture that grew out of an oppressed working class (in Britain), rebelling against the threats of capitalism's inequality. Yet it has grown over the years into a commercially successful and popular

musical genre that now relies on capitalism (Bashir, 2007). One can say that the punk subculture emerged in opposition to mass culture, as punks tend to have anti-capitalistic, anti-commercial, and non-conformist views. Yet at the same time, they need the capitalistic system in order to survive. The canon of punk music includes the Sex Pistols, The Ramones, and The Clash – all of whom signed with major record labels.

According to O’Hara (1999), modern society is a mechanized and depersonalized world where man has an indefinable sense of loss. He feels that there is a current feeling in modern society of alienation so powerful that it has become commonplace and accepted. Members of subcultures, regardless of how oppressed, have often succeeded in finding a solidarity and understanding amongst themselves that is lacking in mainstream society. According to O’Hara (1999), what subcultures can succeed in doing is “to imbue their members with some sense of higher purpose” (p. 23). Born from feelings of alienation and frustration, punk in Britain was essentially a movement consisting of underprivileged working-class white youths. Many of them felt their social situation deeply and used the medium of punk to express their dissatisfaction. According to O’Hara (1999), punk is defined as an art, mixed with theories and politics related to avant-garde movements, unusual fashions, the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life, juxtapositions of seemingly disparate objects and behaviors, intentional provocation of audiences, and the use of untrained performers. Messages of non-conformity and questioning the prevailing modes of dominant thought are common themes within punk music.

The punk subculture in its conception was meant to be an autonomous culture that broke the norms of mainstream society and owned the means of production. Nevertheless, the culture industry still managed to subsume it. Adorno (1989) insists that “autonomous” art forms, which of course rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, are tendentially eliminated by the culture industry. The punk ideology was “coerced” by the economy and eventually shifted towards commercialization and sameness (Bashir, 2007). Today, punk commodities are sold at typical shopping malls, having become mainstream products where the original danger and anarchy associated with punk has been commodified by the culture industries. This process of commodification relates to Debord’s (1967) concept of the spectacle. He claims, “Media culture proliferates ever more technologically sophisticated spectacles to seize audiences and augment their power and profit — and it unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena” (p. 4).

Marcus (1989) considers the Sex Pistols (arguably the most famous punk band in history) as a construction of Malcolm McLaren, a storeowner of a shop called “Sex” that sold records and subcultural apparel (such as t-shirts depicting the Paris riots of 1968 and biker clothes). McLaren recruited the band out of his store, found them a place to rehearse, gave them an offensive name, and preached to them about the possibilities of ugliness and confrontation – all of which acted as pop cultural art project and rejection of the status quo, and thus, a mixture of commodification and resistance.

The do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic allows resistance and empowerment to take shape not simply as signification and representations, but also in creating an unusual kind of

public sphere (Habermas, 1991). Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) theory of the field of cultural production "refers to a network of social relationships that is organized around a particular practice and is relatively autonomous from the social structure at large" (Moore, 2007, p. 440). At the same time, no field can be completely independent, for it is always subject to the influence and pleasure of class, power, and markets as they are ordered in the overarching social system. "A field is defined in part by the degree of autonomy it has established, and much of the struggle within the field is between those who wish to preserve this autonomy and those who would gain by absorbing it into the system's economic and political logic" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 94-114). Best (1997) argues that all cultural texts, including those labeled "folk," "punk" or "high culture," must negotiate in some way with the mass or micro media of the culture industry.

While some punk bands have been quick to "sell-out" to a major label contract (for example, Green Day), other iconic bands such as Fugazi maintained a DIY ethic and actively worked to create a space with a different sense of ideals not predicated on profits alone (the band has been on permanent hiatus since 2002). According to Sinker (2007), the band has never compromised its egalitarian ideals and insisted on low door prices (none of their shows have cost more than \$6 and the shows have always been open to all ages), independent venues (instead of the club circuit, they have played in church basements, community centers, high schools, and even a prison), and low-priced, independently produced records. Fugazi's front man, Ian MacKaye, and his independent label Dischord, started in 1980. He has repeatedly turned down numerous major label

offers to buy both the band and the label. This is an example of resisting co-option and resistance to the dominant music industry. Sinker (2007) interviewed MacKaye, who describes the DIY ethic:

One aspect of DIY is that you really have to do-it-yourself. It's work! We manage ourselves, we book ourselves, we do our own equipment upkeep, we do our own recording, we do our own taxes. We don't have other people to do all that stuff. I think the reason we take the approach to music that we do is that we ultimately have complete control over how we do our music, and how we operate as a band. We don't feel compelled by anyone to do anything that we don't want to do. We're not indebted to anyone. When a band signs to a major label, no matter how good of a contract they think they have, no matter how much control they think their contract provides, it's unavoidable that you're conscious of being an investment (pp. 19-20).

During the 1990s, corporate interest in punk and alternative music threatened this ideology of independence with the prospect of cooptation or "selling out." Sinker (2007) contends that indie labels circulate cultural products that are typically more risky and experimental; these products generally are not attractive to the corporate culture industry that prefers to repeat successful or at least familiar formulas. At the same time, many independent labels depend on the distribution systems of the corporate sphere, and many independent music labels have been bought out or co-opted by major labels, or formed into hybrid labels that perhaps look independent, but are actually backed by a major record label. Many independent labels are founded on a spirit of opposition, as suggested by the Olympia, Washington, based Kill Rock Stars, and the Washington D.C. based Dischord Records, which both remain staunchly independent. Corbett (1990) claims that the Pacific Northwest's K Records (International Pop Underground) and New Zealand's Flying Nun Records are two examples of the innumerable grass-roots recording companies currently on the periphery of the mainstream music industry (p. 98). Lee

(1993) explores the co-option of the former independent record label Wax Trax and the nature of their “independence” after being purchased by TVT (which is owned by Atlantic Records). Lee highlights how “indies” have been co-opted by major record labels through the construction of “hybrid” labels, and how the logic of capitalism has forced many indie labels to secure ties with major labels, especially for distribution. Thus, the nature of “independence” can be ambiguous and its level of autonomy is debatable.

According to O’Hara (1999), resistance is seen in punk subculture’s practice of creating independent media for the purposes of creative expression, cultural participation, and community formation – whereas the idea of making a lot of money may be secondary, as the spirit of punk encourages a different kind of public sphere and relationship to capital. In the case of independent record labels, it is a space where bands have more control over the means of cultural production and the overall look and feel of the final product. Opposition continues to spring from punk and other corners of cultural production where peers and critics measure success not in terms of the “economic capital” of sales and profits, but rather the “symbolic capital” of making good art that is recognized (Moore, 2007). According to Moore (2007), these cultural producers do not simply compete within the field on its own terms but challenge the way that the game is played by redefining the rewards worth pursuing. In the process, their struggle alters the field itself: even pop stars must answer to the fact that critics find their music derivative and uninspired.

Moore (2007) notes that others are motivated to produce culture without any notion of success or capital but simply to get themselves heard, be part of the scene, have fun, and make friends. It encourages self-empowerment, the act of picking up an instrument or making a fanzine. On the other hand, the “culture of authenticity” seeks to establish a network of underground media as an expression of artistic sincerity and independence from the allegedly corrupting influences of commerce (Moore, 2007).

This interaction between “independence” and being co-opted by a major label or corporation is characterized by the interplay of struggle and desire, involving mirroring and the fear of absorption and loss of identity. The other side of reflection is incorporation. Hebdige (1976) reminds us that expressions of rebellion can be commodified. As Davidson (1992) observes, the music and fashion industries frequently package the music and dress codes of the very groups who use music and clothes to counter their social subordination (p. 190). Brennon (1993) seeks to explain this as an effect of mediation; in this view the counter-culture, which has been projected by the mainstream as “other,” is dangerous and represents an enemy which must be identified (made the same) by means of assimilation.

Zines are another form of alternative media associated with the DIY ethic. Zines have historically been sold at indie record stores, along with underground newspapers. According to Duncombe (2001), zines are non-commercial, non-professional, small circulation magazines that the creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves. Publishers strive for a scale that allows them to have complete control over production and distribution, while maintaining close personal contact with the readers. In his

discussion of the politics of alternative culture, Duncombe claims that creating an alternative underground world, no matter how novel and supportive it is, and putting out a “radical zine” – no matter how irreverent, expressive, fun, and woefully adequate, zine creation is a reaction to the assault of hyper consumerism.

According to Duncombe (2001), individuals can and will be radicalized through underground culture, but they will have to make the step to political action themselves. Although underground culture is created in reaction of the main currents of society, it is also shaped and guided by them. The fact of the matter is that there is no coherent political public to which or for which zines can speak. Zines represent the fragmentation in society and are reinforced in opposition to capitalism.

Ensinger (2009) explores the nature of handmade punk posters/flyers that permeate independent record store culture as well as urban spaces, such as telephone poles and alleys. Before punk was co-opted by the culture industries, the flyers were a main form of advertising for underground music, as the dominant media didn't yet focus on punk music as a mass commodity. Ensinger argues that street flyers have been disappearing because of viral or Internet based advertising. But it is important to note the cultural significance of punk flyers and their connection to indie stores, as the stores provided an outlet for punk flyers to circulate. The author also contends that the silk-screened/cut and paste/DIY aesthetic of punk posters has been co-opted by the culture industry, and now t-shirts at Target mimic the look and feel of early punk poster art.

As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) state, “All values are values of opposition and are defined only by their difference” (p. 106). Senses of shared identity are alliances formed

out of oppositional stances. Yet even in the world of alternative or punk music, “oppositional choices are increasingly channeled through the conduits of corporate capitalism; so that you may choose to buy the latest record by the Breeders instead of Color Me Badd’s platinum album – but both CDs are released by Warner Music Group” (Kruse, 1993, p. 34).

According to Kellner’s (2000) interpretation of Marcuse, oppositional subjectivity and the movements and revolts in which it was grounded were fragile and subject to dispersion and defeat, or absorption and cooptation (p. 13). Moreover, Marcuse was aware of the contradictions of oppositional subjectivities and movements that on the one hand reproduced tendencies of the existing capitalist societies, while opposing other aspects and seeking alternatives on the other hand. Subjectivity for Marcuse, whether the dominated subject of advanced capitalism or oppositional subjectivity sought through counter-culture, was historical, and was always full of contradictions and ambiguities (p. 14).

Vinyl Records and Collecting

Music formats, especially their changing and at times ephemeral nature, are a key component to understanding the sustainability of independent record store culture. The emergence of the digital world, most notably the introduction of peer-to-peer digital file sharing, paid-for download sites (such as iTunes), and a variety of on-line stores (such as Amazon.com and Ebay), have increased competition and have affected the brick and

mortar retail store. However, many physical record stores have embraced the digital world and are thus “hybrid” stores that sell music in both the real and virtual world.

There is a good deal of literature that explores the tangible nature of vinyl records and record collecting, and a score of journalistic articles regard the “resurgence” of vinyl records. This section highlights the complex nature of the medium, and draws attention to the individual relationships with larger patterns of technological change, as well as briefly looks at music technology, vinyl records and collecting.

Turino (1999) argues that recorded music can create emotional responses and realize personal and social identities. Recorded songs work as triggers, bringing back waves of emotion, the specificity of a time, an event, a relationship, or evoking more general feelings. Like photographs, recorded songs can relate to personal memories. We often engage with recorded music by stitching emotion or lived experience onto musical impression, hence conjuring up mental maps, or internal stories that are later recalled as part of our musical memory. Personal emotions and affects attached to songs are articulated in explicit memory narratives that people like to exchange. These stories are not only about emotions triggered by music, but directly bespeaking musical memory as it relates to personal and group identity (Van Dijck, 2006).

McLuhan (1967) claims, “Any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (p. 23). Thus, we need to look at how changes in musical formats (for example, the iPod and digital downloading of music) ultimately

affect the way people not only listen to music, but where and how they consume music, as well as how they form a relationship with particular musical media.

According to Van Dijck (2006), technologies and objects of recorded music are an intrinsic part of the act of reminiscence, and personal memory evolves through our interaction with these apparatuses (vinyl record, CD, MP3 players). Music listened to via radio, vinyl records, cassette tapes, or MP3 players have different emotions attached to them. Playing vinyl records over and over again, even as their quality deteriorates as a consequence of multiple use, somehow contributes to the intensity of recorded music stored in memory. For some, the scratches, cracks, and hiss on a vinyl record, capture a different sense of aura, mood, and memory. “The transfer of emotive affection from the brain onto the technology and materiality of audio recordings shows how memory acts out in the spaces between individual reminiscence and shared experiences” (Van Dijck, 2006, p. 365). These same narratives disclose how materiality and technology often become integral to memory.

According to Shuker (2004), as a social practice, record collecting presents itself as a core component of individual social identity and a central part of the life cycle (p. 311). The author argues there is no “typical” record collector, and that the meaning of the word is polysemic. Shuker (2004) continues by claiming there are some shared characteristics: contemporary record collectors have a shared interest in sound recordings as significant cultural artifacts, and share the dominant characteristics with collectors more generally, such as the thrill of the chase, obsession, accumulation and completion, preoccupation with rarity and economic value, and a concern for cultural preservation (p.

327). In sum, this author highlights the notion that record collecting is a social activity and that collectors engage a kind of cultural capital within their peer group, which includes buying only the “best” or collecting material considered cutting edge (Shuker, 2004).

The tangible nature of vinyl can be traced to its cover art and packaging. In a related study, Cunningham and Jones (2004) explore how an individual maintains and uses a personal music collection, in terms of both musical artifacts and digital downloads. These authors touch upon several aspects of the personal relationship towards music, especially in terms of the visual and tactile nature of music collections. They also note that tangible musical artifacts (in this case, a CD) have meaning for users. For example, one research participant discusses how CD inserts can serve as a decoration, by tacking the insert to a wall, thus adding an aesthetic element to one’s room. Another interview subject reported that, after purchasing a new CD, he will “take it round to friends to show it off and maybe let them hold the case” (Cunningham and Jones, 2004, p. 7). For these people, simply having a digital MP3 file does not give the same pleasure or the sense of ownership as having a physical music collection.

Vaher (2008) contends that exotic (extremely eccentric and obscure) record collecting is a manifestation of identity politics – a way of reasserting one’s agency in a consumerist society through an expanded consciousness of the complexities of the forgotten cultural past (p. 342). The researcher views collecting obscure records as an expansion of collective cultural memory of the history of popular culture. As a result, this practice combats the perennial industrial promotion of the “new” with more vintage

and affective ways of defining oneself through material objects of imagined value.

Through the collection of exotic vinyl records, the author claims it is possible, and even liberating, to read the whole grand narrative of culture differently through the “imagined utopia” and experience of radical musical difference, which gives a “a glimpse (or sound) of the fuller gamut of humanity” (Vaheer, 2008, p.352).

Hays (2006) claims the resurgence of vinyl records, and the youth consumers who collect vinyl LPs and utilize a turntable, is resisting industry-regulated contemporary modes of music consumption. The author suggests that record collecting is a response to the postmodern malaise brought about by consumer capitalism, where people are faced with a constant barrage of new music for (and marketed at) their demography. “Young people attempt to mark themselves as different by rejecting widespread practices of consumption maintained by the capitalistic framework” (Hays, 2006, p. 58). These youth attempt to construct alternative practices and attitudes that imply a deeper appreciation of music perceived as being distinct from the mechanisms of commerce regulating their peers listening experience (Hays, 2006). For example, the subjects seek out used and obscure records that are only available on vinyl and not yet released on CD. This practice, the author contends, defies the industry’s control of products according to marketability, thus contributing to the subjects’ knowledge of music as an “outsider,” marking him or her as different or unique. For the collector of marginalia, hunting for obscure recordings doubles as an act of resistance against the music industry’s maintenance of a constructed popular music narrative. Another aspect of vinyl consumption entails the purchasing of used music at indie stores, which offers the

shopper more agency by haggling with dealers and receiving discounts for frequent or large purchases, whereas the prices are fixed and inflexible with major music retailers. While record collecting is constructed here as cultural resistance, this article fails to consider how the “vinyl resurgence,” like many subcultural practices, has been co-opted by the culture industries, as chains such as Best Buy currently sell new vinyl records in their locations. Thus, record collecting intersects with the commodification of culture.

According to Straw (1999), record collections are carriers of the information whose arrangement and interpretation is part of the broader discourse about popular music (p. 5). Straw contends that to collect is to valorize the obscure, and yet such valorization increasingly stands revealed as dependent on the homosocial world of young men. Straw claims:

Just as ongoing conversation between men shapes the composition and extension of each man’s collection, so each man finds, in the similarity of his points of reference to those of his peers, confirmation of a shared universe of critical judgment (p. 5).

This analysis explores the gendered nature of vinyl record consumption and collecting within the context of a male dominated music industry, where women are excluded, “as the boys in the band go back to discussing their record collections” (p. 15). *Vinyl* (2000), a Canadian documentary on record collectors, includes only five females among its 100 interview subjects. Both of these texts suggest record collecting is a male dominated subculture.

According to Grossberg (1984), to collect the obscure is to refuse the mainstream and to engage in rock culture’s processes of “excorporation,” “operating at and reproducing the boundary between youth culture and dominant culture” (p. 231). Also,

as resistance to dominant musical culture, record collecting converges with anti-consumerist ethics that tie the collector's investment in the obscure and the refusal of the blatantly commercial (Straw, 2005).

According to Wallach (2003), every consumer recording/playback format has its adherents and detractors. The graphics, texts, and images that form an important part of the overall package are vitally important in shaping the possible meanings of the commodity (p. 50). Rather than stemming from the pure fetishization of vinyl, plastic and cardboard, one usually collects recordings not for their use values or their inscribed surfaces, but rather for the listening experience they offer.

Elborough (2009) claims that however popular vinyl might be at the moment, it remains a niche interest – one that will appear anachronistic to most who actively engage the digital world. Wallach (2003) contends that the MP3 lacks a fetishizable form, critiquing the format as having a muddy midrange, nonexistent bass, and crisp, but lifeless treble frequencies (p. 52). But he also discusses the advantages such technologies offer the consumer in terms of portability and instantaneous musical choice. McLeod (2005) contends that file sharing networks act as an alternative distribution system that pose a real challenge to major labels and, as a result, have led an unwilling music industry into the online marketplace, opening the door for small and independent labels to disseminate their music and circumvent play lists of corporate radio (p. 521). While digital downloading and peer-to-peer file sharing have decimated physical music sales, independent record stores for the most part have embraced on-line retail, and sell physical recordings via eBay, Jem, and

Amazon.com. There is speculation that indie stores will embrace in-store digital downloading in the future.

While on the topic of music formats, it is of interest to note the recent trend in cassette culture. For example, noise bands in Portland, Oregon, release limited edition cassettes that are often hand-painted or crafted. According to McConnell (2006), this small network rejects the homogenizing tendencies of mass-produced culture and the corporatization of everyday life in favor of the crafted artifact and singular experience. McConnell (2006) continues, “[Cassette-tapes] were labors of love for ourselves, and for our friends in the cassette net. We were all privy to a deeper and more personal, private, and inspiring aspect of communication, rather than consuming empty marketing commodity” (p. 175).

In sum, this project builds upon these studies related to vinyl records and contextualizes this literature in terms of independent record stores, and their political economic connection to the dominant music industry.

Political Economy and Cultural Studies

The political economy of communication will provide an essential foundation and will situate the independent record store within the larger industrial framework of the music industry. However, this research will also utilize several cultural studies perspectives that consider the importance of political economy, much like the early foundations of British cultural studies, where cultural products were linked to an economic context. While these two critical approaches at times have a contentious

relationship with each other, Mosco (1996) claims, “research should bring together, not separate, intellectuals and cultural producers” (p. 272). Through a common goal, “political economy and cultural studies can build a common understanding and common political purpose that can advance the democratization of culture and, through it, the democratization of social life” (Mosco, 1996, p. 272).

According to Meehan, Wasko and Mosco (2004), the relationship between political economy and cultural studies could be beneficial and provide a more complete overview of media power and products. The political economy of communication is often criticized for being overly-deterministic, whereas cultural studies is criticized for placing too much emphasis on media texts, which can lead to the uncritical valorization of media products. Also, cultural studies, especially the American version, tends to omit its critical foundations of early British cultural studies. Thus, the integration of political economy could potentially work to create more insightful and complex research.

The work of Meehan, Wasko, Mosco (1994) exemplifies the interdisciplinary possibilities between political economy and cultural studies in terms of postmodern theory. Their essay uses the film *Batman* as an example of how the intertextuality of the various products created around the film are a result of the economic structuring and corporate synergy (for example, the film and soundtrack are interrelated with their connection to Prince, or the artist formally known as such). The phenomenon of intertextuality is a result of economic processes, more specifically the political economy of communication.

Wasko's (2001) interdisciplinary research on the Disney Corporation is another example where political economy and cultural studies have complemented each other in the same research project. The author claims:

The continued expansion and popularity of the Disney empire calls for the deliberate integration of political economic analysis with insights drawn from cultural analysis and audience studies or reception analysis, or, in other words, analysis emphasizing the economics as well and the ideological, or production as well as consumption (pp. 4-5).

Hall's (2003) notion of the "circuit of culture" considers cultural objects in a manner that integrates notions of identity and the politics of representation associated with cultural studies, as well as notions of regulation, consumption and production associated with the political economy of communication. Hall's (2003) approach incorporates cultural studies and political economy, and is a key example where the two frameworks are bridged, resulting in a more sophisticated analysis of cultural products in an interdisciplinary context.

Maxwell (2001) considers how cultural experience is linked to political economy, and reminds us that a work of culture "has never taken place outside the areas of life determined by particular economic systems and power relations; that is, culture is always in political economy, however peculiar that might sound to those of us raised on a notion that culture, economy, and politics enjoy a happy existence independent of each other" (p. 3). Babe (2009) notes the renowned split between political economy and cultural studies has been, in a sense, a distraction, a diversion and a faux debate, and recommends the integration, or reintegration, of political economy and cultural studies (pp. 195-196).

By embracing both political economy and cultural studies in this project, it is possible to create a more sophisticated and interdisciplinary portrait of the independent record store. Indie stores are an economic entity and through processes of commodification are connected to consumption, distribution, and production. The stores are connected to a highly concentrated music industry, as well as to corporate chain stores and Internet modes of distribution. These attributes are clearly located in an economic base. While this economic grounding is vital to this research project, through ethnographic interviewing (as well as documentary filmmaking and photography), I explore the ideological nature of owning/working/shopping at an indie store, as well as the orientation of the stores as a gathering space, place of socialization and location within a physical community. This project investigates what the stores and their related commodities mean to people, what people do with them, and how people frame indie stores within a larger cultural and narrative framework.

As Hesmondhalgh (2007) claims, “Political economy versus cultural studies is neither an accurate nor useful way to characterize approaches to the media and popular culture,” as it oversimplifies a whole web of disagreements and conflicts down to two players (pp. 44-45).

McDonaldization and Rationalization

Ritzer’s (1996) concept of McDonaldization explores processes of cultural standardization that occur when notions of rationalization, or the processes of the fast food restaurant, have come to dominate more and more sectors and practices of everyday

society (p. 35). Rationalization is the process whereby an increasing number of social actions and interactions are based on considerations of efficiency or calculation rather than on motivations derived from custom, tradition, or emotion. Weber described the eventual effects of rationalization as “leading to a ‘polar night of icy darkness,’ in which increasing rationalization of human life traps individuals in an ‘iron cage’ (or ‘steel-hard casing’) of rule-based, rational control” (Ritzer, 1996, pp. 18-23).

“The McDonald’s restaurant pioneered the reutilization of interactive service work and remains an exemplar of extreme standardization” (Ritzer, 2006, p. 15).

Rationalized processes of efficiency, calculability, predictability and notions of control, which Ritzer claims lead to “irrational consequences,” characterize this standardization. The negative effects of rationalization are a sense of dehumanization and disenchantment. As Ritzer claims, “A fully rational society would be a very bleak and uninteresting place” (p. 29). The Frankfurt School of the 1940s had also argued that the spread of rationalization based on calculation and efficiency dehumanizes and contributes to a “standardized” society. This critique holds that people have the potential to be far more thoughtful, skillful, creative and well rounded than they now are, yet they are unable to express this potential because of the constraints of a rationalized world.

Ritzer builds upon central elements of the work of Max Weber, especially in terms of the concepts of efficiency, predictability, control and calculability. Similar arguments were raised in the 1950s and 1960s by the cultural studies scholars Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, as they attempted to preserve working

class culture against the onslaught of mass culture produced by the culture industries, especially media artifacts from the United States (Durham and Kellner, 2006).

However, the central theme in Weber's analysis of modern society was the process of rationalization, a far-reaching process whereby traditional modes of thinking were being replaced by an ends/means analysis concerned with efficiency and formalized social control. For Weber, the archetypal manifestation of this process was the bureaucracy: a large, formal organization characterized by a hierarchical authority structure, well-established division of labor, written rules and regulations, impersonality and a concern for technical competence (Ritzer, 1993).

Bureaucratic organizations not only represent the process of rationalization, but also that the structure they impose on human interaction and thinking furthers the process, leading to an increasingly rationalized world. The process affects all aspects of our everyday life. Ritzer suggests that, in the later part of the 20th century, the socially structured form of the fast-food restaurant has become the organizational force representing and extending the process of rationalization further into the realm of everyday interaction and individual identity.

Ritzer highlighted four primary components of McDonaldization: efficiency, predictability, control and calculability. These components are explained below.

Efficiency is the optimal method for accomplishing a task. In this context, Ritzer has a very specific meaning of "efficiency." Here, the optimal method equates to the fastest method to get from point A to point B. In the example of McDonald's customers, it is the fastest way to get from being hungry to being full. Efficiency in

McDonaldization means that every aspect of the organization is geared toward the minimization of time. In a McDonaldized society, people rarely search for the best means to an end on their own. Rather, the previously discovered best possible means to innumerable ends have been institutionalized in a variety of social settings.

Calculability implies that the objective should be quantifiable (such as sales and profits) rather than subjective (such as taste). McDonaldization developed the notion that quantity equals quality and that a large amount of product delivered to the customer in a short amount of time is the same as a high quality product. This allows people to quantify how much they're getting versus how much they're paying. Organizations want consumers to believe that they are getting a large amount of product for not a lot of money. Workers in these organizations are judged by how fast they are instead of the quality of work they do.

Predictability implies standardized and uniform services. "Predictability" means that no matter where a person goes, they will receive the same service and receive the same product every time when interacting with the McDonaldized organization. In a rational society, people prefer to know what to expect in all settings and at all times. This system emphasizes discipline, order, systematization, formalization, routine, consistency and methodical operation. The goal is the production of a world that offers no surprises.

Control creates standardized and uniform employees, as well as the replacement of human by non-human technologies. This is motivated by a desire for greater control and potentially more profit. The technology here not only includes machines and tools, but also materials, skills, knowledge, rules, regulations, procedures, and techniques.

Once people are controlled, it is possible to begin reducing their actions to a series of machine-like actions. Bureaucracy trains people to work in a more prescribed manner. The result of a McDonaldized society is the irrationality of rationality, or the notion that rational systems often spawn irrationalities. In other words, rational systems can be unreasonable and dehumanizing.

In a similar thread, Habermas (1991) claims that as advanced capitalists societies have developed, the core integrative function of communication has been increasingly disabled or colonized by social institutions, and that an “ideal speech situation” could restore legitimacy. “Colonization” is to Habermas what the “totally administered society” was to Horkheimer and Adorno, and what the “iron cage” of Weber – a situation where the lifeworld of shared common understandings, including values, that develop through face to face contacts over time over various social groups is compromised by a form of McCommodification (Jeannot, 1998).

Building on Ritzer’s concept of McDonaldization, this study explores how the independent record store resists or challenges the social processes of rationalization, or what can be termed anti-McDonaldization. This process of anti-McDonaldization entails a variety of practices that counter the negative effects of rationalization, such as dehumanization and disenchantment. Since Ritzer’s work has often been critiqued as being overly deterministic and lacking in terms of the possibility of resistance (see Smart, 1999), the concept of anti-McDonaldization builds upon and expands the original foundations of McDonaldization.

According to Smart (1999) and Ritzer (2006), numerous debates suggest that there is a sense of locality in the midst of a globalizing society, and not all social systems conform to a dominant ideology such as McDonaldization. An example or break with the original McDonaldization thesis can be found in the “slow-food” movement (Miele and Murdoch, 2006), where Italian cooks and restaurant owners have created a manifesto and resistance to the banality of fast food and instead focus on the importance of locality (local food and ingredients) and food that requires time and patience.

Another weakness of Ritzer’s theory of McDonaldization is that it fails to address economics and economic determinism. According to Kellner (1999), it would be wise to deploy a Marx/Weber synthesis to theorize McDonaldization as a combination of instrumental rationalization of production and consumption with a sustained corporate attempt to increase profit (p. 188). At the foundation of the communications industry, economics needs to be ardently considered.

Kellner (1999) continues by claiming that Ritzer could better contextualize the problem within the framework of globalization and a restructuring of capitalism, aiming at the increase of productivity and profit through rationalization of production and consumption (p. 190). In addition to being part of a rationalization process, “McDonaldization is a form of techno-capitalism in which world markets are being rationalized and reorganized to maximize capital accumulation” (Kellner, 1999, p. 188). In this study, such weaknesses of the McDonaldization thesis is further reinforced and strengthened by the political economy of communication, along with the theoretical development of anti-McDonaldization.

Space and Place

This project briefly examines how the independent record store is located within space, place, and social geography. This literature describes the politics of space, and relates to unique spaces versus McDonaldized spaces – but ultimately how space and urban design is impacted by capital expansion. According to Low and Lawrence-Zunigas (1999), spaces are contested precisely because they concretize the fundamental and recurring, but otherwise unexamined, ideological and social frameworks that structure practice. The authors contend the correlation between “spatial configuration” and “social structure” might in some cases be obvious but, in others not so clear, and in still others, “extremely difficult to discover.” In other words, social space is never neutral.

According to Liggert and Perry (1995), spatial practices are strategically, geographically, ideologically, and materially mobilized in the individual and collective conditions of society. The production of space implies division and hierarchy. Space is an active component of ongoing political play, struggling to define and enforce social realities.

Ritzer (2006) considered social geography in terms of McDonaldization, but has since developed a more nuanced version of the effects of rationalization. Instead of an over-determined “iron cage” blanketing society, the social reality consists of “iron cages” and “pockets” or “islands” of McDonaldization (p. 33). For example, a city block may contain many McDonaldized shops and businesses, but within this same block there may also be independent stores and shops. Thus, the overall picture of McDonaldization is no

longer as bleak and totalizing as once conceived. In sum, Ritzer believes that society has become, and will continue to become, even more McDonaldized, but at the same time, there is localized variety – and people can choose to shop at places that are less or non-McDonaldized.

According to Steele (1981), to experience a place, we must take into account the eyes, ears, intentions and moods of the person experiencing it. When people are unaware of the ways in which place experiences affect their lives, places tend to not have much conscious influence on the nature of their experiences. Perception of place has much to do with what one brings to it as it does with the attributes of the setting itself.

Industrialization has led to settings that have no special personality or distinguishing spirit and has wiped out regional differences in architecture and building materials. We replace a rich variety of place with homogenized, “efficient” settings that have no variety, surprise, or traces of their own history and development. This relates also to Berry (1987), who argued that the fundamental balance in terms of the scale of building is out of touch with that of nature. This process was brought about by industrialization, and a “McDonaldized” state of affairs where society is turned into “consumer society” and where the GNP has become the standard by which human progress is measured, as opposed to human community and human connections.

According to Solomon (2003), shopping has merged with entertainment to emerge as a new form of activity some have termed “retailtainment,” which is derived from the traditional marketplace (celebrations, exotic peoples, mysteries and carnival) through the creation of corporate created fantasy worlds and themed stores. Klein (2000)

explores the branding of the cityscape, where manufactures and retailers seek out authentic scenes and public events. Klein (2000) describes the “The Queen St. takeover” that took place in Toronto, as Levi’s Silvertab jeans led to the largest and most expensive outdoor ad campaign in Canadian history. The Queen Street strip was painted silver and the company bought of the facades of almost every building and changed them into Levi’s billboards. The ads later moved to busses, streetcars, taxis, and clothes as wearable billboards.

According to Liggett and Perry (1995), shopping malls are highly controlled and predictable spaces, and relate to Ritzer's notion of a McDonaldized society. Malls are uniform in terms of the products for sale, and their hyper-real design gives the illusion of a public gathering space. In reality, shopping malls are privately owned. While shopping malls are not panoptic in physical design, the omnipresent use of surveillance technology in malls is evidence of the controlling nature of these "quasi" public spaces. They create a simulation of a city, while “other” populations such as homeless people are excluded from the space.

According to Liggett and Perry (1995), control within a shopping mall is the norm. For example, any activity or gathering of a political or activist variety is not allowed. There are no constitutional rights in a shopping mall, where consumerist values trump citizen and civic values. In terms of spatial design, malls have open sections where there are no places to sit, and thus have no place to congregate or organize with other people. Therefore, the spatial organization is a form of social control. While malls are extremely popular in terms of consumer shopping, they essentially are responsible for

the destruction of the traditional “downtown,” where locality is undercut by mall culture (Kuntsler, 1993). According to Kuntsler (1993), this leads to towns and cities characterized by a kind of nothingness, where buildings and spaces have no connection to each other, and there is no sense of locality. As a result, people are affected by the insular nature of their private cars, private homes, and private entertainment. For example, Straw (1997) claims that sprawling music superstores with their segregated sections, multiple floors and careful construction of architectural confusion are a form of “organized disorder.” Consumption is marked by a tourist compulsion to explore, rather than an obligation rooted in interpersonal contact that characterizes smaller boutiques and stores.

Carr and Servon (2009) contend that urban design needs to consider vernacular culture in terms of development, “yet many cities pursue development strategies that result in homogeneity rather than preserving what distinguishes them from other cities” (p. 28). An example of this vernacular culture is Granton’s (1990) *The Zinester’s Guide to Portland: A Low/No Budget Guide to Visiting and Living in Portland, Oregon*, a do-it-yourself guide that explores the cities unique and quirky establishments as well as subcultural spaces such as independent book and record stores in the city. The zine is written from the culture below, or from the perspective of artists and zines makers. The pamphlet *Portland Guide to Independent Records, Tapes and CD Stores* (2009) is available at indie record stores in Portland. The pamphlet is an example of vernacular culture, with its hand-drawn cover and alternative social geography which maps and describes the many stores which permeate the city.

Community, Civic Engagement and Vernacular Culture

Putnam (2000) contends that even non-political groups, such as local sports teams, can be considered a form of civic engagement as they build social capital and social networks that are necessary for a healthy democracy. Putnam (2000) discusses in great detail how and why civic engagement has radically declined over the last couple of decades. First, he claims that civic engagement has become “McDonaldized” in terms of how people participate in culture. Instead of face-to-face interaction and the kinds of social bonds formed through going to meetings and debating social issues, people are now “mail-order” activists. People engage social issues from afar – where their group membership or pledge of money helps to support causes. Beyond that, there are fewer tangible forms of engaging community in a face-to-face manner. For example, people are increasingly purchasing music via the Internet as opposed to shopping at a physical music store, which alters the nature of civic engagement. In a later book, Putnam (2003) considers the Internet in terms of developing communities, and emphasizes the importance of face-to-face interaction in terms of developing a real, and concrete social foundation. The Internet works by reinforcing the real and tangible networks already in place.

In terms of why people have stopped engaging in civic life, Putnam (2000) contends that the media – in particular, the introduction of television – has exposed an endless barrage of images or representations of people and events to a mass audience. The author argues that television is a passive activity that encourages social isolation, rather than social interaction with real people. Putnam refers to this as the privatization

of entertainment. To Putnam, television consumption is directly related with one's amount of civic engagement. He contends that television makes people passive and that the overwhelming amount of conflicting information on television breeds a kind of apathy, as people don't want to engage with social issues. The news also tends to oversimplify complex social issues, as news itself has become McDonaldized (for example, less time focused on complex stories that require more than sound bites, and critical issues not being addressed by the news as it may interfere with corporate advertising). Thus, in order to really understand complex social issues, one needs to be engaged with actual social realities. Lastly, television audiences are treated as consumers and television promotes a culture of consumption, rather than civic engagement.

Evens and Boyte (1986) examine the importance of free spaces and ultimately how our social landscape has been altered and there is less space "from the town square" to "the local grocer" in which to have a healthy discourse. This is again is credited to the commercialization or commodification of space. The authors contend that, historically, free spaces are where civic engagement can occur, where one can be socialized or educated by the space. For example, during slavery, black slaves would utilize Baptist churches as spaces for political organization, as well as to relieve themselves from the oppression of white-dominant society. Such spaces were later connected with the civil rights movement, which thus demonstrates how the history of civic organizing is connected with a large-scale social movement. As noted by all of these authors, the rationalization brought about by industrialization, and later consumer culture, has radically affected how people are organized and relate to each other in society.

Independent record store culture includes elements of vernacular culture.

According to Lantis (1960), vernacular culture expresses locality and refers to cultural forms made and organized by ordinary people for their own pleasure in modern societies. Such culture is almost always engaged in a non-profit and voluntary basis, and is often associated with tightly organized subcultures and religious cultures. According to Geertz (1987), the kind of culture that has been developed by a people or by a majority of people to express their own meanings and values is increasingly dominated by culture that has been developed for a people. Embedded in this top-down structure is a range of processes ranging from repressive imposition to commercial saturation (p. 2). While independent record stores exist to turn a profit, they are characterized by elements of vernacular culture that are local and individualized. This can be analyzed in terms of the sale of local music, to hand-drawn cards that separate albums, the layout of stores, fanzines, handmade decorations/drawings on the walls, record listening parties, and the kinds of talk and lore that permeate independent record stores.

Independent Record Stores

There is next to nothing in terms of academic literature on the topic of independent record stores. However, there are recent journalistic sources that explore independent record store culture, and a small number of non-academic books and films on the topic.

According to Gracon (2009), the independent record store and its related culture promotes cultural variety and music not widely available through other

mainstream or commercial retail outlets. The unique design and aesthetic of the House of Records based in Eugene, Oregon, is symbolic of non-rationalized space as it reinforces locality, acts as a community gathering space and for those involved is a form of social interaction, and is a “humanizing experience” (p. 218). It might even be suggested that shopping at an independent record store has an element of carnival, especially the notion of collectivity, where the behavior and actions within the store suggest a kind of playful and critical interaction to the dominant culture. It is argued that the closure of independent record stores result in a more McDonaldized culture predicated on sameness, predictability, and an unhealthy lack of cultural variety. This early research conducted on independent record store culture provided the foundation for the more complex and sophisticated analysis in this study, which involved a political economic analysis, along with a much larger research sample, and a broader research scope.

Keen (2007) describes the closure of Tower Records, America’s largest chain music store, along with hundreds of independent record stores. The author largely blames the digital revolution in the form of digital piracy and the low prices of Internet retailers, such as Amazon.com and iTunes. Keen claims that Tower represented around 40 to 50 percent of the niche-genre labels’ entire market (p. 104). Because of the loss of this important retail outlet and the demise of the physical record store, Keen argues that there could be less musical choice, fewer labels and the emergence of an oligarchic digital retail economy dominated by Amazon.com, iTunes, and MySpace (p. 104).

While this argument sounds convincing, it fails to recognize that the line between the brick and mortar and on-line store have become increasingly blurred, as most independent record stores are actually hybrid stores, where music is sold in both a physical and on-line version of the store. Thus, the binary between on-line and physical stores is not so clearly demarcated. Keen also fails to address the recent popularity or “resurgence” of vinyl records, a trend that has been economically beneficial to the independent record store.

Characteristics of Indie Stores and Related Popular Literature

Jones’ (2009) *Last Shop Standing: What Ever Happened to Record Shops?* is an inside look the closure of over 540 (down from 948 to 408) independent record stores in the United Kingdom between 2003 and 2007 (p. xi). The author describes the record store in the economic highs of 1990s, before the Internet, DVD and video games. He describes the downfall of the music industry in terms of overpriced CDs, and greedy record companies who exploited their artists in order to manufacture and promote the new CD format. Jones explains how storeowners were influenced by a modern day version of payola; they were offered free CDs, trips, and discount deals for selling and promotion of particular albums. The author suggests that record shops still have a future, and recommends that indie stores embrace product diversification especially in terms of music genres and merchandise in terms of DVDs, T-shirts, books, musical instruments, concert tickets, accessories and toys in order to compete with chain stores and online sellers.

Pettit and Monem's (2008) *Old Rare New: The Independent Record Shop* consists of short essays, interviews with musicians and record collectors, and various photos of American independent record stores. In part, the text is somewhat of a nostalgic glorification of the culture, with its pages of colorful album covers and writings on record collecting. There are moments of reflection exploring the community nature of the stores, and their social significance. While touring the country documenting various stores, the authors contend, "The pursuit of records, record shops, and record shop owners and their customers offered up new perspectives on geography, local communities, architecture, culture, politics and people" (p. 12). They describe New York City stores that double as a bakery, live music venue, a bar, and a place where listening parties occur. Rooky Ricardo's, a specialty shop that only sells soul 45s in San Francisco, also offers dance lessons. The stores are community spaces, as emphasized in the following quote: "It's offers more opportunities for friendship, new ideas, unexpected discoveries, chance encounters, and knowledge, and a more visceral and emotional experience than any Internet chat room, MySpace comment, or email can ever replicate" (p. 22). The authors describe dusty old stores that have been around since the 1960s that encourage their customers to "pick up something unusual and inspiring," from leftfield indie rock releases to teaching your parrot to speak German (pp. 16-20). The authors also address issues related to gender within indie stores, and how a majority of record shoppers are male, within a largely male dominated music industry. They explore how hyper gentrification within major cities can force independent stores out of business, as higher rents brought about by the proliferation of corporate chain stores such as

Starbucks and Best Buy push out “long established local businesses and the history, character, and specialist knowledge that they might offer” (p. 24).

Calamar and Gallo’s (2010) *Record Store Days: From Vinyl to Digital and Back Again* provides the most comprehensive historical analysis of record stores. The authors outline the growth of the record store in the 1900s, up to the decline of the record store in contemporary times. Key themes and issues in terms of SoundScan technology is discussed, as well as the communities associated with the stores. As a popular text, this book provides key historical information; however, their analysis does not make any strong connections to the political economy of music or critical cultural studies.

Toller’s (2008) documentary film *I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store* is a complex investigation of both the community and economic aspects of indie stores based on the east coast. The filmmaker discusses how bands have formed by meeting in stores (for example, the Patti Smith Group), which function as gathering places. The closing of a Connecticut based store evokes the following reaction from a loyal customer:

Now you have to go to the mall and get the top 50 spoon-fed garbage, that the mass media, corporate America and record store industry shoves down the throat of consumers – and nobody realizes they are being suckered into this bullshit they call music. The music that stimulates your mind is at this store, not at the mall (Toller, 2008).

The film does an excellent job in terms of linking independent music retail to the homogenization of culture influenced by the FCC’s Telecommunication Act of 1996. The deregulation associated with this bill allowed for the corporate consolidation of radio, and the homogenization of music played through Clear

Channel stations. The film claims that five Clear Channel stations play the same songs 73 percent of the time (Toller, 2008). The consolidation of power with four major record labels has the following result: “competition and diversity of output suffers, and labels sign similar sounding bands, providing customers with few alternatives” (Toller, 2008). The documentary touches upon MTV’s move away from music programming; modern day payola scandals; the influence of big-box stores; pricing practices of major label releases; the rise of Napster and digital downloading; and the influence of new music hardware such as the iPod. The film addresses the complex nature of these various variables, but it fails to do so in a complete manner. More detail and attention needs to be paid to the political economic context.

Goss (2010) documents and profiles a variety of independent record stores in the U.S., including Waterloo Records and Video in Austin, Texas, Rhino Records in Los Angeles, and Amoeba Music, based in California. This text outlines the personal narratives with various store owners. The author claims, “Without places to see, hear, touch, and understand music, we lose part of our cultural identity” (p. 248).

Wolff (2006) documents the accounts of storeowners, workers, and fans recalling the cultural significance of various stores such as Drome and Record Rendezvous in Cleveland, Ohio. The author comments on the perceived “deviant” nature of the stores in the 1970s, as they were located in “seedy” parts of town known for prostitution and drugs. This was also a time when punk culture was in its infancy and was perceived as culturally dangerous (with stories of parents not wanting their teenage kids to go to the

stores because of their painted windows). The anti-establishment leanings were evident, as the owner of Drome claimed, “My idea with Drome was to say, look, everybody, we got a lot of talent here, and we don’t need the national corporations to tell us what’s cool and what we should do” (pp. 126-127). In the 1970s, local punk bands such as the Cramps and Pere Ubu had members who worked at indie stores, both of which became iconic within the history of American underground music. The selection at the stores reflected the obscure fringes of society – music literally not available outside the independent record store context at the time.

According to Kusek (2005), adapt or die is the only way for music retailers to survive. To counter constantly declining CD sales, stores are ultimately becoming “lifestyle zones” or “music arcades,” where people meet a like-minded crowd, and check out all kinds of products that may be associated with music such as DVDs, t-shirts, posters, and toys. In the future, there will be many new opportunities for traditional retailers to work with digital distribution companies, such as in-store “filling stations” for digital downloads and wireless content cards. Brick and mortar music distribution is also no longer exclusively the province of the traditional music store or big box retailer. For example, Starbucks acts as a digital coffeehouse, where customers can peruse digital kiosks that provide access to more than 250,000 tracks (p. 89).

Milano’s (2003) *Vinyl Junkies* explores the nature of record collecting, where scores of collectors describe tales of obsessively finding and seeking obscure vinyl records. Thurston Moore of the band Sonic Youth recalls buying records in the 1970s at Bleecker Bob’s. Moore claims that it was “the church of buying punk records,” where

the owner of the store would fly to England, personally bringing back imported punk records not available stateside (p. 120). Related to independent record stores, this book highlights the nature of record collecting, and rituals of physical music consumption. A rare or collectable vinyl record may be from a first pressing, and is no longer produced, distributed, or “in print.” While a vinyl record is still a mass object, its finite run or pressing separates it from other infinitely reproducible formats, and can render it collectible, or scarce.

Independent record stores have been represented in Hollywood cinema, most notably *High Fidelity* (2000), based on the novel by Nick Hornby (1995). In the film, a Chicago based storeowner obsessively organizes his vinyl record collection chronologically according to life events, an interesting collusion between personal identity and music collecting. The film features a stereotypical ornery store clerk, who derides a “square” suit-wearing customer for requesting the CD of a mainstream artist. The customer is then banished from the store for having “bad” musical taste. While this particular scene highlights the snobbery and elitism sometimes associated with independent record stores, another clerk is soft spoken and gentle, and kindly discourages a female customer from buying a popular Green Day record, instead opting for the more “authentic” Stiff Little Fingers. Record stores are also featured in *Ghost World* (2001) and *500 Days of Summer* (2009) as places to gather with friends or go on a date. *Empire Records* (1995) documents an independent record store (although not as authentically independent, like the store in *High Fidelity*), and the cast of characters struggle to keep the store from being co-opted by a corporate chain.

In *Old Joy* (2006), a slow moving and meditative film by Kelly Reichardt, a character describes the closure of a Portland, Oregon, record store in the wake of eBay and technological change, which acts as a subtle metaphor for changing times and the melancholy evoked by the growing distance between two longtime friends.

Research Questions

This body of literature explores concepts related to the under-theorized culture of the independent record store, and locates the culture within the dominant music industry. Since there is little academic research done on the topic, this project is filling a void in the academic literature, as well as venturing beyond the glorification and nostalgia of indie record stores. The project entails a firm understanding of both political economy and cultural studies, and thus explores the independent record store from numerous micro and macro vantage points. The following four research questions guided this project:

Research Question #1

What is the political economic makeup of the major record labels and dominant retail outlets, and what are the implications of these structural arrangements?

Research Question #2

From a political economic framework, what are the practices and policies of the dominant music industry and corporate music retail? How is the independent record store affected by such practices? As a result, how is the “independent” nature of the store affected?

Research Question #3

Under the auspices of commodification, what are the cultural meanings and narratives within the independent record store, and what are its major defining characteristics in terms of community, subcultures, and as an educational space?

Research Question #4

Under the auspices of commodification, what are the cultural meanings and narratives for the independent record store, and what are its major defining characteristics in terms of space and place, anti-corporate narratives and gentrification?

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methods used to address the study's research questions. This study utilized four methodological approaches, including political economy methods, ethnographic interviews, field ethnography, and visual ethnography. This variety of methods was designed to obtain a variety of multilayered data, each with its own strengths and weaknesses, which enabled me to understand independent record store culture from a number of intersecting vantage points. This project is also a form of action research, as a documentary video will be created following the completion of the written dissertation. The documentary video will be a 30-minute case study of the House of Records based in Eugene, Oregon, and is designed to promote independent record store culture to a broader audience outside an academic context.

This chapter includes the following sections: theoretical approach (postmodernism and positivism), political economy methods, ethnographic interviewing, ethnographic fieldwork, and visual ethnography. The chapter also examines the research sample, procedures and selecting sources, data analysis, limitations of the study, a description of the human subjects process, and chapter summary.

This project used three primary field locations: The House of Records in Eugene, Oregon; Music Millennium located in Portland, Oregon; and Amoeba Music in San Francisco, California. In these three geographical locations, a majority of the niche or specialty record stores were also included in the study. A niche store specializes in a particular musical genre such as punk, world music, soul, hip-hop or classical, and are small operations with a small number of employees. In these cases, I interviewed the owner or manager of the store. Interviews (some of which were conducted via telephone and/or email) were conducted with owners of stores that have closed; representatives of independent and major labels and channels of physical music distribution; various musicians; employees at corporate big-box stores; academics; and vinyl record designers. More detailed information is provided under the “Research Sample” section in this chapter.

Postmodernism and Positivism

Rubin and Rubin (2005) argue that neutrality for qualitative research is impossible, and that conclusions reached by one researcher are unlikely to be replicated by those of another. Thus, this research and my conclusions are one of many possible perspectives on the topic of indie record stores. The goal is to present a range of views and conclusions (in nearly as raw form as possible), as opposed to one overarching conclusion or truth, as knowledge is situational and contextual. Further informed by Rubin and Rubin (2005), the interpretative overlay was less authoritative, and attention was given to my own subjective position in the construction of meaning. This research is

self-reflective and my own subjectivity will be part of the meaning making process. I'm interested in polysemic or gradations of "truths" as opposed to one dominant overarching "truth." Lindlof and Taylor (2002) reinforce this approach and claim that human beliefs about the world are multiple, partial, approximate, and imperfect — and that causes to events are multiple, interactive, and evolving. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), multiple and conflicting versions of the same event or object can be true at the same time. In conjunction with this, Bailey (1992) claims:

Phenomenological research uses sampling which is idiographic, focusing on the individual or case study in order to understand the full complexity of the individual's experience. From this perspective, there is no attempt to claim an ability to generalize to a specific population; but instead, the findings are relevant from the perspective of the user of the findings. (p. 30).

While absolute truth and value-free inquiry are unattainable, the reduction of bias in research (i.e., through peer review) is both attainable and desirable. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), the use of multiple methods and the triangulation of data enhances the explanation of complex phenomena. Rubin and Rubin (2005) recommend exploring polysemy, or a synthesis of understandings that come about from different reports on an event or cultural issue.

This project assumes that no research project, both qualitative and quantitative, is free of bias, and that we as researchers filter information through our own subjectivity. This project is a representation of field data, one of many possible interpretations of the culture and economics of the independent record store. It also assumes that while conducting fieldwork, there are issues of power at play between the researcher and participants, and it is important to be cognizant of these situations by addressing them

within the research project. My approach towards postmodern interviewing and critical ethnography is addressed following the discussion of political economy methods.

Political Economy Methods

The foundation of this study was based on the economic structuring of the music industry. Political economy methods provided the tools necessary to uncover and profile the economic makeup of the “big four” major record labels and major corporate retailers. In this study, documentary sources – company documents (primarily annual reports), newspapers, and trade magazines were analyzed in order to create a narrative that tells us about the various companies’ economic holdings and their relationship to vertical and horizontal integration, diversification, globalization, and concentration of media power. This was accomplished through the construction of brief corporate profiles, which provided a context in terms of key industry trends and how the dominant music industry works. However, it should be noted that each of these corporate entities could be examined in further detail.

This form of document analysis is not exclusive to political economic research, as historians and students of business utilize similar document analysis. Political economic themes were also addressed via field interviews and field ethnography; thus numerous methodological approaches are capable of addressing this theoretical framework.

Scott (1990) points out that in research methods there is too much emphasis given to participant observation, interviews and questionnaires. These in a sense have become the tools of preference for many social science researchers because they are important for

analyzing social phenomena; however, also of importance is the analysis of documentary sources for understanding and distinguishing features of institutional structures.

Scientific data can be constructed from a variety to documentary sources (Scott, 1990), as much as from participant observation, interviews and questionnaires. In the study of the independent record store, documentary sources provided primary information about how the dominant music industry is structured and integrated, as well as providing key figures and statistics in terms of current industry trends and patterns. Other noted studies that have utilized political economic methods include: Atalli (1977), Chapple and Reebee (1977), Wasko (2001, 2003), Chomsky and Herman (1988), Ewen (1996, 2001), and Bagdikian (2004).

Documents are very important because they are the “paper trail” left in the wake of historical events and processes. Documents are also important because they can indicate how an institution organizes itself, what the institution produces, and how the institution relates to society (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This method involved locating different documents that directly or indirectly address the research questions, identifying those documents that are relevant for answering the posed questions, and analyzing the documents for meaning (Howell & Prevenier, 2001).

The documents are divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are records of events as they are first described, without any interpretation or commentary (Ruszkiewicz, 1996). In this study, the primary sources were all documents first and foremost from the corporate parent (in parentheses below) of “big four” major record labels that include: Universal Music Group (Vivendi), Warner Music Group, Sony Music

Entertainment (Sony Corporation) and EMI (Terra Firma Capital Partners). This study also examined documents of major corporate retailers, which included: Apple, Wal-Mart, Best Buy, Target, Barnes and Noble, Borders, Amazon, F.Y.E (Transworld Entertainment Corporation) and Rhapsody. Primary documents included annual reports, articles of corporate association and corporate organization, and detailed lists of enterprises that are either dependents of, associated with or that participate with these various corporate entities. The web site of each of these companies was also analyzed.

According to Scott (1990), secondary sources offer an analysis or a restatement of the primary sources. They often attempt to describe or explain primary sources. The secondary sources used in this study were books, academic essays, journal articles, and industry, trade and economic magazines and newspapers. In many instances, secondary sources have been the only way to learn about certain strategic agreements these entities have made with other large conglomerates; and also to find out about labor problems and internal tensions both of which are not necessarily reported in the annual reports (Martinez, 2005).

This method required the use of some quantification in terms of obtaining national statistics on the number of independent record shops in existence and the number that have closed in recent years. I examined the numbers related to actual CD/vinyl production and sales from the point of view of major and independent record labels, and I charted the decline of the musical object, especially the CD (whereas several indications suggest vinyl sales are increasing, from the point of view of independent record labels). I also utilized the trade literature from sources such as *Billboard* and *Variety Magazine*, as

well as statistics from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), Nielson SoundScan, the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), and the NDP (a market research company) group.

Scott (1990) suggest that it is best to work with original documents since they are authentic; however, if that is not possible, the researcher needs to make sure that copies of the originals are not missing parts or altered in any way. If the copies have alterations, the researcher needs to be able to tell and acknowledge the fact. For this study, I obtained the annual reports directly from the financial section of the companies' official web site. For secondary sources, particularly newspaper articles, trade journals, music industry associations (RIAA) and magazines was obtained through the Lexis-Nexis Academic database that provides copies from original texts that have been posted for public access. In terms of its authenticity, one should trust that Lexis-Nexis Academic uses only authentic sources and is a reliable source that compiles data previously displayed in its original form.

According to Scott (1990), credibility is as important as authenticity. All sources must be credible, meaning that what they are reporting is an accurate account of the phenomena. In the case of annual reports, the discourse of the documents prepared for their stockholders, for the government, and for a general public scrutiny may be biased because of their source; the data does still need to be accurate in order to fulfill government regulations and to inform stockholders. However, it is impossible to know what the totality of documents that exist regarding these corporate entities, because not

everything is available to the public, and recent scholarly research on this topic is limited and/or dated.

A weakness of this method is that the meaning of the material derives from the researcher's judgment that this interpretation "makes sense," given his or her understanding of the producer's intentions and frame of reference (Martinez, 2005). As a result, the interpretation of the documents can be biased. Also, direct access to stakeholders within the mainstream music industry could be difficult, if not impossible. Documents provided a general overview of the institutional arrangement of the industry, but interviews and ethnography added additional insight into the industry's structural nature and mode of operation.

Ethnographic Interviews

The primary research method for this project was ethnographic interviewing. More specifically, this approach entailed in-depth and semi-structured interviews. According to Berg (2007), interviews are a conversation with a purpose. This purpose is to obtain information regarding a specific research question or to explore social phenomena in more complex detail. The interviewer gently guides interviewee through a series of prepared questions, and obtains information related to a research question (Linhoff, 2002). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the researcher elicits depth and detail about the research of a topic by following up on answers given by the interviewee during the discussion. Berg (2007) writes that interviews can provide greater degrees of human complexity and nuance versus statistical information, as it is an effective way to

explore how social and political processes are formed, and how people exist and conceptualize such structures. It is a way to explore social processes and to obtain a new or possibly different view of history and our current social world. Some other projects that utilize ethnographic interviewing in the context of music subcultures include: Hebdige (1981), Leblanc (1999), McNeil and McCain (1996), Sinker (2007), Blush (2001), Greenwald (2003), Jones (2009), Pettit (2008), and Milano (2003).

I will now discuss the organization of my interview instrument. To explore the cultural foundation of what independent record store culture means to people, I built upon my literature review and preliminary field observations by formulating interview questions in a semi-structured manner. This approach was useful because it offered a greater degree of fluidity in terms of how questions were phrased (if the intent of a question was unclear, I was able to rephrase them), and gave me the opportunity to answer questions in order to build rapport with my subjects – thus, I considered the interview to be a collaborative process. By explaining my relation and investment to such stores and culture to storeowners, employees, and customers (and a variety of other sources), the interview process reinforced my dedication to the project, and helped me to gain legitimacy and an “insider” status.

The semi-structured approach allowed the interviewing process to have a natural flow, as opposed to a predetermined set of questions. I posed the same questions to all participants, although the order and phrasing fluctuated. Questions were flexible in order to account for differences in terms of understanding the questions, and at times played out to a particular language within a particular context. As the interviewer, I answered

questions and made clarifications, and added and/or deleted probes to the interview between subsequent subjects. According to Berg (2007), the interviewer is free to digress from the question order, and it was expected that the subjects were probed far beyond the answers to the prepared standardized questions.

According to Berg (2007), essential questions directly reference the research questions. Example essential questions included: What characterizes or defines this store as being independent? Is this store in any way a form of community? Does this store have a social value beyond the buying and selling of music? Why shop at this store as opposed to buying music or downloading it for free through the Internet? What is your relationship with independent record labels? Is the mainstream music industry in any way controlling in terms of their business practices regarding your store? What happens to a community or culture when independent record stores close or disappear?

The generally phrased interview questions were open ended and intended to evoke the significance of independent record store culture, alternative media, the fostering of community, the aesthetic of the store, the future of such stores, and the social forces that either threaten or sustain the stores. The questions were designed to be open-ended and broad, as I didn't want to lead my subjects towards specific answers. At times, the interviewing process evoked an oral history style of interview, where my guiding of the interview was minimal.

Interview questions were followed by probing questions. According to Berg (2007), probing questions are intended to obtain further information regarding a topic brought up by the interviewee. An example probe included: "Could you go into more

detail about....” I asked follow-up questions when necessary, or if a talking point or concept needed further elaboration or clarification. I often created probes on the spot, based on the interviewee’s comments, especially when some concept or observation was overly generalized and needed more context or elaboration.

Throwaway questions were essentially used to gain rapport between the interviewee, and myself and to “warm up” the participant for more complex questions. For example, I asked my subjects where they are from, which isn’t part of the final analysis, but merely gets the subject talking, and builds a comfortable and trusting mood. Thus, question sequencing was important, as I began with easy throwaway questions, and gradually built up to more complex questions. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), double-barreled questions should be avoided. Such questions can be loaded, and in fact have multiple questions within the same question, which can be confusing to the interview participant.

Certain questions were repeated later in the interview, although with a slight variation in terms of phrasing to obtain validity and reliability. Thus, by asking a similar question twice, I was able to gauge the reliability of the subject by observing if a particular response matched the earlier response within the interview.

According to Weiss (1994), interviewing should entail full channel communication. When interviewing, there is a tendency to only focus on the verbal language being spoken, whereas when utilizing full channel communication, the researcher should also be attuned to body language, and the nuances of, for example, “ummm” and “ahhh.” There may be more subtle meanings within subtle mannerisms.

When this is taken into account with what is verbally spoken, the researcher will have a more complete understanding of the various meanings being conveyed. Silence in interviews can also be useful. Within a western context, silence during a conversation can be considered awkward; thus subjects may feel inclined to fill these silences. Berg (2007) recommends that the researcher leave a pause after the interviewee has finished talking, as they may fill that silence with more information.

Before entering the field, I conducted a pretest with my interview instrument. Other doctoral students and my academic advisors examined the questions for clarity and sequencing. I also conducted some practice interviews at the House of Records in Eugene to gauge the effectiveness of the questions and how well they worked as a sequence. Revisions were then made to the research instrument.

In terms of interview length, I spent approximately 45 minutes to an hour with storeowners, managers, and employees (although multiple interviews were necessary with some of the more knowledgeable employees/store owners), and between 15 and 30 minutes with the store customers. Since the questions were open ended, and depending on the participant, there was no time limit, and interviews took as long as necessary.

Ethnographic interviewing has its limitations. Economists and others committed to the development of quantitative statistical models sometimes reject the reports provided by qualitative interview studies. According to Weiss (1994), they may characterize these results as anecdotal, because they rely on accounts provided by a relatively small sample of respondents, or as impressionistic, implying not only that they

are imprecise but also that they are more a product of art than of objective scientific method (pp. 560-69). Weiss (1994) counters this by claiming:

While it may be valuable for the results of qualitative interview studies to be verified by other methods, it can also be valuable for the results of studies done by other methods to be illuminated by qualitative interview studies (p. 12).

Lastly, I'd like to briefly discuss my interviewing approach in terms of critical theory and postmodernism. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2003), a postmodern approach towards interviewing does not seek one uniform or totalizing truth, but rather seeks nuance and polysemy. It assumes data may not be replicated by another researcher. Hence, it is a representation, or a version of truth. The postmodern mode of interviewing also considers how meaning is constructed through the interviewing process between the interviewer and interviewee, and that such interactions are negotiated and developed together. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2003), postmodernism questions traditional assumptions and deconstructs them — that is it shows the ambiguity and contextuality of meaning. It proposes that, in the name of grand theorizing, we have suppressed this ambiguity in favor of a single interpretation.

Adding to notions of power differences within the interviewing context, Briggs (2001) claims that the interviewer is in a power position, that he or she ultimately controls how information is constructed (through the types of questions asked) and has the ability to guide the interviewee – thus such power dynamics need to be taken into account. For example, if the interviewee is from a “subaltern class,” he or she may deliberately be a “reluctant respondent” as a kind of resistance to the sociology of knowledge, or they may feel that such research does not or will not accurately represent

subaltern views, versus those privileged by the researcher and his or her institutional relationship. DeVault (1999) considers feminist approaches towards interviewing, especially in terms of how female respondents have to speak through a male system of language. Thus, they may not have the proper vocabulary to express certain situations, and they must “translate,” where there is no cultural equivalent. These moments of “stumbling” or searching for meaning should be considered as yielding important information about language, gender and power.

Field Ethnography

Ethnography is the practice that places researchers in the midst of whatever it is they study (Berg, 2007). It involves the study of groups and people as they go about their daily lives (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995). This entails evaluating and experiencing the ordinary routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives. While I previously discussed ethnographic interviewing, it is important to note that field ethnography is not a separate method. The ethnographic interviewing that took place was within a formal interview context (inside the stores, usually within a store office). In contrast, with field ethnography, I observed daily activities inside the stores but at times also engaged in causal dialog (as opposed to formal interviews) with the participants.

Other studies that utilize field ethnography include Whyte (1993), Thornton (1995), Evans (2007), Morris (2007), Johnson (2005), Khayatt (1994), Williams (2006), Condry (2004), Cunningham, Britland and Reeves (2003), Cunningham, Jones and Jones

(2004), O'Conner (2002), Yoo, Park and MacInnis (1998), Vaher (2008), and Yochim and Biddinger (2008).

Within the independent record store, field ethnography meant observing the daily activities and variety of interactions that took place within the store, and documenting the activities with field notes. "The ethnographer writes down in regular, systematic ways what he or she observes and learns while participating in the daily rounds of the life of others" (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995, p. 1). The goal was to accumulate a written record of observations and experiences that provided data for the final written analysis.

My goal as an ethnographer was to obtain a deeper immersion into independent record store culture to grasp what others experience as meaningful and important. This entailed evaluating and experiencing the ordinary routines under which people conduct their lives. Immersion in ethnographic research, then, involves both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that give rise to them (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995). First-hand relations with the subjects who are being studied provide clues to understanding the more subtle, implicit underlying assumptions that are often not readily accessible through observation or interview methods alone (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995). This meant observing the conversations and behaviors between customers and employees of the store and how people used and behaved within the space. It meant examining the appearance and body language of the subjects. While interviews evoked direct information to clearly devised questions, the practice of ethnography captured daily activities that either reinforce or possibly contradict what has been stated in interviews.

In the end, my goal as an ethnographer was to not determine “the truth,” or act as a “fly on the wall,” but to reveal the multiple layers of truth apparent in the lives of others.

The reflexive aspect of fieldwork was appealing as interactions with employees and customers placed me within the project, as far as my role as a researcher was considered. Any verbal interactions that occurred under this approach were simply “off the cuff,” and non-scripted, as I wanted to capture “natural” interactions. My goal was not to be an “objective” observer in a positivist sense, as this as an impossibility. My approach towards ethnography can be summed up by the following passage:

Many contemporary ethnographers advocate highly participatory roles (Adler, Adler, and Rochfield 1986) in which the researcher actually performs the activities that are central to the lives of those studied. In this view, assuming real responsibility for actually carrying out core functions and tasks provides special opportunities to get close to, participate in, and experience life in previously unknown settings (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995, p. 4).

The various stores were analyzed as a text, and they were observed in terms of the aesthetic and unique design, various decorations, the types of merchandise for sale (records, CDs, tapes, magazines, DVDs), and the flyers posted outside the store – and how the general ambiance from the music played, the natural lighting, the musty smell of vinyl records, and the way a bunch of punk stickers were plastered haphazardly on the cash register all conveyed meaning (one sticker read “Save the LP”).

A weakness of field ethnography is that observation alone lacks a fundamental understanding of the more complex thought patterns or inner orientation of the participants. One’s perceptions as a researcher might be radically different than how participants are truly thinking and feeling about particular issues. This is why triangulation with interviewing contributes to a more complete picture of the research

setting. Also, it can be assumed that research participants alter their behavior in the presence of a field researcher, and act differently or more self consciously – although it is suggested that with more time spent in the field, and by building rapport, the researcher’s presence in the field eventually becomes more normalized.

This methodology adheres to the principles of critical ethnography. According to Thomas (2003), critical ethnography is a methodology through which a qualitative researcher can frame questions and promote some form of social action (pp. 45-54). Culture in this context is treated as heterogeneous, conflictual, negotiated, and evolving, as distinct from unified, cohesive, fixed and static. In contrast with a relativistic view of cultures as different-but-equal, critical ethnography explicitly assumes that cultures are positioned unequally in power relations (“Qualitative Research,” n.d.). Because critical ethnography is born out of the theoretical underpinnings of critical theory, it is premised upon the assumption that cultural institutions can produce a false consciousness in which power and oppression become taken-for-granted “realities,” ideology, or hegemony (Thomas, 2003).

In this way, critical ethnography goes beyond a description of the culture to action for change, by challenging the false consciousness and ideologies exposed through the research. If the independent record store is a space where counter hegemonic praxis and cultural resistance occurred, this ethnographic research highlighted why such alternative social spaces are culturally significant by outlining specific field evidence of resistance. It also revealed how such stores reinforce certain power dynamics. For example, the

masculine culture associated with record collecting raises a discussion in terms of gender issues.

If the dominant music industry can be characterized as “oppressive” in terms of the homogenization of culture, then perhaps such specialty stores and their related culture offer an alternative to these dominant ideologies. If independent stores are disappearing, such a critical approach can help to outline the social nature and significance of such stores and their related culture, and can help to preserve it.

Visual Ethnography

This project entailed a third qualitative component in terms of ethnography. Berg (2007) claims that video technology might have us looking toward the moving pictorial representation of life, and that still photography also possesses considerable research value. He writes, “The use of photographs as data requires a theory of how pictures should be used by both picture makers and viewers” (p. 250). Photos can be used as data themselves or to assist in the conduct of interviews as illustrative devices. “Photos provide a sense of what existed, perhaps years in the past, as well as a viewpoint – namely, that of the photographer” (Berg, 2007, pp. 250-251). Some related studies and documentary films that utilize visual ethnography include: Penaloza (1998), Balikci (1988), Toller (2008), Cohen (1999), and Rochman (2006).

Still photography was utilized at all my field locations for data analysis, and also provided visual photographic evidence. Within our current digital world, it is vital to take advantage of the possibilities of visual and new media. The digital photographs were

then later analyzed as ethnographic field data, and select images were included in the appendix (Appendix A) of this project, and provide further visual evidence of the cultural and economic aspects of the independent record store. These images captured interactions between workers and customers, interview participants, exteriors of the stores, store layout, and design and decoration.

A weakness of visual ethnography is that the presence of a camera can alter the social reality of the research site. For example, while sitting at the counter at the House of Records, one wonders if the same observations could have been achieved if a camera were present, as the camera alters the reality of the situation. When people know they are being photographed, they tend to act differently. The camera can be invasive, as some people don't like being photographed, or they may get embarrassed on camera. Thus, for such intimate interactions at the counter, the camera was put away. I also felt the camera was distracting as to how I observe the store, as I have to pay attention to the technical aspects of the shooting process such as lighting conditions. Sometimes the frame of the camera was limiting, and I needed to have both eyes open to truly experience the atmosphere of the store.

Research Sample

According to Weiss (1994), a research sample should include a wide variety of perspectives and voices to obtain a more complete and sophisticated view of social situation. The overall aim was to develop a wide range of knowledgeable informants, where each person would significantly instruct me. This large sample allowed me to

gather much data regarding independent record store culture from a variety of cultural and institutional vantage points.

For this dissertation, I recruited a total of 130 interview participants. I chose this number of research participants because I wanted to explore independent record stores from multiple cultural and economic perspectives. While the storeowners, workers and customers were the main focal point of the project, I also recruited other participants affiliated with record labels, distribution, artists, employees at chain stores and various stakeholders affiliated with the music industry. I obtained a more complex portrait of how the music industry is run – and how these “independent” circuits function within the larger music industry. By only focusing on the stores themselves, a large gap would have presented itself in terms of the data, especially as I’m exploring the political economy of the music industry.

I conducted primary field interviews at the House of Records in Eugene, Oregon, Millennium Music in Portland, Oregon, and Amoeba Music in San Francisco, California. These three markets were chosen because they represent three different demographic locations: a major metropolitan city, mid-sized city and a small city. The purpose was to obtain a more representative picture of independent record store culture beyond the Eugene community. I will address the motivation behind each field location in more detail.

Eugene, Oregon is a small city with a population of 150,000. It is a college town and home of the University of Oregon; thus the youthful population of the city shifts according to the ebb and flow of the academic school year. Eugene is known for its

natural beauty, farmer's market, green and left leaning politics, activist political leanings, anarchists of the late 1990s to early 2000s, alternative lifestyles, miles of bike paths, and an aged hippie population. It is also known for its stilted economy due to the loss of jobs associated with the timber industry. Due to the downturn in the economy (as well as development that favors mall culture), there are many boarded up and closed businesses in the downtown area. In Eugene, I focused on House of Records, a small record store located in an old house that has been in business since 1971. This store was chosen because I wanted to capture the environment of a small generalist store with a small staff.

Portland, Oregon, was selected because it is a growing mid-sized city with a population of 580,000. Portland's metro area population growth has outpaced the national average during the last decade, with current estimates showing an 80 percent chance of population growth in excess of 60 percent over the next 50 years (Law, 2008). Thus, Portland is a developing and growing city. Portland is similar to Eugene in terms of its left leaning politics, close proximity to outdoor activities, and alternative lifestyles. But Portland is a much more of a youth oriented city, and many young "hipsters"¹⁵ flock to the city, many of whom were born elsewhere in the country. "Keep Portland Weird" bumper stickers can be spotted around the city, a nod to the small businesses who want to keep corporate chain culture from affecting the unique culture evoked by independent businesses. It is a town that has much emphasis on locality. The city is known for its vibrant indie music scene (bands such as the Shins, the Decemberists and the Thermals call Portland home), DIY culture (the city hosts the annual Portland Zine Symposium,

¹⁵ The word hipster usually has a negative connotation, and implies a person who is overly trendy in terms of indie culture and fashion. They are typically described as being elitist in nature.

and several events associated with crafting), and many independent record stores for a city of its size (over 20). Portland was of particular interest to this project because of its rigid urban planning and land use policies, mainly the urban growth boundary that curbs urban sprawl. In Portland, I focused on the indie store Music Millennium. Music Millennium is a medium-sized independent store and is the longest continuing record store in the Pacific Northwest. The store opened in 1969, and is considered to be a local institution. Terry Currier, the storeowner, is a key figure in the Portland music community, and extremely knowledgeable in terms of the music industry. He is also one of the founders of the Coalition of Independent Record Stores (CIMS), a collective of independent storeowners fighting to keep indie stores economically viable.

Lastly, San Francisco was chosen because it is a major metropolitan city known for its progressive politics, and diverse multi-cultural makeup, and has long been known as center of liberal activism. The current population is 809,000. San Francisco has a long history with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, and the hippie culture of Haight-Ashbury – a folklore that keeps tourists visiting the city to this day (tourism is the backbone of the San Francisco economy). It is home of the critical mass bicycle rides, a gay enclave in the Castro, and the vibrant ethnic neighborhoods of Chinatown, Japantown and the Mission. This city also has a vibrant music culture, and many international and national bands tour through the city. In San Francisco, I focused on Amoeba Music, a massive warehouse sized operation that opened in 1997. Amoeba is known as the largest independent record store in the world, and is located in a former bowling alley. Unlike the other two stores in Oregon, Amoeba Music is a multimillion-dollar business.

Amoeba is a small chain, as there are two other massive locations in Berkeley, and Los Angeles, California. I wanted to explore the nature of a store with such economic magnitude in the context of a larger metropolitan city, as it provides a strong juxtaposition against the other two stores based in Oregon, which are smaller in scale.

Here is a breakdown of the research sample for each field location. A total of 34 interviews occurred in Eugene, Oregon. In Eugene, House of Records was my main research site, and in this location, I interviewed the storeowner, six employees, and 20 store customers. The owners or managers of three additional niche/specialty stores were also interviewed. These stores included CD and Game Exchange, The Museum of Unfine Art, and CD World. I also interviewed two local bands, Yeltsin and Fancy Bandits, two representatives (the general manager and a DJ) from KWVA (the student-run radio station at the University of Oregon), and a representative from WOW Hall, a music venue in town. These additional participants were chosen because I was interested in how the House of Records connects to other media outlets in town.

A total of 52 interviews occurred in Portland, Oregon. I interviewed the owner, 16 store employees, and 20 customers at Music Millennium, which was the main field site. I conducted 12 interviews with other niche/specialty store owners/managers in the area. These stores included: Mississippi Records (they are also an independent record label), Green Noise Records (also an independent record label), Exiled Records, Platinum Records, Crossroads, 2nd Avenue Records, 360 Vinyl, Anthem Records, Discourage Records, Everyday Music, and Timbucktunes. I also interviewed the owner of Marriage

Records and a representative with Kill Rock Stars – two independent record labels based in Portland. I also interviewed two Portland bands: Explode into Colors and Portugal the Man. Lastly, I interviewed a Portland-based filmmaker who made a film about the House of Sound, a record store that was associated with the African American community of North East Portland.

In San Francisco, a total of 31 interviews occurred. The main field location was Amoeba Music, where I interviewed the store manager, five employees, and five customers. I interviewed a total of 14 other owners/workers/customers of niche/specialty stores in the area. This included: Jacks Record Cellar, Groove, Recycled Records (plus one customer), Rooky Ricardo's Records, Force of Habit (plus two customers), Aquarius Records (owner and one worker), Shaxul Records, as well as workers from B-Sides, The Musical Offering and Skills located in the neighboring Berkeley, California. I interviewed three bands associated with the Bay Area: Deerhoof, Pansy Division, and Negativland. Representatives of Alternative Tentacles, an indie record label, Revolver Distribution (two employees), and an employee of Record Pressing (they design and manufacture vinyl records and CDs) were interviewed.

Other miscellaneous interviews included three stores located in Buffalo, NY: Home of the Hits (a store that closed), New World Records (also closed), and Record Theatre. These stores were chosen as Buffalo has very dilapidated economy, which is in stark contrast to these west coast cities. I also wanted to get a sense of some stores that have closed. I also interviewed participants located in Salem, Oregon, at Ranch Records, as well as two employees from Target, and a Best Buy employee, all based on the west

coast. I interviewed Calvin Johnson, owner of K Records and member of various bands which included Beat Happening; a member of the band Trans Am; and an instructor of the music industry at the University of Oregon. Lastly, I interviewed an employee at Super D, a one-stop distributor, as well as an employee from Universal Music Group who deals with indie record stores.

Overall this sample provided a broad perspective in terms of how the music industry operates, as well as how people make sense of the independent record store on a cultural level. According to Weiss (1994), the sample size should be diverse and consider many possible perspectives and vantage points. It was decided that enough people have been interviewed and when the information obtained started to become redundant and peripheral. After obtaining 130 interviews, a saturation point had been reached. I had concluded I wasn't obtaining new information, and it became clear that no further data needed to be collected on the topic. According to Weiss (1994), when the interviewee begins to yield data that repeatedly overlaps or reaches a point of "saturation," one can cease to be in the field.

Procedures and Selecting Sources

I will provide a detailed description of the exact steps taken to contact and access the research participants, obtain their cooperation, and the steps taken to administer my research instruments. After reading this section, the reader should know when, where and how the data was collected. The procedures used for getting informed consent is

described in detail, and copies of the research instruments and related consent forms have been included in the appendix.

I will first discuss “getting in” and how I was able to “access” my research subjects. According to Berg (2007), getting in is typically defined as the various techniques and procedures intended to secure access to a research setting in order to obtain knowledge about the phenomena and activities being observed. For a majority of my field sites, I simply entered the stores “cold” and would ask to speak with a manager or owner. I would briefly introduce the research topic and explain why I became interested in the topic. I often shared the story about my favorite store closing in Buffalo, and how that inspired the project. I would then arrange to have a more formal meeting to discuss the project and the nature of conducting fieldwork in a particular store. Almost all of these encounters were “cold,” meaning I had no prior connections leading up to the interactions. I literally walked in from the street and asked the owners or managers if they wanted to participate in the study. In most cases, a manager or storeowner granted access on the spot. I also utilized snowball sampling, where one participant connected me to other research participants.

I explained that all participation in the project was voluntary, and the participants were informed of the voluntary nature of this project both verbally and on the consent form.

Access was surprisingly easy to accomplish. A main reason for this was that I associate strongly with independent music culture. Perhaps my look and attitude about music and liking particular kinds of music also helped to gain access, along with sharing

my story about the closure of Home of the Hits in Buffalo. Many gatekeepers were intrigued by the research topic and were eager to participate. Many thought it was an interesting project and wanted to contribute their thoughts. Only a few storeowners declined to participate in the project.

According to Cresswell (2007), access to a community often begins with a gatekeeper who has insider status with a cultural group. Finding a gatekeeper is crucial because he or she is the initial contact for the researcher and leads the researcher to other participants. This was accomplished by developing rapport with my subjects, which I achieved by alluding to my own relationship to indie stores. For example, I discussed how Home of the Hits back in Buffalo had closed, and how this had negatively affected me. This straightforward sincerity to learn more about independent record stores and its related culture helped to build rapport, and marked me as an “insider” of the culture.

The gatekeeper, usually a storeowner or manager, would grant me access to the entire store and later introduce me to the other store employees. This was the case at House of Records and Music Millennium. The gatekeeper would introduce me and discuss my project to other store workers. I would then ask the employees if they were interested in being interviewed for the project and many agreed. I would also address any questions the participants had. Formal interviews took place in a store office during working hours, during a break and sometimes after they had finished working. On occasion, if store traffic was slow, I would interview employees as they worked the counter, but this often interfered with the customer interactions. Thus, we conducted the

interview in an office or break room. To build rapport with the employees, I'd share stories from my own personal experience and history to indie stores.

Store customers were recruited in the stores near the checkout area, and outside the store entrance. At House of Records in Eugene, I sat next to the checkout counter, and asked every customer (over the age of 18) within a three-hour period if they wanted to participate within the study. At both Amoeba Music and Music Millennium, I was situated outside the store entrance, and would ask every customer if they wanted to participate in the study while leaving the store. When an interview was taking place, I wasn't able to interview other possible participants leaving the store. Thus, I was only able to ask new participants when I wasn't already interviewing other customers. This selection process was non-random and unscientific. No participants were refused, except for those under the age of 18.

To recruit store customers, I read my verbal script (see appendix) and if a customer gave me permission to partake in the study, I would present them with a consent form. After the participant read the form, I asked if they had any further questions, or if they wanted more detail regarding the project. I would again share personal insights and experiences with indie stores to build rapport with the customers. If not, the interview took place, and was recorded (either by video, which only took place at House of Records, or audio, which was used elsewhere). For most of the non-video participants (those not affiliated with House of Records in Eugene), I would end the interview by taking a digital photograph of the subject (for future visual analysis), to which they also consented. All participants were offered copies of the consent form.

In terms of getting access to certain subjects, I contacted them via email (sometimes a “cold” email, and others through a snowball sample approach), and then arranged to have a phone interview that was to be recorded (for those who agreed to participate in the project). For the phone interviews, consent was given verbally before the interview began, and was documented on the recording (participants were also sent consent forms via email for reference). Lastly, a small number of interviews were conducted via email, and consent was granted at the beginning of the interview response, in the text. These subjects also received physical copies of the consent forms for reference.

Within each of the three primary stores, I conducted an ethnography of the space, and spent up to two weeks observing the behaviors and social patterns in the stores. At House of Records in Eugene, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork from March 14 to March 28, 2007. At Music Millennium in Portland, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork from September 7 to September 21, 2009. At Amoeba Music in San Francisco, I conducted fieldwork from March 20 to March 24, 2008 (this was the access granted by the manager). Within the two Oregon field locations, I spent a total of two hours per day, for two weeks, for a total of 28 hours of observation in each of the stores. At Amoeba, I was only able to obtain 10 hours of field ethnography.

Field ethnography involved sitting in a small chair at various points of the store, and simply observing the daily activities. Sometimes I sat next to the register, a location with a high volume of customer traffic. At other times I sat in alternating corners to see

the store from alternate vantage points – sometimes near customer and employee traffic, and others away from it. I watched as the customers picked through obscure records, asked questions about the latest releases, and discussed their favorite bands. I observed how the customers looked and behaved, and the ways they interacted and navigated the space. I also analyzed the stores as a text, and explored the layout of the space, the sounds and smells, and how the stores were uniquely decorated, and I noted the general atmosphere of the store.

After spending time in the field, I would quickly take notes while on a break, or directly after leaving the field location in a coffee shop or restaurant. All store workers within the field had granted consent and filled out a form before the ethnography took place. While shoppers shopped, I did not get informed consent from all the customers when recording observational field notes (without a camera), and none of these participants have been identified by name.

In terms of visually documenting the stores via video and/or photography, an additional “observational” consent form was utilized to document shoppers and workers, who were not included in the ethnographic interviewing portion of the project. At times, getting subjects to sign a form, when the store was crowded with people, was difficult to accomplish, so I would make a general announcement that I was filming/shooting photos, and if anyone objected to this, I would exclude them from the camera frame. For those included in the footage or still images, additional consent was agreed upon with the observational consent form (see appendix). Most interview subjects (those not

videotaped) had a still image taken of them after the audio interview, which was covered within the observational consent form.

I encouraged all participants to write their email address on the consent form. When the dissertation was to be completed, I could send them a PDF of the project. I believe it is important for the research participants to see how their interviews helped to shape and contribute to the overall research project. I am also interested in their perception of the project.

Lastly, I would like to discuss transcription. The idea was to get down exactly what was said, including grammatical errors, digressions, laughter and tears. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest including stalling words, such as “um and ah,” and silent pauses and hesitation should be noted. According to Poland (1995), many qualitative researchers do not recognize the inherent problems in the process of translation to audiotape and then to text, and this is often overlooked within the literature. A transcriber’s misinterpretations have occasionally reversed the meaning of what had been said; thus, it should be noted that transcription error could lead to misinformation. Through the process of transcription, I transcribed every word as it was spoken, and I paid meticulous attention to detail in order to avoid transcription error.

Data Analysis

According to Berg (2007), good qualitative research is based on calculated strategies and methodological rigor. This qualitative information cannot only add texture to an analysis but also can demonstrate meanings and understandings about problems and phenomena that would otherwise be unidentified. After the interviews were transcribed,

the transcripts, field-notes, digital images (both still and video), and political economic methods provided the data for this project.

According to Berg (2007), the coding process entails the systematic organization and coding of interview data. This was accomplished by conducting a content analysis of the data within an extremely ordered fashion. A content analysis is a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings (Berg, 2007). Transcripts, especially in the beginning, were coded in minute detail, and eventually the document was saturated with repetitious and overlapping codes. Once the codes had been established, the process of open coding began, where notes were taken on each line of transcription text, which lead to a process of memo writing (or theoretical notes), and the creation of short summaries regarding sections of text. A theme was articulated by a sentence of text, and in certain situations, whole paragraphs were used to categorize data, although paragraphs sometimes contained several different themes at one time, which was problematic.

Photographic images were coded in a similar manner. For each image, I utilized an open-coding approach, where a series of notes were taken to identify themes and patterns. An example theme consisted of anti-corporate sentiments. For example, a parody Best Buy sticker read “Must Die.” The key themes and patterns that emerged from the images later became memos.

Each of these themes was coded in terms of the subject, question number, and page number. Categories were grounded in the data from which they emerged (Berg 2007). Analytic categories arose from reading the literature and directly from interview

questions (Berg, 2007). Each category has some explicit definition or coding rules, such as a specific statement or word, and it might have included several inferential levels (Berg, 2007).

Once categories were created, I coded the data, and cut-and-pasted information into a category/document. A large number of data in each section suggested a place to look for specific patterns. A minimum of three occurrences of something was needed to be considered a pattern (Berg, 2007).

A tree of themes eventually emerged, and was categorized into specific word documents. Through this process, specific categories and themes of various actions were developed, and from there, sub-themes were developed. For example, “critical thinking” was a main theme, while “anti-corporate sentiments” was a sub-theme of this topic. I looked for and identified patterns through the process of open coding. This is where each line of text was analyzed, and notes were taken regarding social processes. These notes became memos, where I organized thoughts and themes into categories. When these categories were constructed, I organized them as a separate word file. For example, all “anti-corporate” sentiments were placed within this document, along with a specific coding system that noted the name and location of the data within the larger master file. I began to see how certain narratives or “stories” emerged. As numerous stories emerged, I began to draft a version of the overall final analysis. From here, coherence and meaning was brought about as each category and sub-category began to form a single story (Berg, 2007). These stories thus became the material in which the final report was constructed

(Weiss, 1994). Exceptions to the codes were written into the report to avoid having one overarching truth or conclusion.

Limitations of the Study

This project has a number of limitations. The most ostensible limitation was the three primary field locations were located on the west coast of the United States, whereas fieldwork conducted in a more diverse range of field locations would capture a more complex socio-economic portrait of music retail in a variety of geographic regions. While I interviewed some representatives of independent record stores based in Buffalo, NY, a city known for its economic disrepair and dwindling population, it would have been ideal to include wide variety of cities and small towns throughout the country. This issue was largely due to financial resources and time constraints. The chosen locations were close to my place of study in Eugene, Oregon, and the expenses associated with travel and lodging to other geographic locations were not economically feasible. Nor did I have adequate time to spend in other geographic regions, being a full time student.

In terms of my fieldwork at Amoeba Music in San Francisco, I was only able to conduct fieldwork for a total of five days, and couldn't become more fully immersed in the culture of this particular store. Nor was I granted access to all areas of the store such as the back offices, store buyers, upper management and owners. As a result, my data in terms of this particular research location was limited, mainly because of access issues.

Access was an issue in terms of contacting stakeholders in regards to the dominant music industry. Representatives of major record labels and chains of music

distribution were not easily accessible, despite my attempts, and several didn't want to participate in a "student" project. Likewise, I wanted to obtain more data from the corporate side of music retail, but interviewing upper management and stakeholders affiliated with retailers such as Apple, Wal-Mart, Target, FYE and Best Buy were difficult to access. Also, fieldwork regarding Internet based music retail would help to paint a more nuanced portrait of how the industry works in both a virtual and physical retail environment, but this project focuses on "brick and mortar" stores. Also, access to well known musicians and artists was difficult to attain, as such artists either lacked an interest in participating in a student project, or their publicists blocked my access to them.

In terms of ethnographic fieldwork, spending two weeks at both Music Millennium in Portland, and House of Records in Eugene (as well as five days at Amoeba Music in San Francisco) was limited. This was largely due to lodging expenses and limited time as I am a doctoral student. The ideal situation would have been to spend a full month within each field location, thus becoming more fully immersed in the environments. An ideal situation would have been to work at an independent record store, but time restraints constrained this endeavor.

Another limitation was my lack of access to the bookkeeping of the three primary field locations. Access to the economic records would have created a richer understanding of the economic standing of the stores. These records are private, and thus the storeowners didn't want this information to be publicized. Without specific numbers to analyze, it was difficult to gauge the true economic realities of these primary stores.

Lastly, because this project incorporated four methodological approaches, more emphasis was placed on the qualitative aspects of ethnographic interviewing, field ethnography, and visual ethnography. As a result, the political economy methods, while receiving attention in terms of the creation of the context and analysis of the overall music industry, perhaps had the least attention. Some might claim that political economy could be its own project. While this variety of methods allowed for the triangulation of data, some might argue that such a diversity of methods could spread the data too thin.

Despite the limitations described above, and others the reader may find, this research provides a great deal of information about the nature of independent record store and their relationship to the dominant music industry. My hope is that other researchers will be excited about this research topic, and conduct further research on the topic.

Human Subjects

This research project strictly adhered to the rules, regulations and ethical considerations set forth by the IRB and the Office of Human Subjects at the University of Oregon. This project received approval from the IRB during my initial proposal issued in February 2007. Over the years, this proposal went through numerous revisions in terms of sample size and methods utilized in terms of recording (both video and audio) interviews. The project was reviewed and approved by the IRB on an annual basis. I have research clearance through February 2011. With the approval of my research proposal, all the related consent forms and verbal scripts were approved by the IRB. I

have received my testing certification with the IRB — an informative process that considers various ethical concerns and politics in terms of researching human subjects.

Overall, the process with the IRB has made me acutely aware of the sensitive nature of obtaining information from my research participants, and it forced me to obtain field data in a manner that is both ethical and consensual. This institutional backing protects the research subjects, as they are able to contact the Office of Human Subjects at the university should they feel they are being used unfairly or in an unethical manner. Overall, this process benefited both the researcher and research subjects.

Summary

In sum, this chapter provided insight as to how my research methodologies functioned as a data-gathering device. It included a breakdown of my theoretical approach and methodologies, including political economy methods, ethnographic interviewing, ethnographic fieldwork, and visual ethnography. This chapter examined my research sample, procedures and nature of selecting sources, data analysis, limitations, and human subjects. These methodological approaches were utilized to emphasize the triangulation of intersecting and complex layers of data, and how they provided insight into independent record store culture and its relationship to the dominant music industry.

CHAPTER V

POLITICAL ECONOMY, PART 1: CORPORATE PROFILES OF THE MAJOR RECORD LABELS, CORPORATE RETAILERS, AND ANALYSIS OF KEY THEMES AND PATTERNS

“It’s a very different type of logic, and this is the way these music companies work. They’re not interested in the ideas behind the music, they’re not interested in the spirit that moves the music, the passion. They’re just interested in making money and they have no regard for the music otherwise. And with that, it mocks the music, it demeans it, and it demeans the culture.”

— Robert McChesney in *Money for Nothing: Behind the Business of Popular Music* (McLeod, 2001).

Whether music is purchased at a multinational corporate big-box chain such as Wal-Mart, downloaded digitally through Apple’s iTunes Store, or purchased at a local independent record store, music is a commodity that is bought and sold within a capitalist system.

This chapter entails a political economic analysis of the corporate structuring of the “big four” major record labels and their economic intersection with “big box” stores, as well as with the major on-line music retailers. The primary goal of this analysis is to reveal the economic and structural mechanisms which bring musical objects into being – a situation predicated on the corporatization of culture. Mapping this political economic foundation will enable a more sophisticated analytical reading of the independent record

store under the auspices of the dominant music industry and a social epoch indelibly marked by neo-liberalism.

This chapter provides a structural overview of the corporate ownership of the “big four” record labels, which includes Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and EMI. These concise corporate profiles examine market share and concentration, both vertical and horizontal integration, diversification and synergistic practices. This will be followed with a breakdown of “indie” labels within this economic framework.

Following the discussion of the major record labels, the major music retailers will be profiled. They include Apple’s iTunes Store, Wal-Mart, Target, Amazon, Best Buy, FYE, Borders, Barnes and Noble and Rhapsody. Each of these retailers will be examined in terms of their market share, number of locations (if it has a physical location), vertical and horizontal integration, and diversification and synergistic practices. Independent stores will also be addressed, as well as how independent stores are categorized by type.

After a brief definition of the political economy of communication has been reintroduced (see Chapter IV for a full theoretical foundation in terms of the political economy of communication), and the political economic analysis of major record labels and music retail has been presented, the following research question is addressed:

What is the political economic makeup of the major record labels and dominant retail outlets, and what are the implications of these structural arrangements?

The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings derived from the corporate profiles. These findings will act as the foundation for a more sophisticated analysis of

specific corporate retail practices and the location of the independent record store within this larger economic and cultural context (Political Economy Analysis Pt. 2, Chapter VI).

Brief Review: The Political Economy of Communication

The political economy of communication is a structural approach that investigates media ownership. It is concerned with how media ownership is interconnected with political institutions, and through a variety of practices and policies can result in anti-democratic ideals and the homogenization of information and culture (Mosco, 1996). Mosco (1996) claims, “One can think about political economy as the study of social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources” (p. 25). By examining imbalances in media flows, we can begin to conceptualize how not only how the capitalistic system functions to reproduce itself, but to conceive strategies for overcoming it.

Corporate Profiles of the “Big Four” Record Labels

The four major record labels known as the “big four” are: Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment and EMI. The “big four” are part of multinational conglomerates (with the exception of Warner Music Group). They receive most of their revenues from big-name American performers. According to SoundScan (a point of sale scanning system that tracks for the Billboard charts) statistics from 2009, almost 89 percent of all music sold in the United States was through one of the “big four” record labels (“Nielsen Company,” 2010).

What follows is a brief corporate breakdown of each of the “big four” record labels and their parent companies. These corporate profiles examine market share and concentration, vertical and horizontal integration, diversification and some examples of synergistic practices. It should be noted that these profiles contain key economic data and information about all of the four corporations, whereas each of these operations could lend itself to an extensive research project. The data from these profiles are examined in the analysis portion at the end of the chapter. Most of this data was compiled from documents such as annual reports, company web sites, and trade publications (*Variety* and *Billboard*). In terms of interviews, representatives from the major labels and retailers are difficult to access, and often declined an interview. However, I did interview representatives from Universal Music Group, Target and Best Buy.

Universal Music Group (UMG)

Parent Company: Vivendi (France)
 US Retail Market Share 2009 (SoundScan): 30.20%
 Total Revenues Vivendi 2009: €27,132 million (Euros)
 Total Revenues UMG 2009: €4,363 million (Euros)

Universal Music Group (UMG) is a wholly owned subsidiary of French media conglomerate Vivendi. It is the largest of the “big four” major labels, and is the largest business group and family of record labels in the recording industry and in the world. One in every four records sold around the world is under the umbrella of the Universal Music Group (Vivendi S.A., 2010). UMG is composed of three business segments including recorded music, music publishing, and artist services and merchandising. In terms of recorded music, UMG has particularly strong positions in the North American

and European markets, which together account for 70 percent of global sales (Vivendi S.A., 2010). In terms of music publishing, UMG has a combined publishing catalog of two million owned and administered titles.

The label owns a vast number of record labels and music groups, and is thus heavily horizontally integrated. Labels under the UMG umbrella include Island Def Jam Music Group, Interscope, Geffen A&M Records, MCA Nashville, Mercury Records, Polydor, Universal Motown Republic Group, Decca and Verve. Artists under this umbrella include Lady Gaga, U2, Eminem, Bon Jovi, Nirvana, the Who, James Brown, Bob Marley, and John Coltrane. UMG is not dependent on any particular artist or music trend due to its diverse array of labels.

UMG has outsourced the bulk of its manufacturing and management of distribution activities to third parties. However, UMG is the world's largest distributor of music with Universal Music Distribution, and is thus vertically integrated. UMG also sells and distributes music and film DVDs and licenses music for use in sound recordings, films, videos, commercials and for live performances. UMG's merchandising division trades as Bravado and is responsible for live music merchandising, as well as retail partnerships with Old Navy and Wal-Mart. In 2009, UMG and Kyte (an on-line and mobile digital media platform) created a global partnership to distribute UMG content ("Universal Music Group (UMG) and Kyte Announce," 2009).

According to the Vivendi 2009 Annual Report, some of the company's assets include: Activision Blizzard, the world's leading independent online and console video game publishing; SFR, France's second largest telecommunications operator; Maroc

Telecom Groups, Morocco's largest fixed, mobile, and Internet operator; GVT, the largest telecommunications operator in Brazil; and Canal+Group, France's number one distributor of pay TV offerings and a major player in film production and distribution. The music portion of Vivendi's overall revenues from 2009 amounts to 16.1 percent of the conglomerate's overall total revenues for the year (Vivendi S.A., 2010).

Sony Music Entertainment (SME)

Parent Company: Sony Corporation (Japan)
US Retail Market Share 2009 (SoundScan): 28.58%
Total Revenues Sony Corporation 2009: ¥7,730.0 billion (Yen)
Total Revenues Sony Music Entertainment 2009: ¥539.6 billion (Yen) (figures include Sony Music Entertainment Japan)

Sony Music Entertainment is under the umbrella of the Sony Corporation of America, a subsidiary of the Sony Corporation, based in Japan. SME is the second-largest company of the "big four" major labels, with a total of 28 percent of the U.S. music market in 2009 ("Nielsen Company," 2010). In 2008, Sony acquired Bertelsmann AG's 50 percent stake in the company, and SONY BMG became a wholly owned subsidiary, changing its name to Sony Music Entertainment in 2009 (Thiel, 2008). In addition to being able to further lower its cost base through increased efficiencies, having SME within the Sony Group allows the company to work more efficiently with its electronics, game and pictures businesses. According to the Sony Corporation 2009 Annual Report, Japan represented 24 percent of their overall sales, followed by 24 percent in the United States, and 27 percent in Europe.

The label also has a vast number of holdings in terms of record labels and music groups, and is thus heavily horizontally integrated. An abridged list of record labels

under the Sony Music Entertainment umbrella include Columbia Records, Arista Records, Epic Records, Jive Records, RCA Records, Bluebird Jazz, and Legacy Recordings. Artists under this umbrella include AC/DC, Beyonce, Britney Spears, Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson and Joni Mitchell. SONY/ATV Music Publishing owns or administers more than 750,000 music copyrights (Sony Corporation, 2009). SME distributes its own musical product, which is an example of vertical integration. SME owns RED, a distributor of approximately fifty independent music labels, an example of vertical integration.

On the digital front, SME has recently signed important licensing deals with Sony Ericsson, Apple, Nokia, Vodafone, MySpace, and Amazon, and the company is also developing revenue streams through live concerts, artist management, and sponsorships (Sony Corporation, 2009). SME also works to integrate its music holdings with a wide range of Sony products and hardware, including Sony Ericsson's PlayNow (mobile phones and media download services), X Series and digital Walkman (portable MP3 player), preloaded with a variety songs and videos from the label's repertoire; this is an example of product synergy. Historically, Sony has co-developed the CD, DVD, Super Audio CD, and Blu-Ray Disc (Sony Corporation, 2009). As an example of product synergy, SME released over a dozen new titles in the Blu-ray Disc format, and collaborated with Sony Pictures Entertainment on music components for the latest James Bond movie, *Quantum of Solace*.

Sony is a leading manufacturer of audio, video, communications, and information technology products for the consumer and professional markets (Sony Corporation,

2009). Its key holdings include Sony Pictures Entertainment (film), Sony Pictures Television, Sony Computer Entertainment (video games/PlayStation), electronics/hardware (audio, video, televisions, stereo equipment, CD players), Financial Services (Sony Life Insurance, and Sony Bank Inc.). Its motion picture, television, computer entertainment, music and online businesses make Sony one of the most comprehensive entertainment companies in the world. The music portion of Sony's overall revenues from 2009 amounted to 6.1 percent of the conglomerate's overall total revenues for the year (Sony Corporation, 2009).

Warner Music Group (WMG)

Parent Company: Warner Music Group (United States)
US Retail Market Share 2009 (SoundScan): 20.55%
Total Revenues 2009: \$3.2 billion

Warner Music Group is the third largest of the "big four" major record labels with 20 percent of the market share in 2009 ("Nielsen Company," 2010). Unlike the other major labels, WMG is a stand-alone music company, and is not part of a major conglomerate. The current incarnation of the company was formed in 2004 when it was spun off from Time Warner, and as a result, Time Warner no longer retains any ownership. Warner Music Group is essentially two businesses: recorded music and music publishing. The recorded music business produces revenue primarily through the marketing, sale and licensing of recorded music in various physical formats (such as CDs, LPs and DVDs) and digital formats (such as downloads and ringtones). The recorded music business has also expanded its participation in image and brand rights associated with artists, including merchandising, sponsorships, touring and artist

management (Warner Music Group Corp., 2010). The music publishing business owns and acquires rights to musical compositions, exploits and markets these compositions, and receives royalties or fees for their use. According to the *2009 Annual Report*, the label holds rights to over one million copyrights from over 65,000 songwriters and composers. Prior to corporate expenses and eliminations, the music publishing business generated revenues of \$578 million during the fiscal year ended September 30, 2009 (Warner Music Group Corp., 2010).

Like all of the “big four” major labels, Warner Music Group has a vast number of holdings in terms of record labels and music groups, and is heavily horizontally integrated. Labels under the Warner Music Group umbrella include Asylum, Atlantic, Cordless, East West, Elektra, Nonesuch, Reprise, Rhino, Roadrunner, Rykodisc, Sire, Warner Bros. and Word. WMG artists include Madonna, Led Zeppelin, The Doors, REM, The Ramones, The Smiths, Notorious BIG, Paul Simon and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

In terms of vertical integration, WMG’s recorded music distribution operations include WEA Corp., which markets and sells music and DVD products to retailers and wholesale distributors in the U.S.; and Alternative Distribution Alliance (ADA), which distributes for the independent labels Matador, Sub Pop (Sub Pop owns 5 percent of ADA), Domino Records, Merge Records, amongst many others (Warner Music Group Corp., 2010). ADA distributes the products of independent labels to retail and wholesale distributors in the U.S.; various distribution centers and ventures operate internationally. WMG maintains an 80 percent interest in Word Entertainment, which specializes in the

distribution of music products in the Christian retail marketplace; and ADA Global, which provides distribution services outside of the U.S. In 2006, WMG acquired Ryko distribution, which, combined with ADA, is the largest distributor of “independent” music in the United States.

As a stand-alone corporation, Warner Music Group has no other diversified interests or holdings.

EMI

Parent Company: Terra Firma Capital Partners (England)
US Retail Market Share 2009 (SoundScan): 9.20%
Total Revenues 2009 Terra Firma Capital Partners: £4.7 billion (Pounds)
Total Revenues 2008, EMI: £1,072 million (Pounds)

EMI is a subsidiary of Terra Firma Capital Partners based in England, and is the smallest of the “big four” record labels, with 9 percent of the U.S. market share in 2009 (“Nielson Company,” 2010). The business is made up of two divisions, EMI Music and EMI Music Publishing. EMI Music represents recording artists, markets and promotes them, and distributes their music to retailers and licensed users. EMI Recorded Music owns a catalog of over three million tracks (Terra Firma Capital Partners LTD., 2010). EMI Music Publishing is focused on acquiring, protecting, administering and exploiting rights in musical compositions, with revenue coming from licensing the right to use the music. In the financial year of 2006/2007, the company reported a loss of around US\$400 million, and a revenue drop of 16 percent globally and 13 percent in the U.S. (IBISWorld Industry Report, 2009, p. 35).

Like the other big four labels, EMI has much depth in terms of horizontal integration, and the labels under this umbrella include: Angel, Astralwerks, Blue Note,

Capitol, Capitol Latin, Capitol Nashville, EMI Classics, EMI CMG, EMI Records, EMI Records Nashville, Manhattan, Mute, Parlophone and Virgin. Artists under this umbrella include: The Beatles, Pink Floyd, Beastie Boys, Queen, Coldplay, Depeche Mode, Keith Urban, Snoop Dog and Massive Attack.

In terms of vertical integration, manufacturing was fully outsourced by the end of 2005 and distribution is increasingly being carried out by third parties (Terra Firma Capital Partners LTD., 2010). EMI CMG Distribution was founded in 1994 to serve as the main sales and distribution outlet for EMI CMG's owned and distributed labels to the US and international Christian and general retail marketplace. EMI Label Services and Caroline Distribution distribute numerous "independent" labels, and have been responsible for breaking many acts and nurturing many labels over the years.

Terra Firma Capital Partners is a highly diversified conglomerate. In addition to handling EMI Music and EMI Music publishing, the corporation has the following assets: Everpower (US wind power), Infinis (UK renewable energy), Annington/Deutsche Annington (UK/German residential housing sales and rental), AWAS (worldwide aircraft leasing), Odeon (Pan-European Cinema Operator), and Phoenix Natural Gas (Northern Ireland natural gas distribution and supply), (Terra Firma Capital Partners LTD., 2010).

Terra Firma has been reported to be exploring a merger of EMI with Warner Music Group (and vice versa), but no major transactions have occurred as of this writing.

Independent Labels

Hundreds of “true” independents exist without corporate ownership. Together, independent labels collect the 11 percent of the market share left over from the big four labels (“Nielson Company,” 2010). Indie labels are defined as being free from corporate sponsorship and also have independent distribution, which results in the status of “true independent.” In this case, indie labels such as Kill Rock Stars, Dischord, Alternative Tentacles, K Records, and Anticon are “true” independents under this definition. However, this definition of independence doesn’t take into account digital MP3 distribution (such as iTunes) and the implications this has on an independent label’s ability to exist free of corporate interests. This will be addressed in further detail in the analysis portion of this chapter.

Corporate Profiles: Music Retail Outlets

What follows is a brief corporate breakdown of the primary outlets where music is sold in the American marketplace, both physically and on-line. These brief corporate profiles examine market share and concentration, notions of integration, diversification and synergistic practices. This includes Apple’s iTunes, Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy, Barnes and Noble, Amazon, and FYE. Independent stores as a general category will also be addressed, as well as how independent stores are categorized by type.

As discussed previously, this extremely concentrated retail market consists of big box corporate chains in combination with Apple’s iTunes Store and constitutes 71 percent of the music buying market, as opposed to 29 percent of “other” and independent

record stores. On-line digital downloading stores have been thriving in recent years, as the CD has been declining in sales; however, record stores and general “big box” retail stores still account for the majority of music sales in the United States. More recent 2009 data from the NDP (a leading North American market research company) claims that CDs now only comprise 65 percent of all music sold in the first half of 2009, compared to paid digital downloads, which comprised 35 percent of the market (Graham, 2010).

What follows is a brief corporate profile by outlet. It should be noted that these profiles contain key economic data and information about these corporations, whereas each of these operations could lend itself to an extensive research project. The data from these profiles are examined in the analysis portion at the end of the chapter.

iTunes

Parent Company: Apple Inc. (USA)

U.S. Music Retail Market Share 2009: 25% (19% in 2008)

Total Company Revenue 2009: \$42.91 billion

Total Music Related Products/Revenues 2009: \$696 million

Music Formats Stocked: Digital Download (MP3)

Apple Inc. is an American multinational corporation that designs and manufactures consumer electronics, computer software, and personal computers. According to Apple's *Annual Report 2009*, iTunes is an application for playing, downloading, and organizing digital audio and video files and is available for both Mac and Windows-based computers. iTunes is integrated with the iTunes Store, a service that allows customers to find, purchase, rent, and download third-party digital music, audio books, music videos, short films, television shows, movies, games, and other applications. According to the *2009 Annual Report*, the iTunes Store was originally introduced in the U.S. in April

2003, and now serves customers in 23 countries (p. 7). Currently, legal paid-for MP3s are primarily sold through Apple's iTunes online store, where they are responsible for 70 percent of all paid-for MP3 music downloads ("Nielson Company," 2010).

According to the NDP research group, as of August 2009, Apple's iTunes store comprised 25 percent of all music units sold in the United States. Alternative figures from the *2008 IFPI Digital Music Report* claimed that iTunes' digital sales, which include mobile telephone downloads for songs and ringtones, accounted for 30 percent of the market in the United States (IFPI, 2010). On January 6, 2009, Phil Schiller (Senior Vice President of Apple Inc.) announced in his Macworld 2009 keynote speech that over 6 billion songs had been downloaded since the service first launched on April 28, 2003, making it the largest online music store in the world ("Macworld Expo," 2010). iTunes comprised 69 percent of the digital music market in the first half of 2009, followed by AmazonMP3 at 8 percent (Graham, 2009).

The music sold via iTunes ranges from \$0.99 to \$1.29 cents per track. A single \$0.99 download generates about \$0.33 for iTunes (and \$0.57 goes to the record label) (Campbell, Martin and Fabos, 2010). Some record companies retain this entire amount for recordings in which artists have no provisions for digital download royalties in their contract. According to Campbell, Martin and Fabos (2010), "With no CD printing and packaging costs, record companies can retain more of the revenue on download sales" (p. 99). Despite the popularity of the online store, many music executives criticize iTunes as it promotes the selling of single tracks as opposed to purchasing entire albums – and

artists such as AC/DC, Kid Rock and the Beatles catalog are not available via the iTunes store, since the major labels seek higher profits generated from full album sales.

Placement and visibility within the iTunes Store are often determined by staffers' tastes, and promos are also granted to those who cut prices or provide exclusive "iTunes only" tracks. Apple typically avoids paid placement in an attempt to provide unbiased recommendations. In theory, this stymies major labels and others that would hope to buy their way to the top of the sales charts (Mally, 2007).

In terms of vertical integration, Apple plays an extremely powerful role in terms of the manufacture of hardware, most notably the iPod, the ubiquitous MP3 music player that has radically altered how recorded music is bought and sold. Since October 2004, the iPod line has dominated digital music player sales in the United States, with over 90 percent of the market for hard drive-based players and over 70 percent of the market for all types of players (Marsal, 2007). At the September 9, 2009, keynote presentation at an Apple event, Phil Schiller announced total cumulative sales of iPods exceeded 220 million ("Macworld Expo," 2010). Net sales for the iPod in 2009 were \$8,091 million, according to Apple's *2009 Annual Report*. However, in 2006, the *Mail on Sunday* alleged that sweatshop conditions existed in factories in China, where contract manufacturers, Foxconn and Inventec, operate factories that manufacture iPods ("The Stark Reality," 2006).

Other significant Apple hardware includes the smartphone known as the iPhone, which acts as a MP3 player, for which digital music can be purchased directly from the iTunes Store to the wireless device. Apple sold 6,754 million iPhones, according to the

company's 2009 annual report (Apple Inc., 2010, p. 42). The iPod and iPad also allow customers to access the iTunes store and utilize iTunes software. Apple-based computer products such as the MacBook Pro allow customers to access the on-line iTunes Store, which acts as a database and computer based listening station, as well as a converter of the digital files directly to one's iPod or iPhone.

According to the *2009 Annual Report*, net sales of other music-related products and services increased \$696 million or 21 percent during 2009 compared to 2008. The increase was due predominantly to increased net sales of third-party digital content and applications from the iTunes Store, which experienced double-digit growth in each of the company's geographic segments during 2009, compared to the same period in 2008 (Apple Inc., 2010). In terms of physical retail outlets, the company opened 26 new retail stores during 2009, including a total of 14 international stores, ending the year with 273 physical stores (Apple Inc., 2010).

Wal-Mart

Parent Company: Wal-Mart Inc. (USA)

U.S. Music Retail Market Share 2008: 15%

Total Company Revenue 2009: \$401.2 (billions)

Number of Discount Stores in the USA: 891, Supercenters (2,612), Neighborhood Markets (153), International Market, stores outside the US (3,615), Sam's Club (153), also walmart.com.

Music Formats Stocked: Digital download (MP3), CD.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. is an American corporation that owns a chain of large department stores. According to *Fortune's* Global 500 listing, Wal-Mart was the world's largest corporation in 2009 (Tseng, 2010). Wal-Mart is the largest private employer and

the largest grocery retailer in the United States (UFCW, 2010). The company sells a wide range of consumer products, ranging from dog food, clothing, bicycles, diamonds, groceries, appliances and electronics.

Behind Apple's iTunes Store, Wal-Mart is the second largest retailer of music in the U.S., with 15 percent of the overall market (Graham, 2009). According to Kusek (2005), Wal-Mart alone accounts for approximately 20 percent of all physical music sold in the U.S. (the largest physical retailer of music in the country), which is an astonishing figure considering the store's music catalog is usually less than 750 titles deep (p. 87). According to Knopper (2009), in 2000, the Federal Trade Commission accused the labels of price fixing, and the FTC declared they were penalizing some stores like Best Buy and Wal-Mart for selling CDs too cheaply, or as "loss leaders." Wal-Mart has had a number of exclusive only releases, where CDs are only available at the retail store from the likes of AC/DC, The Eagles, Journey, and Garth Brooks.

Despite this powerful position in the music market, the amount of store and shelf space at Wal-Mart that is dedicated to physical music has been shrinking in recent years, due to the decrease of sales of physical product, or CDs. According to *Business Insider*, in July 2007, estimated that Wal-Mart had cut between 5 percent and 23 percent of their CD inventory in the previous two years. *Business Insider* also reported predictions of cuts that would range from 20 percent to 40 percent (Kafka, 2007).

Wal-Mart MP3 Downloads mimics the iTunes store, where consumers can purchase individual tracks for \$0.94 (thus undercutting iTunes' price of \$0.99 per track). While the physical Wal-Mart Store usually caters to popular music and mainstream

Billboard hits, the on-line store sells a broad range of “underground” or “independent” music, as well as music with political and explicit content not available in the physical stores, such as the Dead Kennedy’s *Bedtime for Democracy* and NWA’s *Straight Out Of Compton* (edited version), records that would never be stocked in the physical stores.

Wal-Mart’s role as a censor of music has been highly publicized over the years. The chain has a long-standing policy of not stocking any CD with a parental advisory sticker. In fact, Wal-Mart doesn’t outright censor musical content, but in order for the music to be stocked in their physical stores (note: this isn’t the case with Wal-Mart’s digital download store), it must meet certain requirements, or the label must provide edited versions and/or modify album artwork. As a result, artists and labels must agree to self-censorship in order to obtain shelf placement in the physical retail stores. Because Wal-Mart is the largest market in terms of physical CDs in the country, many artists bend to these requirements, or face significant reductions in their overall album sales. However, in 2009, the popular punk band Green Day refused to make an edited version of its album *21st Century Breakdown*, and as a result, Wal-Mart refused to stock the album (however, numerous other Green Day albums are available at Wal-Mart MP3 on-line store, and in select physical retail stores). The issue of censorship will be addressed in more detail in Chapter VI.

In terms of horizontal integration, Wal-Mart is a ubiquitous brand in the United States and in certain countries around the world. Its strong holdings in terms of retail outlets make the corporation an economic powerhouse. According to the *Wal-Mart 2009 Annual Report*, in the United States, there are 891 discount stores, 2,612 supercenters,

and 153 neighborhood markets. Wal-Mart also has an on-line presence at walmart.com. In terms of the global market, there are 3,615 stores outside the US, and a total of 153 Sam's Club outlets. There are 318 Wal-Mart Stores in Canada, as well as a variety of Wal-Mart Stores that operate under other names, such as the Seiyu brand in Japan (371 units), the Bodega Aurrera brand in Mexico (1,197), and the Hiper Brand in Brazil (345 units), as well as locations in India, China, and numerous locations in central America (Wal-Mart Stores Inc., 2010).

Even though Wal-Mart is the largest seller of physical music in the country, the *2009 Annual Report* doesn't mention music sales, suggesting that musical product plays a minuscule role in their overall business operation.

Best Buy

Parent Company: Best Buy Co., Inc.

U.S. Music Retail Market Share 2008: 13%

Total Company Revenue 2009: \$45,015 (millions)

Best Buy Stores in the United States in 2010: 1,069

Number of "continuing operations" in 2010: 4,027

Music Formats Stocked: Digital downloads (MP3), CDs; vinyl LP records.

Best Buy Co. Inc. sells consumer electronics, as well as a broad range of related merchandise such as computers, computer software, video games, DVDs, Blu-Ray discs, CDs, mobile phones, digital cameras, and car stereos. They also sell home appliances such as washing machines, dryers and refrigerators. Best Buy is the largest specialty retailer of consumer electronics in the U.S. and Canada.

Best Buy is the third (behind iTunes and Wal-Mart) largest retailer of music in the United States, with a 13 percent share of the market (Graham, 2009). Best Buy also sells

CDs and vinyl LP records at Bestbuy.com, which has a deeper catalog than the physical stores. Digital MP3s can be purchased through Napster, another Best Buy asset. Select Best Buy outlets also sell LP vinyl records at prices ranging from \$6.99 to over \$50 for re-issued records. Best Buy has had a number of exclusive only releases over the years, which have included Guns and Roses' *Chinese Democracy*, as well as a live release by The Police.

According to the *2008 Annual Report*, the store's "Entertainment Software" category, which includes CDs, DVDs, and video games (hardware and software), and computer software, combined for 20 percent of all domestic sales and 13 percent of its international sales (p. 7). However, it is unclear what specific percentage music sales represented in these "entertainment" figures. However, the report notes that CD and DVD sales have been declining (Best Buy Co., Inc., 2008).

Best Buy has been accused of selling their CDs as "loss leaders," meaning they sell these products for less than they pay for them, because the losses can be made up with the sale of computers, televisions and a variety of other electronics. The topic of "loss leaders" and pricing will be explored in the next chapter.

Best Buy is vertically integrated due to its ownership of Redline Entertainment, a record label and video distributor. Redline is a company that works with artists in multiple areas of the entertainment industry, including management, publishing, production, and merchandising. In 2009, Redline Entertainment released an album by the band Chickenfoot *S/T* (featuring former members of Van Halen and the Red Hot Chili Peppers), which was a Best Buy exclusive for a brief time and later sold at other retail

outlets. The album peaked at #4 on the Billboard charts in 2009. Redline's catalog also includes releases by Pete Townshend and Prince.

Best Buy Co. Inc. is heavily horizontally integrated in the retail sector. In September 2008, Best Buy acquired Napster, a digital download store where music can be streamed and individual MP3 tracks or albums can be purchased. Napster also offers music subscriptions and various mobile offers. As of 2008, Napster had over 700,000 music subscribers (“Best Buy to Acquire Napster,” 2008). At Bestbuy.com, physical CDs can be purchased or consumers can directly download albums or tracks through links with Napster.

According to BestBuy.com (2010), in addition to 1,069 retail stores in the U.S., Best Buy owns Magnolia Audio Video Stores (8 units), Geek Squad stand-alone stores (6 units) and Best Buy Mobile stand-alone stores (74 units). Global operations include Canada Best Buy (64 units), Best Buy Europe (2,453 units), Five Star Stores (158 units), as well as stores in Mexico and Turkey. Best Buy is also diversified in terms of other forms of retail, including Pacific Sales Kitchen and Bath Centers (35 units). In total, Best Buy Co. Inc. reported a total of 4,027 total “continuing operations” (Best Buy Co., Inc., 2008).

Amazon

Parent Company: Amazon.com Inc. (USA)

U.S. Music Retail Market Share 2008: 6%

Total Company Revenue 2009: \$24,509 (billion)

Amazon Stores in the United States in 2010: E-Commerce/No Physical Stores

Music Formats Stocked: MP3, CD, vinyl records

Amazon is an American-based multinational electronic commerce company. As of January 2010, Amazon is the largest online retailer in the U.S., with nearly three times the Internet sales revenue as the second largest retailer, Staples, Inc. (Amazon.com, 2010). Amazon started as an online bookstore, but soon diversified to product lines such as VHS, DVD, music CDs and MP3s, computer software, video games, electronics, apparel, furniture, food, and toys. The Amazon Kindle, a hardware and software platform, is used for the rendering and displaying of e-books and other digital media. According to 2008 NPD statistics, Amazon is the fourth-largest seller of music in the U.S. with 6 percent of the overall market (Graham, 2009). The company has a total of 8 percent of the digital download market, behind the iTunes store with 70 percent of the market (Graham, 2009).

In 2007, Amazon launched Amazon MP3, its own online music store, where individual tracks can be downloaded for 0.99 cents each. Thus, Amazon stocks a wide variety of mainstream and independent music titles in both physical and digital form, and has a deep catalog in terms of established and, at times, obscure artists. In most cases, Amazon.com has more musical diversity than Wal-Mart.com, Target.com and Best Buy.com.

Amazon laid the groundwork for the hugely successful Amazon Marketplace service launched in 2001, which allows customers to sell used books, CDs, DVDs, and other products alongside new items. Amazon reported that over 1.3 million sellers offered products through Amazon's web sites in 2007 (Amazon.com Inc., 2009). Users can also create reviews of music that are posted under the item listing. None of the other top

major retailers sells used musical goods, which means that Amazon represents more diversity than other chains in terms of musical selection. Many independent record stores sell new and used CDs via Amazon.com, where the company takes a small portion for every sale. As a result, indie stores are connected to a larger corporate entity.

Amazon also offers warehousing and order-fulfillment for third-party sellers, including large companies such as Target Corporation (and formerly Borders), and thus maintains strategic alliances with other companies (Amazon.com Inc., 2009).

According to the *2008 Annual Report*, the company has developed software for national versions of Amazon in the United Kingdom, Ireland, India, Japan, China, and South Africa. Amazon has order fulfilling operations and warehouses around the U.S., as well as in Germany, Japan, China, England, Scotland, and Wales.

Target

Parent Company: Target Corporation

U.S. Music Retail Market Share 2008: 5%

Total Company Revenue 2009: \$65,357 (millions)

Target Stores in the United States in 2010: 1,740 (USA)

Music Formats Stocked: CDs, vinyl LP records (very limited availability)

The Target Corporation is a discount retailer based in the United States that sells home furnishings and décor, food and pet supplies, household essentials, and clothing apparel and accessories. Target is the second largest discount retailer behind Wal-Mart, and is the fifth largest seller of music in the U.S. with 5 percent of the overall market (Graham, 2009).

According to the *2009 Annual Report*, music product falls under the store category of “Hardlines,” which also includes electronics (including video game hardware and software), movies, books, computer software, sporting goods and toys, which constituted 22 percent of the overall store revenues in 2009 (p. 2). Specific statistics for music sales are not included in the company’s annual reports. Over the years, Target has had a number of exclusive only releases by artists including Pearl Jam, Prince, and Mariah, Kings of Leon, Bon Jovi and John Legend. Like Wal-Mart and Best Buy, the music sections at Target stores have been shrinking over the last couple of years due to decreasing CD sales.

Music can be purchased in the physical store or at Target.com, where physical CDs can be purchased from a much more diverse catalog of both mainstream and “indie” artists. Unlike Wal-Mart and Best Buy, Target doesn’t sell digital MP3 downloads of individual tracks or albums through their on-line store. However, in 2002, Target.direct and Amazon.com's subsidiary, Amazon Enterprise Solutions, created a partnership in which Amazon.com would provide order fulfillment and guest services for Target.com in exchange for fixed and variable fees. This electronic commerce relationship between Target.direct and Amazon Enterprise Solutions will last until August 2010 (“Target Corporation and Amazon Enterprise Solutions,” 2006). This is an example of horizontal integration.

According to the *2009 Annual Report*, there were 1,740 Target stores in the U.S. in 2007. The company also licenses its bull’s-eye trademark to Wesfarmers, owners of the separate Target Australia chain, which includes 283 stores (167 Target Stores, 116 Target

Country Stores) (Coles Group Ltd., 2007). Target is also a highly diversified company with the following subsidiaries: Target Financial Services includes the Target REDcard issued through the Target National Bank. Target Sourcing Services/The Associated Merchandising Corporation is a global sourcing organization that locates merchandise from around the world and helps import merchandise such as garments, furniture, bedding and towels to the U.S. Target Commercial Interiors provides design services and furniture for office space. Target Brands owns and oversees the company's private label products, including the grocery brands and the electronics brand Trutech. The company also operates Target.com.

F.Y.E.

Parent Company: Transworld Entertainment Corporation
 Music Retail Market Share 2008: 4%
 Total Company Assets 2007: \$687.6 (millions)
 Transworld Stores in the United States in 2010: 557
 Music Formats Stocked: CD, vinyl LP records, MP3 downloads

FYE (For Your Entertainment) is a mall-based electronics store selling primarily CDs, Blu-ray discs, DVDs, video games, books, and other entertainment products. They also buy, sell, and trade used CDs, Blu-ray discs, DVDs, and video games. FYE falls under the corporate umbrella of Trans World Entertainment Corporation. As of January 30, 2010, the company operated 557 freestanding and mall-based stores under several brand names ("Trans World Entertainment Company Information," 2010). In late 1998, Camelot, a separate mall-based chain, was acquired by Trans World Entertainment. Trans World later consolidated its mall-based music stores under the brand name FYE,

including the remaining Camelot and The Wall (another mall-based chain) locations.

According to the *2007 Annual Report*, the total number of stores in 2006 was 992 which then dropped to 813 in 2007 (Trans World Entertainment, 2008, p. 3). The chain's reduction to 557 stores is evidence of the company's continued financial difficulties.

FYE sells both new and used CDs; it is also possible to purchase vinyl records at FYE.com. FYE sells MP3s with its FYE Downloads Unlimited on-line service.

According to the *2007 Annual Report*, Trans World Entertainment is heavily horizontally integrated in terms of media, and owns the national chain FYE, along with local chains including Planet Music, Saturday Matinee, Wherehouse Music, Coconuts, and SecondSpin.com. Trans World is diversified with the ownership of Suncoast Motion Picture Company, a mall-based operation that focuses on film and video. Numerous defunct music chains under the Trans World umbrella included: Camelot Music, Media Play, Sam Goody, Tape World, Record Land, Record Town, and On Cue.

Borders

Parent Company: Borders Group (USA)
 U.S. Music Retail Market Share 2008: 3%
 Total Company Revenues 2009: \$3.82 (billion)
 Borders (and related) Stores in the United States in 2010: 511
 Music Formats Stocked: CDs

Borders Group is an international bookseller and is the second-largest bookstore chain in the United States (after Barnes & Noble), selling a wide variety of books, CDs, DVDs, and periodicals, as well as gifts and stationery. Borders maintains 3 percent of the music market in 2008, according to NPD statistics.

As of January 2010, Borders operated 511 superstores under the Borders name, including 508 in the United States and three in Puerto Rico (Borders Group Inc., 2009). According to the *2009 Annual Report*, Borders operates 175 mall-based and other small format bookstores, including stores operated under the Waldenbooks, Borders Express and Borders Outlet names, as well as 29 Borders-branded airport stores. In terms of product synergy, in 2004, Borders reached an agreement with Starbucks subsidiary Seattle's Best Coffee to operate the cafes in its domestic superstores under the Seattle's Best brand name.

In 2008, the company announced that its marketing alliance with Amazon.com would cease, as Amazon had been acting as Borders' online component, a similar arrangement that Target maintains. As a result, Borders launched its own web sales site. Borders.com sells new and used (much like the Amazon user-generated merchants and sales) tangible CDs, but not vinyl records. Digital MP3s downloads are available for \$1.29 per track, and albums sell for \$9.99.

According to the *2009 Annual Report*, in terms of global operations and diversification, Paperchase is a stationery retailer based in the United Kingdom. As of January 2010, the company operated 85 Paperchase locations. The Annual Report states that Borders previously had 45 stores in the UK, but they closed in 2009, after declaring bankruptcy.

Barnes and Noble

Parent Company: Barnes and Noble Inc.
U.S. Music Retail Market Share 2008: 2%
Total Company assets 2009: \$1,723,304 (thousands)
Borders (and related) Stores in the United States in 2009: 775
Music Formats Stocked: CDs, vinyl records

Barnes & Noble, Inc. is the largest book retailer in the United States. Most stores also sell magazines, newspapers, DVDs, graphic novels, gifts, games, and music. As of October 2009, the company operated 775 stores in all 50 U.S. states. In addition, the company owns 636 college bookstores, which serves nearly 4 million students and 250,000 faculty members across the country (Barnes and Noble Inc., 2009). Barnes and Noble held 2 percent of the overall retail music market in 2008, according to the NPD group.

According to the *2009 Annual Report*, the company's subsidiary Sterling Publishing is one of the leading publishers of non-fiction trade titles, with more than 5,000 books in print, an example of vertical integration. The report also noted that BarnesandNoble.com receives over 365 million visits annually, ranking it among the top 15 multi-channel retailers. BarnesandNoble.com sells a wide variety of CDs and vinyl records from user generated stores and sellers (much like Amazon.com and Borders.com). The on-line store doesn't contain MP3 digital downloads.

The physical stores have cafés that sell Starbucks coffee, an example of product synergy.

Rhapsody

Parent Company: Rhapsody/RealNetworks (former owner)

U.S. Music Retail Market Share 2008: 1%

Total Company assets 2009: Unknown

Music Formats Stocked: MP3, WMA

Rhapsody is an on-line music service only available in the U.S., and is a competitor of Apple's iTunes Store. Launched in December 2001, Rhapsody was the first music service to offer streaming on-demand access to a large library of digital music, where users paid \$9.99 per month to access and stream music. Rhapsody gives consumers unlimited on-demand access to more than nine million songs, which can be accessed from a laptop, mobile phone, television or home stereo system. Rhapsody allows consumers to access music through Verizon Wireless and through Rhapsody applications on the Apple iPhone, iPod Touch, as well as other mobile devices. In addition to its subscription service, Rhapsody sells MP3s individually via the "Rhapsody MP3" service. Rhapsody was previously owned by RealNetworks, Inc. (creator of Real Player, which owns RealArcade) along with Viacom's MTV Network. Rhapsody was spun into an independent company in February 2009.

"Other" Stores

According to the 2008 NPD retail sales figures, "other" stores constituted 29 percent of the American music market. However, these figures are problematic, as "other" stores can have multiple meanings. The "other" category included music sold at live concerts as well as through record clubs, along with music directly sold through independent record labels. It also includes a wide range of online indie stores such as CD

Baby and Thinkindie.com, as well as traditional “brick and mortar” independent record stores. As a result, it is unclear what percentage “brick and mortar” stores actually constitute in the market.

There is another problem with the NPD statistics. It is not clear if independent record stores are counted, as this data only included stores that utilize the SoundScan (which compiles the figures for the Billboard charts) point-of-sale barcode scanning technology. Several indie stores in my research sample don’t utilize SoundScan, such as used only stores and niche specialty stores. As a result, independent record stores would have a slightly higher market share (for those that sell new music) than represented in the NPD statistics. Taking all these factors into consideration, I estimate that approximately 20 percent of all music sold in 2008 occurred in “brick and mortar” indie record stores.

Since late 2003, about 900 independent record stores have closed nationwide, leaving about 2,700, according to the Almighty Institute of Music Retail, a marketing research company (Williams, 2006).

Independent Record Stores

In terms of ownership, indie record stores are privately owned, and they are not publicly traded or publicly incorporated businesses. As a result, they have no financial responsibility to shareholders or the demands of constant economic expansion and growth like their corporate counterparts. Indie stores are usually locally owned and operated operations. They are often modest economic holdings that are passionate about music and their desire to share it with customers, as opposed to *only* being driven by

constant economic growth and profits. Of course, the storeowners recognize that they are a business and need to make money to survive. They are part of a larger capitalist economic system, and are susceptible to the ebb and flow of the market. However, many storeowners seem content in simply paying their rent and employees on a monthly basis, as opposed to expanding to multiple locations and developing new markets in the local, national, or global context. In most cases, many indie storeowners are deliberately small-scale, and want to keep their business a manageable size (this will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter).

In terms of independent record stores, there are several types. The largest is the *Indie Superstore*, which includes Amoeba Music with three sprawling locations in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Los Angeles – as well as the now-defunct Tower Records. Then there are *indie chains*, such as Newbury Comics located in the Northeast, with a total of 27 stores. *Generalist* stores carry a broad range of titles or catalog. This includes Music Millennium in Portland, and the House of Records in Eugene, Oregon. *Niche/specialty* stores specialize in a particular genre such as punk, hip-hop, indie, electronica, classical, or world music. Lastly, there are *used only* stores, which are largely free of the confines of the dominant music industry, as the musical product is secondhand. Most indie stores sell new and used product, and a majority of “brick and mortar” stores also have an online or e-commerce presence. These are referred to as “hybrid” stores.

Several independent record stores are also an independent record label and distributor of music. Thus, some indie stores are vertically integrated on a micro scale.

For example, Music Millennium in Portland also owns Burnside Distribution, and Mississippi located in Portland also runs the very popular (on a small-scale) re-issue label, Mississippi Records. Green Noise in Portland also releases punk records under the Dirtnap label. Unlike their corporate counterparts, these are modest operations working with small pressing sizes, and who often cater to a very small subcultural community.

Most indie record stores buy musical product through alternative distributors such as Revolver, Carrot Top, Forced Exposure, and Redeye. If the indie store wants major label product, they must go through a one-stop distributor such as Super D. Unless it's a larger indie superstore such as Amoeba Music, or a large-scale generalist store such as Music Millennium, independent record stores can't buy musical product directly from the major "big four" labels (due to their small economic scale and small buying power). Indie record stores can buy directly from independent record labels. Indie record stores sell both major label and independent musical releases – although there tends to be more emphasis on independent labels. However, the meaning of "independence" is ambiguous, and no shared definition of independence exists. Many "indie" acts are distributed through one of the "big four" labels, and the indie label itself can be a subsidiary of a corporate record label.

Local bands and artists sell their CDs and albums directly to indie stores on consignment. Many independent record stores buy used product directly from customers, or whole collections from estate sales; thus, the music selection is constantly shifting.

The larger the independent record store (for example, superstores), the more likely there is a corporate style of operation in terms of buying practices and use of co-op

advertising. However, generalist stores, niche/specialty and used-only stores are often modest operations in terms of staff size, and economic presence, and often don't embrace a corporate style of operation.

Since independent record stores are not publicly traded entities, it is rather difficult to find concrete financial data as financial reports are not widely available (or are non-existent); nor was I able to obtain this financial data through my fieldwork.

Brief Analysis of Key Themes Regarding the Corporate Profiles

Music as a commodity is characterized by extreme market concentration and corporate oligopoly, and is impacted by the primacy of constant economic expansion and growth amongst the world's largest media conglomerates. Under the auspices of late capitalism, the commodification of music is a global narrative in frame and scope. It is characterized by the perpetual commodification and standardization of musical forms, where marketing formulas work to construct and manufacture popular musical acts.

The corporate music industry frames music in terms of its exchange value and its ability to generate capital – whether or not the music has any other social or *use* value beyond commodity consumption. Music is simply another commodity to be bought and sold within a marketplace. As long as the commodity generates revenue, it will continue to be commodified. However, because music is a form of media, it has socio-cultural values and ideology embedded within it, which distinguishes it from a typical non-media commodity.

The roads in which music commodities reach retail markets is by no means a neutral act. The process is motivated by a complex web of large-scale multi-national

conglomerates, vertical and horizontal integration, diversification and intersecting corporate synergies. The commercial success of an artist is largely dependent on the economic power of label representation (usually major label), physical and/or digital modes of distribution. A host of other economic factors including labor contracts and agreements, music production, licensing arrangements and intellectual property rights associated with the labels greatly affect the economic success of an artist. The economic weight of the “big four” record labels plays a pivotal role in terms of manufacturing the popularity of a musical artist. How is this manufacturing of popularity put into practice?

Music and Corporate Concentration

The music industry is an intensely concentrated market where four major players control an inordinate amount of musical product. With their sheer economic power and scope, the “big four” have an inordinate amount of influence and control over the kind of music that is available within a given culture. The music promoted by the majors amounts to a very narrow slice of popular *Billboard* titles, as opposed to the vastness of musical diversity available on a broader spectrum of styles, genres, and global musical forms.

Overall figures from 2009 compiled by Soundscan suggest a very highly concentrated music market. Within the United States, almost 89 percent of all music sold was through one of the “big four” record labels. In terms of digital albums in 2009, 84 percent of the albums sold were through the “big four.” Almost 87 percent of all paid-for individual digital tracks in 2009 were connected to one of the “big four” record labels

(“Nielson Company,” 2010). According to Shuker (2008), the market share exercised by the majors varies from country to country, but in some cases is over 90 percent.

Because the major labels maintain such market dominance, it is difficult for independent artists to be heard on a larger scale; independents don’t have the same financial backing and marketing budgets. Without such promotional and financial backing, independent artists don’t have the same access to larger retail chains, MTV rotation, or airtime on Clear Channel radio stations. As a result, the major labels have the economic power to reproduce the musical status quo by manufacturing popular artists. The “big four” have the economic power to make their artists culturally visible on a mass scale, through a variety of integrated media outlets. As a result, the dominant music industry reinforces a very narrow perspective of the overall musical spectrum.

Major label titles get the most exposure through advertising and radio play. They have a major influence over the control of what tastes will be popular, and the manufacture of musical trends. Labels tend to sign bands with a popular and marketable aesthetic, providing customers with few alternatives. Major labels rehash predictable and polished musical formulas designed to create mega-stars. In a market where power is concentrated in the hands of a few, competition and the diversity of output suffer. Manufactured stars, boy-bands, and pop icons represent a relatively narrow scope of the musical landscape.

Likewise, a similar economic pattern of economic consolidation is apparent with corporate retail outlets, where 71 percent of all music is sold within the United States (Graham, 2009). This includes iTunes, Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy, Barnes and Noble,

Borders, FYE, and Amazon – all of which reinforce (to varying degrees) the mainstream musical acts (those geared towards *Billboard* chart success) manufactured by the “big four” record labels.

Large merchandising chains like Wal-Mart, Target and Best Buy are changing the kind of music available to consumers. Unlike a specialty store that seeks to provide a wide variety of choices to music buyers, big box stores offer customers only the most popular albums. According to Smith (2009), it’s not just classical, jazz, hip-hop and indie rock that have trouble making it into the big boxes. Up-and-coming pop, rock or hip-hop acts are unlikely to be welcome until they are proven sellers. Back catalog titles also feel the squeeze, and even the Beatles are frequently represented in big chains with only one or two albums. That means there are fewer places than ever to buy any CDs but the newest, most heavily promoted titles.

Unless an independent store is in a unique location or designed to derive revenue from a wide variety of products, it is increasingly difficult for the stores to stay in business. According to Kusek (2005), as more physical stores close, product selection narrows, with only the hits and bestsellers making it to the shelves, in terms of corporate retail. The general retailers frequently use music as a loss leader, reducing their music CD and DVD prices to attract shoppers whom they hope will also purchase other store products with higher profit margins. This situates music as only one component of the general selling of lifestyle consumer goods. However, this often works hand and hand with a label’s radio and promotion strategies: focus the efforts on the “sure thing” and take fewer chances. Kusek (2005) states that promoting a very narrow range of “proven”

artists is more lucrative for the label in short run, but this activity leads to the homogeneity of the market (p. 87).

Music and Corporate Conglomerates

The increased concentration of the culture industries is a feature of late capitalism, and the music industry is part of this process of consolidation. The largest companies no longer specialize in a particular cultural industry such as music, film or publishing; they now operate across a number of different cultural industries. These conglomerates compete with each other, but, more than ever before, they are connected with each other and with other companies. As Hesmondhalgh claims (2007), these companies are immersed in a complex web of alliance, partnership and joint venture (p. 2).

The “big four” record labels (with the exception of Warner Music Group, a stand-alone music company) are part of massive multi-media (along with other non-media based commodities) conglomerates. Within their respective parent company and corporate umbrella, the music labels represent an insignificant economic portion of the overall revenues.

For example, Universal Music Group is the largest and most powerful record label in the world. Yet only 16.1 percent of Vivendi’s overall revenues in 2009 were derived from its music holdings (Vivendi S.A., 2010). The music portion of Sony Corporation’s overall revenues from 2009 amounted to 6.1 percent of the company’s overall total revenues (Sony Corporation, 2009).

Music holdings represent economic “peanuts” to the overall economic structuring of these conglomerates. As the major record labels continue to lose revenue on an annual basis, these losses are offset and “cushioned” by the extremely diversified nature of the parent conglomerate. These conglomerates continue to retain their overall market dominance through an impressive array of holdings in other industries ranging from film/motion pictures, video games, various telecommunications operations, Internet operations, green energies, housing sales and rentals, natural gas distribution, banking and the manufacture of media-related hardware devices. As a result, the major “big four” labels can retain their economic dominance in a manner that is not economically possible for small-scale independent record labels. The corporate structuring of the dominant music industry has the economic power to perpetuate and manufacture popular musical artists, despite declining album sales.

A similar economic pattern and structuring is apparent with corporate retail outlets, where 71 percent of all music is sold in the U.S., according to 2008 NPD statistics. Apple’s iTunes, Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy, Borders, Barnes and Nobel and Amazon are all highly diversified retail outlets. Revenues from recorded music are minor.

For example, Apple generates most of their profits by selling hardware such as iPods, iPhone, iPad, and computer products – all of which reinforce a symbiotic relationship with the iTunes Store. In Wal-Mart, Target, and Best Buy, music sales don’t even constitute their own economic category, but are lumped together with other

“entertainment” commodities such as DVDs, books, and video games. In this context, profits are generated by high-end purchases such as flat screen televisions, computers, electronics, and appliances. On top of this, these big-boxes are powerful global operations with interests in a variety of foreign markets. As a result, these corporations have greater economic leverage in terms of the retail market.

According to Best Buy’s *2008 Annual Report*, the revenues generated from the “Entertainment Software” category, which included CDs, DVDs, and video games (both hardware and software), and computer software, combined for 20 percent of all domestic sales and 13 percent of its international sales (p. 7). Target’s *2009 Annual Report* noted that music product falls under the store category of “Hardlines,” which included electronics (including video game hardware and software), movies, books, computer software, sporting goods and toys; “hardlines” constituted 22 percent of the overall store revenues for 2009 (p. 2).

Neither Best Buy nor Target offered specific statistics about recorded music sales. As a result, it can be assumed these revenues are small in terms of the generic “Hardlines” and “Entertainment Software” categories (video games and consoles tended to be the best sellers in this category), and certainly within the company’s overall revenues. This is further reinforced by the continued shrinking of shelf space devoted to musical product in the big-box chains; this is yet another indicator that music sales are not only shrinking, but sales of physical music is becoming less significant as well.

As physical recorded music becomes less significant at the big-boxes (and iTunes has become the largest retailer of music in the U.S.), this pattern reinforces the decline of

the physical CD, instead encouraging the growth of MP3s and downloaded music culture. As MP3 and download culture grows, it becomes normative, and fewer consumers purchase physical music in general. As the big-box stores are highly diversified, losses in music are offset by other commodities and interests. If physical music sales were to cease completely, the big-box chains would still survive as the economic impact would be minor. However, indie record stores are not diversified corporations and they do not have the same economic cushion. As a result, indie stores are more susceptible to closure (as most indie stores focus on music sales) as the culture shifts towards the digital world and away from physical CDs.

There is another reaction to this economic pattern. As the physical musical object declines (brought about by the corporate structuring of culture, and the practice of illegal downloading), many indie stores are forced to diversify their product. Instead of focusing only on recorded music, many indie stores must sell other objects such as DVDs, toys, candy and t-shirts to stay competitive. As opposed to having stores that focus solely on the depths of music culture, some indie stores have been economically “coerced” into becoming entertainment generalist stores. As a result, some indie stores have less shelf space devoted to recorded music as a cultural object, having become more oriented towards a more general form of consumption.

Vertical Integration

In terms of vertical integration, each of the “big four” labels are responsible for the distribution of their own physical product. Not only do they produce the music and

own intellectual property rights to that music, but they also control the distribution of product from the warehouse to various retail outlets, usually catering to large accounts and big-box retail stores. Universal Music Group Distribution is the largest distributor of music in the world, and also the world's largest record label. Warner Music Group's distribution holdings – Alternative Distribution Alliance (ADA) and Ryko – distribute a wide variety of “independent” record labels, which in a sense act as a musical “minor leagues.” Bands develop and grow in terms of popularity, and then are bought out by the major label.

In terms of corporate retail, there are several instances of vertical integration. The most significant example of vertical integration is Apple Inc. Apple is an extremely vertically integrated corporation, and the synergistic connection between the on-line iTunes store, the largest music retailer in the country, in conjunction with hardware such as the iPod MP3 player (along with the iPhone and iPad), by far the most popular digital music player, has radically altered the economic structuring of the music industry. Apple simultaneously manufactures and sells the iPod, the dominant MP3 music player, which in tandem with iTunes reinforces extreme market power and integration within the Apple Corporation. The popularity of the iPod also reinforces the move away from tangible musical objects (such as CDs and vinyl records), where the MP3 (in both paid-for and illegally downloaded form) is quickly becoming the dominant musical format – which adds to the popularity and economic success of the iTunes Store.

Best Buy illustrates another example of vertical integration and control within the music industry. Best Buy owns Redline Entertainment, a record label and video

distributor, and the company works with artists in multiple areas of the entertainment industry, including management, publishing, production, and merchandising. Its release of a Best Buy only album by Chickenfoot *S/T* in 2009 is an example of vertical integration; this illustrates the relationship between record label ownership and distribution, as well as the ownership of the retail outlet. The control over the sale of the album, a Best Buy exclusive, is an example of a fully integrated economic system.

Besides this Best Buy example, there are no other instances where a major record label owns corporate retail outlets. However, in Europe, there are the HMV chain and Virgin Megastores, both of which are also record labels. However, it should be assumed that deals and strategic alliances exist between the “big four” record labels and retail outlets. For example, it was noted that there is an alliance between Universal Music Group and Wal-Mart; however, the details surrounding this partnerships were not discussed in the companies’ annual reports. The practice of co-op advertising and retail “payola” are strategic alliances to be discussed in Chapter VI.

Horizontal Integration

The “big four” major record labels are extremely horizontally integrated in terms of the ownership of numerous record labels and music groups. This diversity in musical product helps to offset losses in any particular genre or musical style in terms of the parent company. If one particular album or artist is not selling, these losses are offset by the other stronger selling artists on the label, along with other affiliated labels within the corporate umbrella. Indie labels are usually individual entities and are not part of a music

group. Independent record labels are at a disadvantage, as they do not have the leverage to offset losses in an economic downturn, as they are not structured in the same manner.

Within horizontal integration, it is vital to note that the major record labels generate much of their revenues through licensing agreements and the exploitation of intellectual property of back catalog, where music is used in film soundtracks, television commercials, video games, and at public events. Thus, labels don't only create commodities for retail sale; they also retain copyright privileges long after an album has been released. Thus, maintaining a massive catalog of artists under a variety of music groups allows for greater exploitation of copyright across a variety of media platforms and branding strategies endlessly into the future. This is another example of how the major labels are cushioned through a variety of holdings. Even as revenues from traditional music sales decline, copyright and intellectual property will never become obsolete, like the CD will in the near future.

Synergy and Cross Marketing

To reach a mass audience, which is often global in scope, the audience must be constructed. The audience must be aware of the artist in order to purchase (or illegally download) the musical product. The music itself is dependent on a cultural visibility via mass and micro-marketing and promotional techniques. This entails the exploitation of various multi-media platforms including: exposure on MTV; radio play on Clear Channel radio stations; and tours conducted by Live Nation. It entails placement and product ties with television commercials, movie soundtracks and video games. It means having

ads and album reviews in *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and Pitchfork.com. It means having a viral Internet presence in terms of social media outlets such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and user generated blogs. Musical commodities are dependent on access to big-box stores and prime product placement within retail stores, which also coincides with the circulars and advertisements for the stores.

Synergy and cross marketing occurs in retail outlets, where music sales are capable of affecting sales of other commodities related to an artist. For example, a Lady Gaga CD is strategically placed on a giant cardboard sales display in the entertainment section of a big-box store. Copies of the CD are available next to the candy in the checkout lane. CD sales can be reinforced through the sale of other Lady Gaga products, such as music videos that advertise her latest DVD in the entertainment section. This product synergy is also reinforced through the sale of t-shirts, posters, books, and popular magazines. Thus, the marketing of an artist entails much more than just selling of music, but a whole array of products associated with the artist, thus perpetuating processes of commodification through synergistic practices.

The selling of technological hardware in various retail outlets also reinforces synergy. Wal-Mart, Target and Best Buy also sell Apple's iPod and iPhone, as well as digital download cards for the iTunes on-line store. Sony Music Entertainment also has worked to integrate its music holdings with a wide range of Sony products and hardware including Sony Ericsson's PlayNow (mobile phones and media download services), X Series and digital Walkman (portable MP3 player), preloaded with a variety songs and videos from the label's repertoire. It should also be reinforced that Best Buy also owns

Napster.com, where Best Buy's exclusive only releases can be sold through the ownership of its own digital download site. Lastly, these intersecting and synergistic economic and structural forces, and the overall capitalist structuring of economics and culture, largely determine the cultural variety and kinds of music available for consumers in retail outlets.

Conclusion

Music sales within corporate retail outlets strongly reflect the economic structuring and influence of the "big four" major record labels and their ability through vertical and horizontal integration, diversification and synergistic practices to contribute to the manufacture of a variety of popular musical acts. As a result of this global economic structuring, there is a strong economic correlation between music sales with the "big four" record labels, and the type of music sold at the major corporate retailers, which largely determines the kinds of music, or musical status quo suitable for mass consumption.

This chapter discussed the extremely concentrated nature of the "big four" major record labels and corporate retailers. The labels and retailers were placed within the context of their parent company, and it was discovered recorded music plays a minor role in terms of the overall revenues of these conglomerates. The "big four" record labels are extremely horizontally integrated, which allows them to perpetually capitalize on a massive music catalog via the ownership of copyright. Also, the fledgling sales of one particular artist can be offset by stronger selling artists on the roster; thus, record labels

don't have to depend on the success of one particular artist or musical genre. In terms of vertical integration, the "big four" labels own and control their own physical and digital distribution, and they also distribute for a number of "independent" labels.

Apple's ownership of hardware such as the iPod (as well as iPhone and iPad) is vertically integrated with the iTunes retail store, the largest retailer of recorded music in the U.S. This integration is radically altering how the music industry is structured, and is extremely significant in terms of the future sustainability of the independent record store, as well as the CD format. We have seen an example of full vertical integration. Best Buy's ownership of the Redline Entertainment record label, who released the Chickenfoot CD that was exclusively distributed and sold within Best Buy outlets. Because of this integration (and related synergy), the album peaked at #4 on the 2009 *Billboard* charts. Lastly, the practice of synergy allows music products to be marketed across a variety of platforms. For example, recorded music from Sony Music Entertainment is featured in Sony Films (such as the James Bond film *Quantum of Solace*), and included in various Sony hardware such as Sony Ericsson's PlayNow, X Series and digital Walkman.

This economic structuring is guided by particular practices and policies of the dominant music industry (both major labels and retailers), yet the independent record store maintains to varying degrees a sense of autonomy, and offers a different range of cultural variety and musical product as opposed to their corporate counterparts. However, as we will see, the independent record store is still impacted by the structuring

and practices of the dominant music industry. This is the focal point for the upcoming chapter.

CHAPTER VI

POLITICAL ECONOMY, PART 2: AN ANALYSIS OF CORPORATE RETAIL POLICIES AND PRACTICES AND THE LOCATION OF THE INDEPENDENT RECORD STORE WITHIN THE DOMINANT MUSIC INDUSTRY

“Retail chains could affect what we see and we don't see because a lot of them are major corporations and they like to do business with major corporations. But retail is pretty much a final frontier for the delivery of art to people.”

— Chuck D of Public Enemy in *Money for Nothing: Behind the Business of Popular Music* (McLeod, 2001)

Building upon a political economic foundation, this chapter explores the specific practices and policies utilized by the dominant music industry and corporate music retailers. These corporate policies and practices have positive and negative consequences for the independent record store and their ability to find a niche within the capitalist structuring of music culture. Independent record stores are not outside the umbrella of the dominant music industry, yet they embody several characteristics and practices that allow for greater cultural variety and alternative media.

Under the umbrella of the corporate control of music, the analysis section briefly explores the differences and similarities in terms of economic scale and orientation towards musical variety, as independent record stores are juxtaposed against their corporate counterparts. This is followed by a systematic analysis of corporate policies

and practices in terms of major labels and corporate retail. This includes pricing practices and loss leaders, centralized versus individualized buying practices, exclusive only releases, co-op advertising, retail “payola,” barriers to “digital” entry, tactics of forced obsolescence, and issues related to retail censorship.

Lastly, I address the murky term of “independence” and explore how the policies and practices of indie retail actually mimic their corporate counterparts (and vice versa with indie stores). While indie stores can be autonomous (to varying degrees) from the dominant music industry, they are still impacted by its policies and practices. The analysis of cultural diversity, as well as the corporate “homogenization” of music, necessitates an analysis of the intersection between the corporate structuring of the music industry and “independence.”

These points of analysis and critique address the following research question:

From a political economic framework, what are the practices and policies of the dominant music industry and corporate music retail – and how is the independent record store affected by such practices? As a result, how is the “independent” nature of the store affected by such structuring?

Key Differences in Scale and Approach

It is important to reiterate the key differences in terms of scale and economic approach between the big box retailers and independent record stores. In terms of scale, the big box retailers such as Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy, and F.Y.E are large-scale operations. Because these large retailers are incorporated, they must continue to grow and seek out new and diverse markets in order to sustain increased profits. These

conglomerates are characterized by a large number of retail locations, both nationwide and globally, and exist in a highly concentrated retail market.

The fundamental drive of these corporations is profit. There is more emphasis on large-scale marketing campaigns, in-store promotions, and co-op advertising that intersects with other corporate synergies, such as MTV rotation and radio play on Clear Channel stations. Profits benefit the corporation, not the local community.

Independent retailers, on the other hand, vary in terms of economic scale. Most independent stores, especially used-only stores and specialty/niche stores, usually only have one physical brick and mortar location, and often are modest operations with a handful of employees. Earning a profit is also an underlying motivation for these businesses; it is often not the sole motivation for existence, as the independent storeowners are overwhelmingly adamant about being “passionate” about the music they sell. Gary, the owner of House of Records, an independent store in Eugene, Oregon, explains: “Other stores are definitely directed more towards retail. It’s a numbers game. We’re certainly not a number game – if it were a number game, we wouldn’t be open.”

Indie stores are not incorporated,¹⁶ nor are they concerned with constant expansion and growth. They are not responsible for satisfying shareholders. Indie stores

¹⁶ In an incorporated business context, one of those most important legal benefits is the safeguarding of personal assets against the claims of creditors and lawsuits. Sole proprietors and general partners in a partnership are personally and jointly responsible for all the liabilities of a business such as loans, accounts payable, and legal judgments. In a corporation, however, stockholders, directors and officers typically are not liable for their company’s debts and obligations. They are limited in liability to the amount they have invested in the corporation. Corporations and Limited Liability Companies may hold personal assets like real estate, cars or boats. If one is personally involved in a lawsuit or bankruptcy, these assets may be protected. A sole proprietorship is a type of business entity which is owned and run by one individual and where there is no legal distinction between the owner and the business. All profits and all losses accrue to the owner (subject to taxation specific to the business). All assets of the business are owned by the proprietor and all debts of the business belong to the proprietors.

are often content simply being able to pay the bills and to subsist in a small-scale way. The stores tend to be deliberately small-scale with a few exceptions, such as indie chains such as Newbury Comics, and superstores like Amoeba Music, which are larger economic operations. Indie stores are not part of a concentrated market, and the type of musical product varies depending on the store. With the exception of some indie chains, each independent store is unique in terms of space and design, and there can be less emphasis on advertising and in-store displays. However, some of the larger indie stores embody characteristics associated with a corporate model (Amoeba Music, Tower, Newbury Comics. etc.), yet they still tend to be vastly different from their corporate counterparts in terms of musical selection.

Orientations Toward Musical Product

The cultural variety and kind of music available at a big box store and independent stores can be vastly different, especially when considering physical in-store shopping.

At the big box chain stores, music product is not the main focus of sales. The big boxes focus more on household items and electronics. Music is another product amongst a sea of commodities. The focus is on a narrow range of major label (the “big four”) product and *Billboard* hits, as well as new releases and established popular artists. However, on-line stores such as Amazon and iTunes feature local artists without major label backing. But in the big boxes, there is little emphasis on deep catalog, or older albums from particular artists. Marcus Hernandez, a Target

Entertainment Specialist in Springfield, Oregon, discusses the musical product available within his store, claiming:

Right now we carry anything that's top 20s, *Billboard* stuff. That's kind of what we focus on... If you're going to Target, you're going for something that you heard on the radio. Going to CD World (independent store in Eugene, Oregon) is an experience, and you just comb through stuff and find a lot of local stuff. And you really get a good variety of music. If you go to a Target or a Wal-Mart, or anything like that, you're really not going to hit any surprises.

This lack of “surprises” is evidence of musical predictability and standardization associated with a typical chain store. Customers generally know what to expect and the music is widely promoted on the radio. Music played on the radio (a very consolidated market) correlates with the music on the *Billboard* charts. This same music is heavily promoted and sold by corporate retailers. The intersecting synergies between radio play, music charts and retail are interconnected. Indie stores (as noted with Eugene's CD World) are demarcated by their “experience,” where a broad range of “variety” and “local” musical product is available. This variety and locality suggests less predictability and standardization. At the big-box stores, the commodification and *exchange value* of music is the bottom line, regardless of the quality or variety of music for sale. A Target store manager on the west coast reiterates this point:

They (Target) care about who is going to sell and what can meet demands. They don't want to build a relationship with a label that can't meet demand. If we need X number of CDs, can you do that? I think the company could care less about who produces the music. It's just, are you going to sell? That's all they really care about.

Unlike a specialty store that seeks to provide a wide variety of choices to music buyers, big box stores offer customers only the most popular albums.

According to Smith (2009), it's not just classical, jazz, hip-hop and indie rock that

have trouble making it into the big boxes. Up-and-coming pop, rock or hip-hop acts are unlikely to be welcome until they are proven sellers. Back catalog titles also feel the squeeze, and even the Beatles are frequently represented in big chains with only one or two albums. Fox's (2005) work on Wal-Mart examines the effects that mega stores have had on music retail, claiming, "The typical Wal-Mart store stocks around 5,000 titles, whereas the average Tower Records store stocks around 60,000 records" (p. 513).

However, big box stores tend to offer more musical variety on their on-line stores, and usually offer items not sold or available in the physical stores, especially in terms of music that is perceived to be "independent." Thus, for corporate retail, the cultural diversity of music is much greater on-line than for physical in-store selection.

Independent record stores are generally not oriented towards the *Billboard* chart system or what is necessarily currently popular on a massive scale. According to Fred Murschell, an employee at House of Records in Eugene, Oregon:

The House of Records is a place that focuses on everything outside of the mainstream. If you can see it on TV, we probably don't have it. If you hear about it on NPR, we probably do. We try to cover all the bases that are on the fringes of society.

Indie stores focus on independent distribution and indie record labels, especially the specialty/niche stores. Indie stores have much broader depth and variation of musical product, and they usually cater to local music scenes. The stores focus on fringe genres and music specialization such as techno, punk, indie, experimental, hip-hop, world, and classical, as well as a plethora of sub-genres in these categories. Andrew Hosch, the

owner of Timbucktunes, a world music store based in Portland, Oregon, describes the variety of music available in his store. He claims:

Well, it's a small store whose primary focus is on world music... But along with music from all over the world, I also feature different American root genres, some old blues, bluegrass, gospel, New Orleans music, Native American and creative, or modern jazz and classical as well. Experimental classical, and new music, basically. I sort of focused on all these different areas A, because they're music I really love, but B, because they're areas that other stores don't necessarily cover as well. I've left off all of the obvious genres of mainstream music. I don't carry any rock, pop, R&B, hip-hop, country, none of the mainstream genres. Kind of a little oddball store. Eclectic music from off the beaten path is one of our slogans.

Indie stores focus on deep catalog, meaning that they carry all (or most) of the releases of a particular artist and not just the most popular sellers. Used product is commonly sold at the stores, which adds to an un-rationalized and unpredictable mixture of product. Thus, the type of music within a store can vary depending the day you enter the store. Stores are sometimes viewed as archives or libraries, as opposed to merely shopping destinations. Music buying is often done locally in-store. The type of music in the stores is seen as a form of "curation." They sell music they are passionate about, not only what is currently popular on a mass scale. According to Eric Isaacson of Millennium Music,

We change pretty frequently, depending on what kind of used collections we get. So sometimes we're more a punk store, then a jazz store, then a blues store. We're pretty flexible, so. Yeah, it changes, but our focus, we're a pretty curated store... We're really careful about each section representing the genre in a way we want it to represent it, like our aesthetic is applied to each section. It's not like, ah, whatever, jazz records are jazz records. It's like, no, we like this specific type of jazz, and you know, try to get to the core of the matter historically, and also taste-wise.

Used-only record stores are the furthest outside of the dominant music system, as they don't rely on any form of distribution at all and obtain their entire product from

customers, not major corporations. The music variety can range from the obscure to the out of print. In terms of formats, indie stores sell various musical formats including vinyl, 78s, 7" records, and cassettes, along with CDs. Stores usually stock both new and used music. Indie stores share a similar sensibility with the free-form musical variety associated with community or college radio, as opposed to corporate radio.

Policies and Practices of the Dominant Music Industry

I will now explore the corporate policies and practices for major labels and corporate retail. This includes an analysis of pricing practices and loss leaders, centralized versus individualized buying, exclusive only releases, co-op advertising, modern day forms of payola, barriers to "digital" entry, digital placement, policies against used music and vinyl, and issues related to retail censorship.

Pricing and "Loss Leaders"

Shopping at an independent record store or a corporate chain store are both forms of consumerism. However, it is important to consider how independent record stores are pitted against the economic advantages of Wal-Mart, Target and Best Buy, and how this affects the sustainability of the independent store. Pricing, or "price wars," is an important issue. Many customers will shop wherever the prices are the lowest and thus, the big boxes almost always win. How can the big boxes sell music for such low prices?

First, we need to consider the music buying process. The big box chains, as well as independent superstores (such as Amoeba Music) and large indie retailers (such as

Music Millennium), are able to buy directly from the major “big four” record labels, and thus exclude middlemen. The smaller independent record stores’ accounts are much smaller in size and scope. They can’t purchase music directly from the major labels (in most cases) and must use one-stop distributors (such as Super D) that stock music from the “big four.” In the process, the distributors take a cut, and the indie stores end up paying more for the products, which must be sold at higher prices in order to turn a profit.

When a major label purchases a smaller independent distributor known for being popular with indie stores, this becomes more problematic. When such buyouts occur, suddenly the music on the indie distributor is no longer available to the indie stores, due to the label’s policy of not selling to small accounts. This was the case when EMI bought the indie distributor Caroline. Now indie stores cannot obtain Caroline product. Allen Horrocks, one of the owners of Aquarius Records in San Francisco, describes this situation:

EMI bought Caroline recently and completely ruined it... As soon as EMI took them over, it became impossible to order from them. Not sure what their thoughts were, but they essentially made it so independent stores can’t order from them... And you’d think they’d be trying to sell to whomever is getting their stuff, but instead they bought this distributor [Caroline], and were just like, we can’t sell to indie stores anymore, or made it virtually impossible to do so.

Deals between the major labels and big boxes often include bonus materials, extra tracks, or perhaps bonus discs exclusive to particular retail chains. So, not only are the prices lower at the big boxes, but they also provide extras to which the independent stores have no access. Terry Currier, the owner of Music Millennium in Portland, describes this situation:

I was screaming loudly about a U2 situation with Best Buy, where they were going to give a U2 DVD to Best Buy for the Black Friday Thanksgiving weekend, and two weeks before anybody else in the industry. And I said, bullshit! And so did a lot of other independent stores... U2 fans weren't going to wait, they're going over to Best Buy and get their CD and on top of that, you had a special value added CD thing to the first 500 customers that came through the store that day.

Knopper (2009) notes an example where a small indie chain in Indiana closed three stores, citing unfair price competition with Best Buy. For example, Best Buy sold The Beatles' *Anthology 2* for \$22.99 (along with a Best Buy only, free limited edition interview disc) and the indie store sold it for \$27.99 (minus the extra disc). Because the indie couldn't compete with such pricing, or the exclusive extras associated with Best Buy, the chain closed in 2003.

It seems obvious that corporate pricing practices affect independent and corporate chain stores differently. Research at House of Records provided evidence of this practice. A rapidly selling CD (for example, AC/DC's *Back in Black*) may start selling for \$11, and the product sells very rapidly at indie stores at this price. The major label recognizes this and suddenly raises the price to \$17. Sales come to an immediate halt, as the CD is overly expensive. When the labels raise the price in this manner, independent record stores suffer. This is particularly harmful as musical products are the main items sold at indie record stores. When this same pricing situation occurs at a big box store, the difference is made up through other diversified products such as flat-screen televisions, computers or appliances. They are able to sell the CD for a much lower price, as music sales are a minimal source of their overall profits.

Many indie storeowners assail the “big four” record labels for the high prices of CDs. In fact, they often associate the rise of illegal music downloading with the high prices of CDs and consider this practice a form of protest against the “greedy” record labels. Greg Sutherland, the buyer at House of Records, claims:

People are reacting to something, and what they’re reacting to is these dinosaurs in the record industry don’t understand that their prices are too high. The Darkness CD was \$12.95 for eight or nine months, and the price rose to \$16.95, and it killed it. Just stopped selling it. And so, that’s the mindset of the record industry. If they’re selling something, they just want to make more. Why does it cost nearly \$20 to buy Sgt. Peppers (by the Beatles)? If it was \$10, people would buy it. I guarantee it. But it’s not, and I can’t change the record industry. So I don’t know what to do about that... The record industry’s inability or lack of desire to change their pricing scheme is hurting record stores.

Lastly, there is the issue of “loss leaders,” when the big box retailers sell products for less than what they pay for them, making up the loss with the sale of computers, televisions and other diversified products. Chris Lewis of Universal Music Distribution explains:

It was a way to get customers into the stores, obviously, for them to buy their higher margin products. And I think they still use music for that, but, I don’t think they are willing to take a loss quite as often as they used to... I think because of the big boxes’ ability to sell more units and to sell other higher margin products. They are not as dependent on the margin they get per piece than the independent record store would be.

Greg Sutherland at House of Records explains how the pricing tactics at the big boxes affect sales in his store:

Best Buy and Circuit City and places like that sell CDs for less money than they pay. They buy a CD for nine bucks to get it in their store, and sell it for \$6.99. And that’s cutthroat competition, and they’re going to make their money off of stereo equipment. They put out CDs as loss leaders, and they’re using them to lure people into the store, and I can’t tell you how many people have come in here and bragged how they just bought Miles Davis at Circuit City for \$7.99, and I’m selling it for \$11.95.

As there are many big box outlets nationwide, losses at one store can be countered by profits at other stores. Independent record stores focus on small-scale niche markets (for the most part), and they do not have the luxury of selling other high end products, and thus are more susceptible to downturns in the market. They are more financially unstable.

Knopper (2009) also discusses the policy of “Minimum Advertised Price” or MAP. Stores selling CDs above a certain price receive a financial boost from the record labels in the form of newspaper or television advertising money. So a CD would start selling for \$11.88, and after a week, the store would get the free ad money, and then raise the price to \$14.99. The practice actually gave leverage to the small indies, as they could compete with the low prices of the big box stores. In 2000, after MAP had been in place for almost eight years, the Federal Trade Commission accused the labels of price fixing and declared that they would penalize stores like Best Buy and Wal-Mart for selling CDs too cheaply. According to Knopper (2009), the FTC had found that, from 1996 to 1999, CD purchasers had paid a collective \$480 million more than they should have because of MAP policies. The FTC’s findings confirmed long-held consumer suspicions regarding CD prices: record industry conglomerates price-gouge music consumers to pad corporate profits. As a result, “Forty-one states filed suits, alleging price fixing and collusion, and the labels agreed to pay \$20 to anybody who bought one of the 4.1 billion CDs sold between 1995-2000” (Knopper, 2009, p. 112).

Pricing strategies provide the big box chains with a clear economic advantage over the independent record store. This is a situation implicated by power relationships, and affects how what kinds of music is bought and sold in the marketplace.

Buying Practices: Centralized Versus Localized

The buyer at a record store is responsible for ordering music, and this individual greatly influences the musical variety at a given store. The buyer is a gatekeeper, as they ultimately control what music will make it onto the store shelves and what music will be excluded. At an independent record store, the buyer typically orders music through independent distributors (usually Revolver, Redeye, Forced Exposure or Carrot Top), one-stops (for major label product), and/or directly from independent record labels. Indie buyers also purchase used music directly from the customers, as well as music from local musicians. As previously noted, indie stores are unable to buy directly from the “big four” record labels, and thus must pay a more expensive price by going through a middleman, or one-stop distributor.

There is a considerable difference between the music buyers at independent record stores and their corporate counterparts. At an indie store, the buyer works at the physical store, interacts with other workers and customers, and has a clear sense of what music is popular, new, or cutting edge, and what is being demanded from the customers. The indie buyer is close to the local music currents in a given community. Eric Isaacson, a co-owner of Mississippi Records, a mostly used vinyl store based in Portland, Oregon, claims, “We actually pay attention to what individuals are looking for and want, and give it to them, you know. Rather than try to shove stuff down their throat, like a chain store.”

The buyer can sell music from local bands on consignment, thus contributing to the local musical scene. If a customer within the physical store can't find a particular album, the buyer can accommodate a special order of the album, and it usually arrives in a few days from a distributor.

Music buying at a chain store is centralized and the company can maintain uniform product in its various outlets. The buyer orders music for a particular geographic region, but may live in another part of the country. Products almost always consist of major label "big four" material, *Billboard* hits, and established artists designed to sell massive quantities of recordings (however, on-line outlets such as Amazon and iTunes are fairly accessible to bands with no major label backing). However, even within this narrow range of music, there are regional differences between the big box stores. For example, a store in the south would likely have more country music, whereas a store in an urban center carries more hip-hop. Music comes to these retail stores as a one-way flow and the employees have no agency in terms of influencing the kind of music sold in the store. Special orders are not possible at big box stores, and any artists outside of the rather limited musical database can't be purchased or accessed. Corporate chains typically exclude local musicians, even if there is popular demand for a particular artist. Target employee Marcus Hernandez from Springfield, Oregon, describes the buying process in his store:

Unfortunately, it's all done corporately. We don't have any kind of say to what gets brought in, and what gets taken out of our browser... For the most part they want each Target to be pretty much exactly the same as far as the product that is carried.

A Target store manager on the west coast reinforced the practice of centralized buying at the store: “I know it’s done at the company level, and we do have buyers. It’s definitely centralized. We don’t make decisions on that. And we have no input into it, and we get what we get.”

Hernandez describes the bureaucratic difficulties of ordering musical product outside of the Target system:

The process would be very lengthy for me. Very lengthy for me to call somebody at corporate, put the idea in somebody’s head, and get it approved, and then bring it back. It would just be ridiculous.

Some customers at chain stores request music by local artists. Because the music is not distributed by a major distributor or marketed by a major record label, musical locality is systematically excluded from the big box retailers, despite the local popularity of certain groups. Hernandez explains:

Eugene is really big on Floater. And I have people coming in all the time looking for Floater. Do you guys have Floater here? And because it’s not something that’s mainstream or a national phenomenon, unfortunately, we miss out on a lot of sales because of something like that.

Ryan Polischeck, a Media Associate at the Best Buy located in Springfield, Oregon, discusses the nature of locality in terms of the specific requirements needed to be stocked in the store:

I doubt they would buy from people who play little shows locally, and they sell their CD, which is basically a burnt copy, from their home computer... I don’t think Best Buy would turn around and sell that. You have to have professional cover art, and it has to be an actual CD, produced by an actual label and everything.

The packaging standards described here exclude locality. Some bands are not able to (or in some cases don’t want to) adhere to corporate packaging policies (such

as barcodes). Some artists embrace the do-it-yourself aesthetic that relies on cheaply produced media artifacts on unconventional formats such as CDRs and cassette tapes (refer to Appendix A., figure 9). Sometimes these releases are characterized by handmade cover art and packaging, a vernacular aesthetic not sanctioned by the corporate model. On the other hand, indie stores often encourage the sale of unconventional musical artifacts, despite their unorthodox packaging and use of format.

In sum, the buyer plays an important gatekeeping role. As we have seen, independent record stores are more flexible and provide more cultural variety, plus work to accommodate local musical scenes by selling musical product from local musicians. Indie stores are capable of making special orders of music that is not so readily available or is completely outside of the ordering system of larger chain stores. Because they are not dependent on Top 40 *Billboard* sales, they tend to be focused more on music from independent record labels and from smaller distributors, and thus, a much broader range of music.

Buying for big box stores is a centrally organized system with no interaction between corporate buyers, store employees, and customer preferences. It is not possible for customers to obtain musical releases outside of the corporate ordering system. In this sense, the corporate music buyers at the big boxes are responsible for manufacturing a particular range of popular music (top 40, *Billboard* hits), which excludes all other musical forms and possibilities. Since the buyer is located in a central corporate location, local music scenes have no access to the larger chains. The big box stores are only

concerned with popular music can sell mass quantities on a national (and often international) scope, as opposed to the idiosyncratic nature of local and small-scale musical scenes. Because of this, the centralized buying system at big-box chain stores leads to the standardization of music culture.

Exclusive Only Offers

Big box chains and the on-line retailers such as iTunes utilize the exclusive only release offer. This practice essentially creates a monopoly over the sale of a particular musical release, while simultaneously branding the store with a particular artist. If you want Pearl Jam, you have to buy it at Target. If you want AC/DC, you have to go to Wal-Mart. If you want the Police, you have to go to Best Buy. Exclusive only releases can come with additional tracks, bonus CDs, or other promotional add-ons not available at other stores. If an artist wants visible placement in the iTunes Store, they need to provide extra material in order to create an iTunes exclusive.

This practice poses two problems for the independent record store. First, they can't purchase or access the album through the typical distribution system. If they want to stock the exclusive item, they must physically go to the big box store, buy the actual CDs from the shelf, and then sell them in their own store. If they wish to make any profit, they have to raise the price, and it will be more expensive than at the big box retailer.

The exclusive selling approach is problematic for both indie and big box stores, as the practice controls media flows and limits cultural diversity. If indie stores are

exclusively selling certain music, those consumers living in locations where there are no independent record stores don't have access to the music. Likewise, when the big boxes exclusively carry certain titles, it is an attempt to control media flows and to brand artists with corporate retail outlets. While exclusive releases are typical of the big boxes, and major on-line retailers, indie stores have embraced the practice on the annual Record Store Day. Record Store Day is an annual "holiday" that occurs the third Saturday of every April. Record Store Day celebrates and promotes the "brick and mortar" record store, and participating record labels (both major and indie) exclusively release vinyl records, CDs and various promotional products on this particular day. Approximately 700 independent record stores participate in the event in the U.S., and festivities include live in-store performances, meet and greets with artists, and DJs spinning records (Record Store Day, 2010).

Co-Op Advertising

Outside the world of music retail, little is known about the practice of co-op advertising, a practice that occurs at big box stores, as well as at larger indie stores.

Co-op advertising involves a record label (usually a major label, although it occurs with larger independent labels) that provides advertising money for certain titles to be featured prominently in retail stores. This usually includes an end-cap display, which is a highly visible display at the end of a retail aisle. The space is essentially paid for by the record label, in conjunction with the paid-for advertisements placed in local weekly newspapers. As a result, the retail stores get free advertising and additional money for

providing space in their store. Gayland Morris, the Sales Manager of Independent Retail/Special Markets at Super D, a one-stop distributor, and formerly the Northwest Marketing Manager for Sony Music, explains the process of co-op advertising:

It's basically them putting in pricing and positioning, meaning they are going to take the record, and we're going to put it on an end rack, right there in the main aisles, so everybody sees it. And they (the retailer) are going to bring in 100,000 units. But in order for them to bring in 100,000 units, the label that's selling it to them direct has to jump in on co-op advertising, which can cost \$150,000 a week. For that \$150,000 a week, you get your price, meaning you can get it on sale (the retail outlet), you get it positioned on that rack, and you get the mini — it's the record cover in their little circular that you get in the mail every week, that goes out everywhere. Well, all those guys have their own circulars, and they print their own circulars, so it's not like they are going to an outside firm. It doesn't cost that much to print that many circulars. So you bring in a 100,000 units, okay, you sell it for \$9.99, and you bought it for \$10.99, but you're still making an additional, you know, \$2. You might lose a dollar on the initial sell, but you are still making \$2 on the back end of that advertising (money).

Knopper (2009) notes this practice occurred at Best Buy, where the retailer demanded \$40,000 to \$50,000 from labels to push CDs via in-house ads and on the displays and racks. This practice eventually became the status quo, and it changed record stores forever. Co-op advertising affected larger independent chains such as Tower, as their policy had been to not accept money to display CDs prominently on store shelves. Previously, Tower employees decided from the ground level which CDs were selling, and wanted to promote those ones. Tower later adopted this policy of taking money, but then was forced to display certain CDs on the end-caps in the stores in order to compete with Best Buy. As a result, the labels paid for the music promoted on end-caps, and not necessarily what store employees were passionate about and *wanted* to promote.

Chris Lewis of Universal Music Distribution deals exclusively with independent record stores and claims his branch of the label no longer engages in co-op advertising.

He claims:

What we found after many years of doing it was, we weren't actually paying to market the product. We were paying for space from the stores. We were paying for the real estate, basically... And by the way, co-op is not usually ever co-op (laughs). It's usually the labels that are paying for it all. I know, at one point it was called co-op, and we still call it that. It's just not really that way.

Maggie Vail at the independent record label Kill Rock Stars reinforces this practice:

They (the bands on the record label) are not going to let us sell their records at a loss, so Best Buy can have the cheapest price on the block. And that's the thing, sometimes you have to give people a lot of money in order to get into their stores, like those larger chains.

Greg Saunier of the band Deerhoof, who is on the Kill Rock Stars label notes that Best Buy is where the band sells most of their albums. Saunier claims:

We sell more at Best Buy than anywhere else, according to the statements I get. It confuses me, since we could hardly be considered a mainstream act. But there are just so many Best Buys, maybe it just adds up.

But such sales are due to the label's participation in co-op advertising, and even as an "independent" band closely associated with the margins of music culture, they nonetheless are part of the corporate or dominant system of retail sales. As Saunier notes, the sales are akin to a "mathematical formula," which entails a more corporate or McDonaldized approach towards the sale of music. Saunier notes:

Since Best Buy doesn't care about musical style or taste, and there is no music expert or music fan being employed as such at a Best Buy store (and in fact the CD area usually has no one working there), success in a chain like that comes as close as it ever comes to a pure mathematical formula — the more money you pay Best Buy, the more they will sell. You can choose various options — have one of

your songs in a rotation that is played through tiny speakers attached to the CD stacks, or have your CD placed in the end cap displays. Then you can choose the length of your campaign, such as one month or two months... For all I know, Best Buy doesn't even make money selling music, maybe they just use it as loss leader, something to bring people to the store and buy TVs.

The practice of co-op advertising is problematic on a number of levels. First, the “big four” are part of integrated multinational conglomerates that have the marketing power to buy their way into large-scale retail stores. They can secure prime store placement, and advertise with the big box stores. This process assures that popular music from the major labels retains a hegemonic positioning in the stores, which is reinforced by other promotional techniques such as MTV rotation, and radio play – all of which contributes to the manufacture of musical popularity.

Secondly, the economic intersection between the major labels and corporate big box retailers perpetuates a system where the dominant retailers themselves profit by simply providing shelf space for major label product. This guarantees the positioning and placement of a very narrow and standardized range of corporate musical acts. In a sense, the major “big four” labels have a monopoly over the kind of music sold at big box retailers because of their ability to pay for the retail space and placement.

Third, small-scale independent record labels don't have the capital to “buy” their way into larger retail chain stores. Even if they did, they often lack the same dominant market exposure through MTV or corporate radio channels. There is no guarantee that albums will sell, even with in-store positioning and advertisements. Because independent labels can't buy their way into the corporate retail system, the overwhelming majority of product available in a big box store is likely from one of the “big four” record labels.

Fourth, with the exception of some large-scale independent stores, most independent record stores don't participate in co-op advertising, mainly due to their small scale and size, as well as their different orientation towards non-mainstream product. Thus, major labels are not paying for retail space in independent stores, and, as a result, indie stores don't have the same economic cushion.

“Payola” and Buy-Ins

Payola in the American music industry is the illegal practice of payment or other inducement by the record labels (promoters and representatives) for the broadcast of recordings on radio. Some radio stations report the plays of the newest and most popular songs to industry publications. The number of times a song is played affects chart ratings and the perceived popularity of a song. Payola is a method that influences the popularity of an artist. Similar practices have been historically utilized in music retail; however, they have never been found to be illegal.

In the 1970s, the *Billboard* charts were calculated by the number of albums *shipped* by a record label, not actual albums *sold*. So labels would ship product to random warehouses, and the product could just sit there. In other words, the albums were *shipped* but never actually *sold*, thus resulting in the perception of a popular album. Labels would also encourage stores to order more products than they actually needed. The stores would then return the products after 30 days (since products can be returned to the label for credit, if they don't sell). Since the records were initially *shipped*, the practice affected chart rankings, even though the records were never actually sold in a

retail store. The practice became a common adage in the industry: “Ships Gold (rewarded after a half a million “sales,” or shipments), and returns Platinum (a million records).” Eventually *Billboard* made chart listings dependent on actual *sales*, instead of the number of albums *shipped*.

Other “payola” tactics have been utilized over the years in music retail. According to Jones (2009), label representatives sometimes would “borrow” the record books of retail stores in exchange for free copies of music, concert tickets, and/or vacations for store-owners. While the books were being “borrowed” by label representatives, the sales figures were manipulated. These false sales records influenced the album charts and created the perception of a popular album. Jones (2009) provides an example of this practice:

This was during the days when chart manipulation was rife, and the record charts were compiled by writing sales of catalog numbers down in a white book in a selection of record retailers. Adrian (owner of an indie store in London) would leave his book on the counter whilst he made coffee for the sales reps, and on his return the book would suddenly be full of numbers. For being so hospitably careless he was often rewarded with boxes of free stock (p. 127).

Terry Currier, the owner of Music Millennium, confirms that this practice was ubiquitous:

I never accepted any of the stuff, I always reported (to *Billboard*) things straight. But, I know people out there that said they were able to pay their down payment on a house, buy cars – and do all kind of things from free goods that were sent to them. I was in a situation one time where somebody was going to offer me a television set. And I never took any of that. But, it was widely done within the industry.

Currier goes on to note how these practices became institutionalized:

But you know, a lot of people (storeowners) probably played that game that wouldn't have played that game, but that's what the game board looked like. If you don't play by the rules of the game, even though they were not legitimate

rules, you have a hard time getting in there and having any kind of success. So, a lot of people were almost forced into those things in order to compete.

Currier cites yet another method involving free musical product given to retail stores:

Another common practice which was a little more legit, was that many of the labels would send like cassette singles or CD singles for *free* to you, and ask you to give it special pricing in the store, which in many cases changed the chart position because, you know, you were able to get a three dollar single for \$0.99.

These examples preclude the use of scanning technology, or what is referred to as SoundScan, where each album sold is scanned (using a point of sale scanning system), as opposed to the previous method where stores would call in or fax their sales rankings to *Billboard*. The SoundScan system was introduced in 1991. Calamar and Gallo (2009) claim that the older techniques of giving clerks concert tickets and other gifts in exchange for chart manipulation is a thing of the past; however, the authors give the following example in the SoundScan era: “A storekeeper put a bar code for a record on a candy bar so that every time he scanned the candy, it registered as an album sale” (p. 144).

Calamar and Gallo (2010) provide another example:

Getting a spike for an unsigned band. Here’s how that would work. A box of 25 CDs for Band X would be sent to a store. The clerk who unpacked the discs didn’t notice that the box was never ordered. A “customer” comes into the store within 24 hours of the arrival of the box and asks for any and all copies of the new album by Band X. Now SoundScan reports that sale of 25 copies of Band X’s album. The “customer” takes this box home and repeats this with another store. The sales, if undetected, create a regional blip in SoundScan, and the A&R executive suddenly thinks he has come across an unsigned act that has a healthy following. Alas, they do not (p. 144).

Calamar and Gallo (2010) confirm that the SoundScan era still has its problems, but it is far more accurate than the previous system. Overall, these “payola” practices reinforce the political economic notion that the major corporate players manufacture popular artists, which ultimately can boost overall album sales. Carrier at Music Millennium reinforces this notion:

Because it was a lot more like PT Barnum, and there was a lot of smoke and mirrors and you could make something happen, you could create a buzz on something – you had the ability to do that, I mean, with falsification and that kind of stuff. Many of those records never would have happened without that, and many of those records were great records. Today, it really gets down a lot to the sale, you know, in modern times is who has the most money to get their records on the charts.

The “buy in” is another practice where labels pay for music to be included in listening stations and prime in-store placement in retail stores. A listening station is a device that displays a small number of CDs, and the customer can sample tracks with a pair of headphones. Because the listening station is located in a prime position in a store, it acts as a promotional device for bands and labels. However, not everyone has found success with the buy-in practice. Curtis Knapp of Marriage Records, based in Portland, critiques his use of the practice to promote his label’s product:

They’re all independent [stores], but then the way it ends up reading is, it reads like a major. Because you buy into their listening booths. You buy spots. It’s like a weird business scam. Even collectives that end up having those pyramids, which are fishy... Each of the stores in your collective guarantees to buy three copies. If I guarantee to provide that, and I pay for this slice of the listening station that you are leasing from this company. You know what I mean? It gets to be a weird scam. It’s like, let’s take a risk and spend \$3,000 on these listening stations, that these independent stores are telling us, they’ll buy three records each, if we do that. It’s almost like a payola scheme. You’re paying for them to buy your records. You’re paying for a commercial for them, so then they’re paying to buy your records. It’s weird to me. They are promotional devices, you know. But from a

consumer point of view, it makes it seem like those things have a special value, when really it's just an advertisement.

The logic of the stations is that you can build an audience through the initial release via the listening stations. The next release, in theory, will have a large following established, and the store will sell more records. Knapp at Marriage Records noted that he "broke even" by utilizing the listening stations, but was surprised at the number of records sold through the process. Calvin Johnson of K Records notes a hypothetical situation where an indie label is trying to establish an audience through the buy-in process. Johnson claims:

They [a hypothetical label] sold 40,000 records, but all they did was establish that artist so the next record comes out, they hopefully, there is going to be orders for 50,000 records. That's the process, that's what they're hoping is going to happen. It doesn't always happen that way. A second record might come out, and nobody cares. People already forgot about that band.

However, this building up of an artist through promotional devices is costly. The major label acts have stronger financial backing, as the sales from the first buy-in are expected to increase with each successive album. Small-scale indie labels can't take the same risks with buy-ins. Thus, most music promoted in listening stations is major label, or affiliated with a major label (or possibly has major label distribution). If an album flops, the economic loss from a buy-in hurts the indie label more, as they are less financially stable compared to the majors.

In sum, this section highlighted the nature of retail "payola" and buy-ins. Retail "payola" practices have historically reinforced a distorted perception of the music charts; however, the SoundScan system brought about in 1991 has brought about more accuracy

(with a few exceptions). As a result of “payola” practices, many popular music acts have been manufactured by the major label system, and their ability to purchase popularity and fame. The major labels have more capital and leverage to purchase buy-ins, which means a greater likelihood of major label product in listening stations and prime placement in retail stores.

Barriers to Entry: Digital Download Stores

Another issue in the digital era is the barriers to entry for independent stores interested in creating a MP3 download store to compete with iTunes, AmazonMP3.com and WalmartMP3.com. In order to have an on-line digital download store, the storeowner needs to acquire licensing rights from the record label. The economic barrier in this situation involves having the capital to cover the licensing fees associated with intellectual property and copyright. These expensive fees effectively prevent independent record stores from obtaining a digital download store. Because Apple, Amazon, Napster (owned by Best Buy) and Wal-Mart are massive multinational corporations, they have the ability to cover these licensing fees and can essentially dominate the digital download market. The only indie stores able to attempt the digital download market are larger superstores like Amoeba Music and the large-scale generalist store, Music Millennium in Portland, Oregon. Terry Currier, the owner of Music Millennium, comments on the difficulties of creating a digital download store:

You can't just do digital delivery. Working with lawyers from the digital side of all these different record labels and record distribution companies trying to work

out deals to be able to do so. There is cost involved, there are legal things involved, and not anybody off the street can go make this happen... The cost is so high, I don't venture to see us making any money off of this for years to come.

iTunes Placement

Another problem for indie stores is album placement and visibility on the iTunes Store. As noted in the last chapter, iTunes doesn't allow labels to pay for placement on the site; however, bands can obtain better placement if they provide additional exclusive material, or in the case of the indie label Kill Rock Stars, release material early to iTunes. Maggie Vail, vice president of A & R, director of west coast operations, and head of marketing for the Kill Rock Stars record label, explains this situation:

Because it's so hard to get placement on iTunes, and often times you give them the record two weeks before stores get it, and the mom and pops get real upset at that, if you continuously do that. Because it's undercutting their sales. For some records, iTunes is 70 percent of their sales. Certain bands sell so much that you have to give them the best placement. So you might end up giving it to them a week early. We did this for two Deerhoof records in a row, I think, with iTunes. And the second time, Lesley, who used to run the retail stuff at Touch and Go (formerly an independent distributor) called and said, 'The stores are so upset. You can't do this again.' I hadn't even thought of it. I didn't think of them as necessarily competing, but they are.

As iTunes has become the largest retailer of music in the country, it is vital to have strong and visible placement within the on-line store. However, when independent labels agree to sell an album early (in this case, up to two weeks) to obtain better placement, this practice undercuts a large portion of sales from independent record stores. It also reinforces the primacy of the digital download model of consumption, versus the act of buying physical product in brick and mortar

stores. Because of Apple's market dominance, the company has the ability to obtain music before other retailers, a practice that ultimately undercuts sales at other independent stores.

Controlling Used Music

In 1992, the distributors of the major record labels decided to cease giving co-op advertising money to record stores who sold used music, a commonplace practice in indie stores. The majors claimed the stores were profiting from the major labels and the artists were not getting additional royalties when a CD is sold secondhand. Most independent record stores depend on the sale of used goods, as the markup on selling used CDs or vinyl records is much higher than the low margins associated with new music product. The inability of independent record stores to sell used music would seriously affect their overall economic sustainability.

Country artist Garth Brooks was the first artist to speak out against the sale of used goods. As a result, Terry Currier, the owner of Music Millennium, decided to take action:

The principle of the whole thing, I felt, was very bogus. These are peoples' livelihoods, these are their stores and they should be able to do whatever they want with their store... Within 10 minutes of that announcement, we had pulled all the Garth Brooks product off the floor – VHS, LPs and CDs at the time. And we wrote them up for return to send them back to the supplier.

As an act of protest, Currier initiated a media event titled "BBQ for Retail Freedom" in the parking lot of the store, where community members could barbeque various Garth Brooks products (CDs, posters, T-shirts), and learn about the proposed

major label practice (refer to Appendix A., Figure 20). The event was such a success that Currier took the act on the road, and visited numerous record stores on the west coast. The BBQ gathered the attention of local and national media outlets such as CNN, MTV, *People* and *Forbes* magazine. Currier's activism prompted the major distributors to change their mind about the used music policy. As a result, Currier discovered there was a sense of solidarity with other independent record stores who shared common problems, and this initial action became the foundation for the Coalition of Independent Music Stores (or CIMS). The coalition brings stores together and acts as a catalyst for breaking new records, and as a support group. As a side note, Music Millennium still doesn't stock any products by Garth Brooks.

Constructing the CD Market

Another major label policy illustrates technological control and forced obsolescence. In 1989, the major labels decided upon a policy to essentially guarantee the success of the newly emerging CD and, as a result, eliminate the vinyl record. To accomplish this, the labels enacted a policy (that continues to this day) whereby vinyl records are no longer returnable to the distributors or labels, whereas CDs are returnable. In music retail, music can be returned for a credit after a 90-day period. So, when vinyl ceased to be returnable, there was less financial incentive to stock the format. If the vinyl records don't sell, then the stores are stuck with them – a policy that essentially forced stores to stock CDs. Marc Hossler from the band/art collective Negativland claims:

CDs did not become popular because it's what the American public wanted. It's because all the major labels all made a backdoor, behind the scenes agreement that they would no longer allow mom and pop record stores to do returns on vinyl. So one day, sort of if by magic, we have this new thing called the CD, and you can buy those and return them. And overnight, they forced all the mom and pops to purchase a CD, to start carrying CDs, all at once.

Consumers no longer had any choice and were forced to buy music on the expensive CD format, as well as necessitating the need for a CD player to play the new format. Another side effect was that vinyl versions of the back catalog were no longer produced.

The list price of a new CD was \$17.98 versus \$9.98 for a new vinyl record. Consumers would buy albums they already owned on vinyl to replace their collection on the new format. However, today there is much hype about the "resurgence" of vinyl records, but a majority of the labels that press and continue to sell vinyl are the independent record labels, not the major labels. As well, these records continue to be non-returnable.

In sum, this is an example of the music industry dictating a particular musical format through the enactment of a policy to deliberately force CDs onto the market and to make it less financially advantageous for stores to continue to stock vinyl records by rendering them non-returnable.

Music Retail and Censorship

Lastly, music retailers act as gatekeepers, and the music purchased by an indie music store and/or corporate chain reflects the ideology of the storeowner or corporation.

While any retail outlet is capable of censoring musical product, Wal-Mart has a lengthy history of censorship issues.

Wal-Mart's role as censor of music has been highly publicized over the years. The issue of retail censorship primarily pertains to the Wal-Mart retail chain, which has a long-standing policy of not stocking any CD with a parental advisory sticker. Because of this policy, Wal-Mart acts as a media filter and gatekeeper of musical content, thus pitting corporate interests against democratic ideals of freedom and creative expression. This practice is particularly problematic as Wal-Mart is the second largest music retailer in the country (behind iTunes), and the retail chain continues to be the national leader of physical CD sales (Wal-Mart maintains 20 percent of the physical CD market).

However, the issue of censorship at Wal-Mart is a tricky one. In fact, Wal-Mart doesn't actually censor musical content. In order for the music to be stocked in their physical stores, the label must provide edited or "sanitized" versions and/or modify album artwork. As a result of this policy, it is the artists and record labels who must agree to *self-censorship* in order to obtain shelf placement in the physical retail stores. Because Wal-Mart is the largest market in terms of physical CDs in the country, many artists bend to these requirements or face significant reductions of their overall album sales.

In 2009, the popular pop-punk band Green Day refused to make an edited version of its album *21st Century Breakdown*, and as a result, Wal-Mart refused to carry the album. Other albums, such as the indie-rock band the Strokes' *First Impressions of Earth* and Mos Def's *Black on Both Sides* are not carried in Wal-Mart because edited versions

are not available. Despite this strict in-store policy, censorship doesn't seem to be as strictly applied to Wal-Mart's digital download store, where many "obscene" or politically challenging albums can be instantly downloaded.

A quick search of the site yielded the unexpected. For example, an unedited version of the Dead Kennedy's *Bedtime for Democracy*, a punk band known for its scathing critiques of government and capitalism can be purchased on-line. The "obscene" NWA album *Straight Outta Compton* is available as an edited version. However, numerous non-21st Century Breakdown Green Day albums are available at WalmartMP3.com, and in select Wal-Mart stores, despite the band's expressed anger against the company for not stocking their latest album. Ironically, Green Day tracks from the *Dookie* album, including "Basket Case," which explores a male seeking out a male prostitute, and "Longview," a track that mentions the word "shit," can be sampled and downloaded on the Wal-Mart webpage.

According to Klein (2000), the punk band Nirvana had difficulties selling their *In Utero* CDs at Wal-Mart due to these censorship practices. Wal-Mart refused to carry their album (even though their previous album went quadruple platinum) because the back cover art featured artwork with a fetus. Facing a loss of 10 percent (as Wal-Mart was at the time the largest and most influential music retailer in the country), Nirvana and their label Warner backed down and changed the artwork, as well as changing the title of the controversial song "Rape Me" to "Waif Me" (p. 167).

Thus, Wal-Mart serves as a media filter, a concept described in Herman and Chomsky's (2002) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*.

While this version of censorship isn't related to the news industry, it suggests how corporate media industries are firmly embedded in the market system where the commodification of media products must appear in a supportive selling environment that supports the political economic status quo. As a result, powerful corporations have the power to exert their authority over the flow of information available within society.

Censorship typically doesn't occur at independent record stores. These outlets usually don't conform to a homogenizing "family atmosphere," nor do they force artists to produce sanitized versions of albums. Independent record stores generally have no explicit censorship policies, although they may prefer a different type of product. In other words, one can find extremely political and stylistically challenging music that is far outside the constructed and formulaic channels of the mainstream music market. Indie record stores are typically open to stocking music with challenging political, sexual, and/or controversial themes. Every indie storeowner interviewed for this study strongly rejected censorship practices for their store and were (or claimed to be) ardent supporters of free speech and musical diversity. As Chris Lewis, Account Manager for Universal Distribution, who deals extensively with independent record stores on a regular basis, claims, "I don't believe I have any independent accounts that even buy the edited versions."

In sum, corporate censorship practices, especially by Wal-Mart, are a form of social control and act as a media filter for what constitutes morally acceptable music. Their ability to force artists to create "sanitized" edited albums or change cover art is a form of control over creative expression in a democratic society. Independent record

stores usually don't adhere to such censorship policies, instead offering the consumers the opportunity to purchase a broader variety of music, regardless of political or artistic content.

Ambiguities of "Independence" and Indie Retail

"Independence" is difficult to define as it has numerous connotations among indie storeowners, customer, artists and labels. However, when owning and operating an independent record store, the issue of "control" is a central theme of defining independence. In particular, storeowners noted the control over the kind of music for sale (localized buying practices), buying from independent distributors, having control over store design and atmosphere, and being non-corporate.

Nonetheless, independent record stores are businesses and are immersed in processes of commodification. Indie stores are impacted by corporate policies and practices that connect the stores to the larger economic system. The "true" independent nature or degrees of autonomy vis-à-vis corporate culture becomes increasingly ambiguous upon a closer analysis. Eric Isaacson at Mississippi Records in Portland, Oregon, claims, "I mean, you have to be in bed somewhat with the mainstream music industry, if you have a record store."

What follows are some key themes and analysis regarding the ambiguities of "independence." Various indie storeowners describe the independent nature of their stores.

The definition of independence often incorporates a sense of *difference* from the dominant corporate culture. Wade Wright, the owner of Jack's Record Cellar, a used-only specialty store in San Francisco, claims:

We're not Barnes and Noble, and we're not, everybody picks Wal-Mart, but they're not the only ones. We can do what we want. That's all. I'm here, and Roy is here. And we can decide if we don't feel like opening the door. We don't have to be here at 8:30 in the morning, and we're not going to stay open until 9 pm, because the rest of the mall has to stay open until 9 at night. And that's the whole point. We wouldn't be here if it had to be like that. We're too salty (laughs).

Jack's Record Cellar opens when the owners decide to show up. The store is open periodically, or by appointment, and doesn't follow standardized business hours. If a customer is lucky, the store might be open by chance. This practice is symbolic of having control over their business practices. Wright's definition of independence includes corporate culture as a defining point, a marker as to what Jack's Record Cellar *is not*. The store is not "Barnes and Noble" or "Wal-Mart," nor does it conform to the structuring of "mall" based retail. The storeowners have the power to run the business as they please; however, Wright's meaning of independence is *dependent* on the dominant corporate culture. Corporate culture is what gives indie stores their independent *brand*.

Indie storeowners and others involved with the culture fail to recognize that corporate and independent culture are not separate entities. To think of these entities in binary terms is to oversimplify their differences, whereas the two business models often intersect. Both are driven by capital and exist to earn a profit. However, subtle differences do exist.

Scott Simmons of Exiled Records, a Portland indie store, links independence to his use of independent music distribution, and by not partaking in corporate advertising and listening stations. Simmons claims:

Most everything I do is through smaller distributors... I'll use smaller distributors like Forced Exposure, Revolver and stuff like that... I don't do any of the things like some of these other stores in town like work deals and have listening stations and free advertising. You know, we don't participate in any of those things. I just basically carry what I like.

Paid-for in-store advertisements complicate the nature of independence. Exiled Records deliberately doesn't utilize free (co-op) advertising or listening stations, as such practices are corporately oriented. Thus, Exiled Records is another example of defining independence through *non-corporate* practices. The store is further from the typical corporate model, and is more autonomous from the dominant industry. Its reliance on independent distributors further reinforces this.

Many indie stores hang promotional posters because they like the music, not because it's a paid ad. However, I came across a situation at Music Millennium in Portland, Oregon, where in the storefront window, a large-scale hand-painted (DIY aesthetic) drawing advertised the popular indie band Modest Mouse. A store employee didn't create this drawing out of sheer appreciation for the band. It was a paid-for advertisement, and the store had to photograph and send it to the label for documentation (see Appendix A., Figure 21). Thus, upon a closer analysis, what appears to be vernacular art is really a corporate promotion.

The music displayed in promotional listening stations, where shoppers can sample music before buying, is another paid-for advertisement in the stores. This practice is

utilized by larger indie chains and generalist stores. This arrangement tends to be skewed towards the major label discourse of moving product, and product placement. The practice is similar to the big box stores.

There can be considerable difference and variation in terms of “independence.” Numerous specialty/niche indie storeowners in the Portland area claimed that Music Millennium was more corporately oriented because of their reliance on listening stations and co-op advertising. As a result, the store lacks the subcultural capital and “independent” feel of smaller niche stores such as Mississippi and Exiled Records. Both of these stores refuse listening stations and co-op advertising. While the storeowners of these three stores would all define themselves as being independent, there is much variation in terms of how others perceive this independence. For example, Curtis Knapp of the independent record label Marriage Records in Portland comments on his dealings with Music Millennium:

...There is something about the management there. There is like this strong socialist ethic, but honestly, my dealings with it has been a little bit hokey. And they have like ten different listening stations there; it's like a fucking casino. So I haven't really had that great of a relationship with them, as a local label in town... And just like the group ads, and stuff like that. They're all involved. They're just a little bit more commercial minded and it ends up being a hokey aesthetic to me.

Jon Klots of Anthem Records, an indie store that focuses on avant-garde music in Portland, echoes the importance of independent distribution, as well as carrying some major label product. Klots claims:

I mean, it's fairly atypical for anything with any sort of major distribution ever find its way in here. There are exceptions. Sonic Youth was on a big label for a long time; obviously we have Sonic Youth. I have the last Eminem record in here. There are the major indie bands, like there is a Spoon record right there. Everybody had mixed tastes, you know. But, still, that's independent.

Many indie stores stock music that is perceived to be “independent.” Often, this music is connected to larger corporate entities through distribution arrangements or partnerships, and many indie storeowners lack an understanding of the structural arrangement of the music industry. In this example, Klots notes the selling of corporate products. The venerable Sonic Youth was formally on the DGC label, owned by Universal Music Group. Eminem is on Interscope Records, which is also owned by UMG. However, Spoon is an example of *perceived* independence. While Spoon releases albums on Matador Records, a respected “indie” label, the products are distributed by Alternative Distribution Alliance (ADA), which is mostly owned by Warner Music Group.

However, as music is increasingly distributed digitally via Apple’s iTunes, the definition of “true” independent is obsolete. As digital distribution via corporate channels increases, the word “independent” increasingly will have less meaning.

In terms of product diversity, I have yet to come across an independent record store that only exclusively sells “independent” music. To reiterate, a “true” independent label is a record label free from corporate backing, and must have independent distribution. Thus, there is a considerable difference between the perception of independence and the economic realities of the music industry.

For Tony Green, a manager at Amoeba Music in San Francisco, independence is an attitude, one that demarcates itself from *typical* capitalism. Green claims:

I guess it’s kind of an attitude thing, but beyond that we just have the three stores, which are privately owned, and I think anyone who walks into Amoeba would think, yes, this is an independent record store. It doesn’t reek of capitalism.

This definition of independence is problematic as it suggests Amoeba Music is somehow *outside* of capitalism. The comment reinforces the binary between indie and corporate retailers, as if capitalism is an abstraction that only occurs somewhere else. Amoeba is the largest independent record store in the country, a status achieved through ardent commodification and the nature of capitalism.

Similarly, Andrew Hotch of Timbucktunes, a world music store in Portland, contends his store is *outside* of capitalism. Hotch claims:

I don't believe in capitalism. I don't believe in profit motive. I think it corrupts everything it touches... I don't think there is any contradiction there. I don't think that business means capitalism. People sell things all over the world; obviously, people buy and trade things no matter what sort of economic system their country has... Businesses are generally around to make money (laughs). I would like to see that too, but my focus is on music and what music means to me, and the way I think it means to the world... I joke that it should be run as a not-for-profit business, because it's not really churning one.

Again, this storeowner falsely suggests autonomy from the capitalist system. As a theme, numerous indie storeowners had a difficult time reconciling their relationship to this dominant economic system. This is likely due to the personal connection the storeowners have to the product they sell. To place an indie store in the context of capitalism contradicts the ideological or "pure" nature of "independence." Indie stores are nonetheless constituted by the capitalistic system.

Stone Clement, the owner of Shaxul, a heavy-metal specialty store in San Francisco, defines his store by his lack of financial means and by his economic struggle. Clement claims:

I guess the fact that like, basically one guy is running it, and I'm always just scrapping by financially. It doesn't really get any more independent than what

I'm doing. So, what you see in this little store is and what sells is what is getting us by each month. So, to me, that's the definition of being independent, if there ever was one.

Greg Saunier of the indie band Deerhoof shares his insights from working at the independent distributor Subterranean. He explains how there were similarities between the two retailers, and that corporate and indie stores follow the logic of the market. Despite the vast differences in musical product, both retailers bought albums based on their ability to sell. Saunier explains:

For a time in the mid 90s I worked at a record distributor called Subterranean, which sold almost exclusively to independent record stores. It always seemed like the stores were on the verge of going out of business, and yet it was my task to convince their buyers by phone to buy more of our obscurities, which would most likely put them further in the hole. The temptation on their part to gamble less, and go for the safer titles, was perfectly understandable, but also begged the question of the philosophical or even commercial purpose of the store's existence, since in so doing, they imitated the buying patterns of the major stores to a greater and greater extent.

Indie and corporate retailers have much in common in terms of the nature of capital. Buying "safer titles" follows market logic, where the focus is on products that will sell. Indie and corporate retailers should not be considered in binary terms. There is a lot of grey between the two.

What follows is a listing of my observations that consider the nuances of "independence" in indie record stores.

- The larger the indie store, the more likely the presence of an overt corporate influence. Many larger indie stores such as Music Millennium and Amoeba Music engage in co-op advertising practices, in-store displays and promotions, and listening stations.

- According to Chris Lewis at Universal Music Group, larger indie chains tend to utilize centralized buying practices, although with better communication between levels of management and floor workers.
- Many indie stores supplement their physical in-store sales with e-commerce. Business is conducted with Amazon.com, one of the largest corporate music retailers in the country. The House of Records in Eugene and Music Millennium both utilize Amazon.
- Diversification of product mimics the dominant paradigm of corporate culture, where many indie stores have become “lifestyle” stores selling DVDs, books, board games and toys to off-set losses in music sales (Calamar and Gallo, 2010, p. 97). As a result, “music only” stores are becoming less common.
- The selling of rare and collectable “punk” records is big business, as the record’s scarcity drives the demand, which results in expensive cultural commodities. For example, a rare and independent punk album sells for \$75.99 (refer to Appendix A., Figure 23).
- Record Store Day mimics the exclusive only paradigm established by the big box retailers. Much of the product on RSD come from the major record labels, and this can be seen as co-opting indie culture. This is especially ironic considering how some major label policies and practices have negatively affected independent record stores over the years.
- There is a shared ideological connection of independence between indie labels, distribution and record stores. However, the selling of music follows the logic of capital. According to Dave Gulbif at Revolver Distribution, indie distributors will sell music to anyone who is willing to buy, even the major big box stores. The practices of the big boxes ultimately undermine the independent record store.
- Big box chain stores have co-opted “underground” music, and music from “independent” labels. This music is available at Best Buy, Wal-MartMP3.com, Amazon, Barnes and Nobel, and iTunes. No longer is “independent” music exclusive to independent record stores.
- Some chain stores such as Best Buy and Fred Meyer have co-opted the vinyl trend as a form of commodification.
- According to Hebdige (1976), expressions of rebellion can be commodified. The commodification of punk (refer to Appendix A., Figure 24) was evident in the now defunct Virgin Megastore. Large chains have commodified “alternative” musical scenes.

Upon closer examination, the very concept of “independence” becomes increasingly murky. In fact, the very notion of “independence” is rendered problematic – as its very definition depends on the existence of the dominant corporate system and the nature of capitalism. This critique of “independence” is important as it suggests the concept is essentially an imagined *brand*. Even if indie stores utilize alternative approaches towards music culture, they nonetheless harvest and commodify difference. Both “indie” and corporate retail discourses are part of a system determined by late capitalism.

Conclusions

This chapter analyzed a number of practices and policies related to the dominant music industry and corporate music retail, as well as the political economic location of “independence” in this industry.

The corporate policies and practices described in this chapter reinforce the notion that the “big four” major labels manufacture popular musical artists. This construction is essentially paid for with buy-ins, co-op advertising money, exclusive only releases and centralized buying practices. Historically, major labels utilized retail “payola” to buy their way into retail stores, and essentially rigged the *Billboard* charts through a variety of methods. Even in the SoundScan era, there are a number of examples of how the charts continue to be manipulated. Major labels are able to buy and construct fame through their sheer market power and multinational conglomerate backing. Therefore it should come as no surprise why particular artists

become popular. Simply check which major label is backing the artist. “True” independent record labels don’t have the same financial backing as the major labels, and thus it comes as no surprise why indie artists rarely chart on the *Billboard* Top 40.

Pricing and the practice of selling music as a loss leader are systematic practices that undermine the independent record store. When “independent” labels sell their music to a chain like Best Buy, the logic of the market usurps the ideology of locality and the support of small business, and corporate competitors undercut indie stores. While this practice shouldn’t come as a surprise, it exemplifies how indie labels (along with their distributor) will sell to anyone willing to buy, regardless of their shared ideology of “independence.” In this example, the market trumps the ideology of “independence.” Independent labels and distributors will sell to anyone willing to buy, even Wal-Mart, which is notorious for censoring music. The same is true for indie labels that release material early to iTunes, so they can obtain prime placement. In both of these situations, it is the indie stores who suffer, or worse, who close down completely.

As noted, there is a tendency among indie storeowners and others related to record store culture (customers, workers, and record labels) to reinforce the imagined binary opposition separating independent and corporate culture. As I have outlined, it doesn’t make sense to demarcate these retailers in such terms, as they both utilize an array of intersecting policies and practices. They are not exclusive spheres. In fact, independent stores rely on corporate culture to define their own idiosyncratic

difference, or *brand*. For example, some indie stores resist the use of listening stations, co-op advertising, and label-based promotions. While such practices resist the corporate paradigm, indie stores continue to define themselves vis-à-vis corporate power. On the other hand, corporate retailers have continually co-opted subcultural fashion and vinyl records, and currently sell an array of “independent” music, which is mainly sold on their web sites (for example, Wal-MartMP3.com). While indie stores still have more musical variety in terms of the obscure (and local music, out of print material, etc.), the corporate retailers currently stock a wide array of “independent” releases, at least on-line. However, the in-store selection at the major big boxes continues to be limited.

When independent record stores embrace exclusive only releases on Record Store Day, sell music on Amazon.com, diversify product away from music, and accept co-op advertising money, there is little distinction between independent and corporate culture. In this context, the practices of the independent record store can hardly be considered progressive.

However, some used-only stores exist outside of the traditional music distribution system, and indie stores who only buy from indie distributors exhibit more autonomy from the dominant music industry. The selling of local music (sometimes with unconventional packaging and formats) fosters local scenes and communities. These practices distance indie stores from the dominant music industry and can be viewed as progressive, but they are nonetheless a business guided by markets and nature of capitalism.

As noted, independence begins to take on the realm of the *imagined*. Some storeowners and workers have displayed a distorted perception of independence, and imagine indie stores are somehow *external* to capitalism. The notion of independence becomes folkloric in scope, an ideology based on perceptions of independence, not economic reality.

The next chapter analyzes the key cultural characteristics, communities and ideologies surrounding the independent record store under the auspices of commodification.

CHAPTER VII

CULTURAL ANALYSIS, PART 1: COMMUNITIES, SUBCULTURAL CONNECTIONS, MUSICAL EDUCATION AND COMMODIFICATION IN THE INDEPENDENT RECORD STORE

This research project thus far has articulated how the independent record store is situated within the political economy of the dominant music industry and is influenced to various degrees by the policies and practices of this industry.

Up to this point, political economy has described how the overall playing field is structured and organized; however, critical cultural studies explores how the participants play the overall game. This doesn't suggest that the cultural approach is *outside* of commodification and late capitalism. It provides the tools necessary to analyze how the agents associated with indie record store culture construct narratives, actively develop rituals, and reinforce counter-hegemonic belief systems. At the core of this analysis is the exploration of how these narratives and social practices intersect with commodification, where the stores form their own independent *brand*. This necessitates an exploration of how actors create and contest cultural meanings.

This chapter explores the nature of communities in the independent record store, and how such spaces have a social function in terms of socialization. These communities

are comprised of a series of subcultures, and the indie record store *connects* individuals and groups. This chapter addresses the following research question:

Under the auspices of commodification, what are the cultural meanings and narratives within the independent record store, and what are its major defining characteristics in terms of community, subcultures, and as an educational space?

Communities and Social Aspects of Independent Record Stores

It is abundantly clear that indie stores foster social interaction and are a form of community. For some individuals, indie stores represent more of a social community space than for others. I would argue that certain indie stores foster community better than other stores, especially in terms of their corporate, big box counterparts.

This notion of community corresponds with Putnam (2000), who contends that the activity of non-political groups such as those who play on a local sports team can be considered a form of civic engagement. Such interactions build social capital and social networks that are necessary for a healthy democracy.

Currently, consumers are increasingly purchasing music via the Internet as opposed to shopping in a physical record store, thus altering the nature of civic engagement and human interaction. In his later work, Putnam (2003) considers the Internet in terms of developing communities, but rather emphasizes the importance of face-to-face interaction in terms of developing a real and concrete social foundation, whereas the Internet works in terms of reinforcing the real and tangible networks already in place. While on-line communities certain can and do form, physical record stores emphasize face-to-face interaction.

For some customers, going to an indie record store is a weekly ritual where they dig through the latest used vinyl records that have been traded in – and spend much time talking with the workers and other customers about music, concerts, and life in general. Regulars and store employees address each other by name. The interactions that occur at the cash register regularly turn into lengthy conversation. Groups of teenage skate kids come in together, skateboards in hand, as they look over the punk 7” vinyl section. Others spend a quiet afternoon, meditatively sifting through records for hours on end, without making a sound to anyone. Others sing enthusiastically to the music playing in the store. Some “customers” visit indie stores and chat with the workers without buying anything. Local musicians hang posters advertising a concert, thus reinforcing the larger community outside the store. As Greg Sutherland at the House of Records in Eugene, Oregon notes, indie record stores represent a “microcosm of bigger society,” and that “It’s a little society in here.”

For those willing to make the investment, indie stores are a place to talk and learn about music, build friendships, and meet other people in the community. Tony Green, a store manager at Amoeba Music, an indie superstore located in San Francisco, comments:

One of the things that’s really big here is when people come up to the counter, and they don’t know the song, but they can sing a couple of bars, and we call it ‘name that tune.’ And everybody gathers around and they sing a few bars, and it’s like this big race to be the first person to get it, and you don’t get that at iTunes, or wherever... It’s just a really great atmosphere here, and people having fun, and I love working here, and I get a big kick out of being here. You don’t get that from staring at your computer screen. I think there is always going to be a place for music fans to interact for social interaction... It still has an energy of its own.

Store interactions between customers and workers tend to be playful and relaxed, as opposed to a rigid corporate system where such interactions are more institutionalized, and the kind of talk is built into particular codes and policies of behavior. As Green comments on the “atmosphere,” the social interactions available “in-store” is something that can’t be replicated by a “computer screen.” thus suggesting that mediated interaction is not the same as human physical interaction. In person interaction and community has primacy over mediated forms of community.

Scott Simmons at Exiled Records in Portland claims that shopping at an independent record store transcends “typical” commodity consumption:

It’s not somewhere where you’re going to buy a record and take off. You can have meaningful conversations and meet people and you can get a little bit more out of it than just, you know, going to Fred Meyer to buy bread or a six pack of beer. I think it works on a higher level than that.

Shopping at an indie record store has importance beyond the typical buying and selling of goods. By comparing Exiled Records to Fred Meyer, a department chain, shopping in a corporate context is an anonymous experience, where commodities are purchased minus social interaction or community. In an indie store, music as a commodity form has a different social value than “beer” and “bread,” that the experience is somehow beyond such mundane consumption and commodity exchange. To be “working on a higher level” is to demarcate indie stores as having a different social function than corporate stores.

Gracon (2009) conducted a case study of the House of Records, a generalist indie store based in Eugene, Oregon; this study explores notions of community and social

interaction. For many customers, shopping at House of Records is a weekly ritual. Many browse through the used record bins looking for the latest trade-ins, which are constantly circulating and changing. On one particular Sunday, several customers commented that this is what they do every weekend and the space is valued in terms of identity and one's relational community. Herman, a customer for several decades, comments:

If this were in other countries, this would be called a marketplace. I don't mean a place of selling and buying, but a place of social activities, and people mixing and meeting, and being friendly.

A long time customer named Chico discussed the store as a space beyond commodity exchange and music consumption. This could be framed as the social relevance of the space, or how the store acts as a subcultural marker of sorts, where people congregate, and a sense of community pervades. For example, Chico claimed the store is kind of "detox," or "like stopping in for a beer after work," as the environment is relaxing and is a place to unwind from the stress of work and to happily disappear into the shelves of old vinyl. This community feeling relates to his comments regarding House of Records as a "family" and "home," citing an experience of the store in the early 1990s akin to "Thanksgiving," a kind of family atmosphere. He referred to the store as "House of Recs," as if talking to a close friend with a special nickname. He also described a situation where at times he fields questions from other customers (as recommended by the employees) while waiting in line, which implies a more active participation in the space.

Emily West Afanador, the drummer of the local Eugene band Telepathic Dumpster, comments on how the atmosphere of House of Records is more conducive to social interaction:

I think the atmosphere is conducive to talking to people. You're not under florescent lights at House of Records. It's a house, and it feels like you're welcome to talk to people. And you look through the isles of the records and you see someone looking back at you – and it just seems more natural place for conversation to erupt. When you're at a department store, people aren't encouraged to talk to you and it's more isolating and often times you don't want the clerk to talk to you. You kind of want to just be left alone. Get in and get out.

Emily's observations regarding the atmosphere of the store suggest conditioned behavior, where social interaction, or how conversation “erupts,” is largely dependent on the context. Being in a “house” as opposed to being under “florescent lighting” is more “natural,” and is conducive to conversation and community. In a department store, it is assumed consumption is more anonymous, and interactions are not expected or encouraged, and thus, such stores are less about community.

Numerous customers at the House of Records enjoy the social interactions with the store employees, and in some situations, forge friendships with them. While researching this store, I was asked to be in a band, to play a variety of records on my college radio show, and was invited to several concerts and events, all while being mistaken as a store employee. I also made a few musical recommendations to customers.

Backroom Records and Pastries, based in Montreal, Canada, is an extension of Warren Hill's apartment. The store is an unsanctioned and quasi-legal store (he doesn't pay taxes or have a business permit) that operates through word of mouth advertising. To find out if the store is open, one must locate a vinyl record dangling from a back alley stairwell that leads to the shop, signifying that someone is "working." The store focuses on used vinyl records and, at times, locally made baked goods and pastries. Upon comparing his store with a corporate chain, Hill comments, "I can't think of two things that are more different than those two." Hill claims:

Mine is my house, and that's where I live, and people come into my kitchen and use my bathroom and sit in my kitchen and hang out and drink tea or play dominos or whatever... We'd have various different events whether it be, some kind of party – we had some people come in and make meals and serve them out, or I'd have grilled cheese day, where for every customer that came in, I'd make them a grilled cheese sandwich. But generally it's more of like a hangout spot for me and my friends. And people to come in and sit around and listen to records.

While Hill's store is an extreme example, its outright obscurity and quasi-legal nature are no doubt part of its appeal. It's a place to "hang out," "party," "listen to records," and "play dominos," which is a very different agenda to *only* selling commodities and earning profits. The practice of making meals and having "grilled cheese day" also suggests a communal atmosphere.

The store contains elements of vernacular culture. According to Lantis (1960), vernacular culture expresses that which is native or common to a locality, region, or by extension, to a trade or other group (p. 203). It refers to cultural forms made and organized by ordinary people for their own pleasure in modern societies. Such culture is almost always engaged in on a non-profit and voluntary basis, and is

often associated with tightly organized subcultures and religious cultures. According to Geertz (1987), it is the kind of culture that has been developed by a people or majority of people to express their own meanings and values to apply to customs and works, as opposed to a repressive imposition of commercial saturation from the top down (p. 2). As participants use the space for “hanging out” and “listening to records,” the store ceases to exist only as a commercial act.

When not selling records, Richard Vivian, the owner of San Francisco’s RPM, a store that specializes in soul 45 vinyl records, has been known to offer dance lessons on the side. He echoes the casual and relaxed gathering environment of his store:

People come in for that experience, and I had a black woman who worked for me for 15 years, passed away. She was an old blues singer and she knew music right and left, and she was hilarious. We played cards every Friday. I mean it’s a community. If I, I could have a latte machine in here if I wasn’t so lazy. Cause that’s the kind of place it feels like. People eat their lunch here. I always have this table.

While indie stores are suggestive of community, Lisa Schonberg, the drummer of the Portland band Explode into Colors, describes how independent record stores are more than just economic centers; they are also places that allow a community to foster in unexpected ways. Lisa notes:

The independent record stores have an investment in the community that goes way beyond economics. For instance, I am one of the organizers for a listening party and discussion about female drummers at our local drum shop called Revival this coming week. The plan is to listen and talk about female drummers, and spin all sorts of bands that have female drummers. Mississippi Records invited us to borrow any records we wanted to from their store for the event. What are the chances that a corporate Best Buy, Wal-Mart, or Sam Goody would do that? We

borrowed them and then returned them. I am not sure if they gained anything besides knowing that they were extremely generous and sweet and helpful!

Lisa's initiative to form this workshop, along with musical suggestions and the "borrowing" of music, suggests that Mississippi Records, a Portland-based vinyl only store, operates as more than a record store. To have a workshop where people can gather and discuss music without the pressure to actually purchase anything is suggestive of a more community-based approach towards music culture. At corporate stores, the "borrowing" of music for such cultural purposes would be unthinkable. Also, it is unlikely the big boxes would have a broad selection of music featuring female drummers.

There are other examples of indie stores being more than just a place of commodity consumption. The Museum of Unfine Art in Eugene, Oregon, a quirky record store specializing in off-kilter musical genres such as "non-categorizable," also doubles as an art gallery where local artists and students exhibit their wares. The exhibition in the store included works conducted by elementary school students – a project coordinated with a local schoolteacher (see Appendix A., Figure 26).

Jackpot Records in Portland, Oregon, hosts an annual free film festival. The films included in the 2010 event explored the history and politics of music, such as *Do it Yourself: The Story of Rough Trade*, a look at iconic indie record store and record label, and *You Weren't There: A History of Chicago Punk 1977-1984*. In the past, Jackpot hosted Record Store Day, where customers could partake in a foosball tournament with the local band Menomena.

The Musical Offering, a classical music store in Berkeley, California, doubles as a café and coffee shop. The owner of Force of Habit, a punk store based in San Francisco,

also books and promotes live concerts for touring bands – and thus actively works to foster live music and cultural events outside the store. Portland’s Music Millennium offers a singer-songwriter workshop, where local musicians gather, discuss and critique their artistic progress. The store also hosts an annual customer appreciation barbeque in the parking lot behind the store, where hundreds of customers show up. Skills, an indie store located in Berkeley, California, focuses on electronic music. The store offers workshops and lessons on how to be a DJ, thus giving people the opportunity to be cultural producers and not just consumers of music.

It is important to note, however, that the communities associated with the independent record store are occurring in the context of commodification – and the line separating a community gathering and commerce can be ambiguous.

For example, many independent stores have live in-store performances, where a touring band performs in a record store. These events are often free, and customers and fans can gather, watch the performance, and customers can simply leave without purchasing anything. However, the in-store events usually promote a new release. As a result, the in-store is a form of indie *branding*, where the live performance associates the artist with the store. The experience is the *ad*. For example, the Mae Shi, an art-rock band from LA, performed in Amoeba Music in Berkeley. While many people gathered to watch the live event, the band members were *branded* with Amoeba stickers and the event was recorded and placed on the store’s webpage. As a result, Amoeba brands the band. In-store performances get customers into the stores. On the surface, this seems

like a community event, but the intention is that customers will also purchase other merchandise.

Another example blurs the line between community and commodification. In the fall of 2009, Music Millennium hosted a Beatles release party. EMI Records re-issued the Beatles' back catalog as a box set. The party had a festive feel, and free food was served as various Beatles songs played through the speakers. News cameras were on hand to capture the event. The customers congregated and talked about their favorite Beatles songs and youthful memories of the iconic band. While this event had a community feel – as a fairly large group of enthusiastic customers were present – the event was nonetheless based around the selling of an expensive box set. Beatles fans were harvested as the party or spectacle facilitated the commodification of music (see Appendix A., Figure 19).

The independent record store can be a form of community to some, but it can be exclusive to others. Some customers feel intimidated by the unusual or unpredictable design of some stores, as they might be “too funky.” Richard Vivian, the owner of RPM Records in San Francisco, claims, “People love coming in here for the most part, um, there are people who come in, turn right around and walk out. It doesn't work for them.” Scott Simmons, the owner of Exiled Records in Portland echoes this behavior: “Some people walk in, and immediately they are stoked. I'm sure of plenty of other people walk in and are like, this place is horrible. And they take off.”

Sometimes store workers made cynical comments about customers behind their back, especially when dealing with repetitive and mundane questions. Thus, relationships in the store are not always harmonious and friendly. Richard Vivian at RPM Records comments on the harsh attitudes of some storeowners, as well as his own behavior towards customers who annoy him, thus providing exceptions to a harmonious community:

A lot of record shops, you walk in there, and you feel like you're like in a museum in there, and the owners are very territorial and angry... And I can be grumpy too, but, there is so much freshness around here, and there is always something in here that perks me up for the assholes that bring me down, I mean, you will not believe the stupid questions people ask. Sometimes it's so stupid it's funny. But a lot of times it's just so stupid, it's annoying.

It was a common theme for customers to feel awkward (at some point) in indie stores. Some felt they lacked musical knowledge, or were embarrassed about their musical taste. Kelsey, a customer at House of Records, claims:

When I was in high school, I was really intimidated by record store employees, and I always thought the stuff I was picking out wasn't cool enough to buy from the counter. I used to make my little brother come in the store with me. I'd give him the stuff I wanted to buy and the money, and have him go up the counter for me and get it because I was too embarrassed to buy it from the store clerks (laughs).

According to Gracon (2009), one of the few female customers at the House of Records notes, "Sometimes it can be a little bit intimidating because there're all these male employees, and being the only female in there, and there're all these guys, so you sometimes feel a bit excluded." Gender issues related to record collecting connects with Straw (1997), who contends that the valorization of the obscure increasingly stands revealed as dependent on the homosocial world of young men. Straw writes:

Just as ongoing conversation between men shapes the composition and extension of each man's collection, so each man finds, in the similarity of his points of reference to those of his peers, confirmation of a shared universe of critical judgment (p. 5).

However, I met several enthusiastic female record collectors during the study.

Kelly Stoltz, an employee at Groove in San Francisco, comments on gender relations in his store:

There are girls who know what they want, the liberated record buying women (laughs). They know what they want, and they don't need some dude to drag them around, and tell them what's cool. So that's cool. We definitely have a few, we have about three or four regulars who are girls or women who come in and buy stuff.

Lastly, several store workers described examples where they dealt with shoplifters. Thus, not everybody views independent record stores as a form of community.

Big box stores have a vastly different approach towards community. A store manager of Target on the West coast describes the music section as not having a sense of community, and that the shopping experience is "isolating." Shoppers are often "in a hurry." In terms of a community in the music section, the manager claims:

The music section exists to serve them, trying to figure what they want, but it doesn't pull people in on its own. I can't remember seeing people who are regulars, necessarily... If they don't know each other, they're not really talking to each other. A small amount, and it's not the norm at all. If they're dressed the same way, they might talk about something, but not typically. It's not a place where you meet in the jazz section and talk about jazz.

Marcus Hernandez, an Electronics Specialist at Target in Springfield, Oregon, encounters regular customers in his section, but observes a lack of interaction amongst store customers. Hernandez says:

Not so much. It's more of an individual thing. Barring families and friends that come together, we don't really get guests that interact with each other, or recommend things to each other. They come to me for recommendations or anything that they are looking for.

Ryan Polischeck, a Media Associate at Best Buy located in Springfield, Oregon, claims that music in the store is a "grab and go" item, where the customer grabs the item and leaves without any kind of social interaction. Store employees are not encouraged to talk to customers:

You don't just go up and talk to a person about a CD for an hour. You know what I mean? Because you're not selling it to them. Typically they know what they want or they go in just to browse, because they want a new CD, and they look and see if anything catches their eye... And if anything catches their eye, and they grab it, and take it to the front, and you don't even interact with them.

In terms of viewing the entertainment section at Best Buy as a gathering place, Polischeck claims:

Not really, when you're talking CDs. You get people who do it in games, with displays where they can actually go and deal with, but our music section doesn't really have a way to listen. And it's only one aisle big (laughs). It's not a really happening place. More people come in and they want to play rock band or DJ Hero.

Target and Best Buy do little to foster community and social interaction in the music/electronics section of their stores. They are in many ways the opposite of the independent record store in terms of community and interaction. In the corporate context, the shopping is more individualized and an isolated experience. At Best Buy, social interaction with the customers isn't a focus of the job. The media specialist position is geared towards selling more expensive items like iPods (which ironically affects the sustainability of the independent record store) or other electronics, as opposed to discussing the nuances of CDs and music culture.

In conclusion, I have explored the nature of community in the independent record store. The stores are considered to be an important form of community. However, there are exceptions to this community nature and, for a minority of customers, the stores can be seen as being exclusive and/or intimidating, and in-store interactions are not always so harmonious. The stores are also known for being male-dominated.

The fostering of community intersects with commodification, and in-store performances and gatherings to celebrate, for example, the re-release of the Beatles box set blurs the lines between branding and community. To this end, the communities that gather in indie stores are harvested towards consumerism and commodification.

Indie Stores as a Subcultural Connector

In the context of community, the independent record store acts as a *subcultural connector*. A subcultural connector allows music-based subcultures such as indie hipsters, hip-hop heads, punks, hardcore kids, hippies, and ravers (as well as those who don't fit into a specific subcultural category) a place to gather, learn about music culture, and actively participate in culture. Indie stores foster an atmosphere where participants can be *connected* to other like-minded people with similar interests, as well as to other subcultural activities in the community. I explore these connections in terms of band formation, locality and locally produced music releases, punk culture, rave scenes, and through an examination of flyers and posters associated with the stores.

Jon Ginoli, a former employee at Amoeba Music in San Francisco and the singer/guitarist for the gay punk band Pansy Division, describes the makeup of characters which constitute a “bohemian” subculture in Amoeba:

It’s a record store, and it’s full of prickly personalities and anti-social people who would rather be hanging around in a record store than working in an office or doing whatever kind of regular job. So you get a certain amount of misfits and oddballs. And they have very different opinions about things, especially about music. But you put them all together and you have a really nice cross section of sort of bohemian underground, as much as you can in a city where it is so expensive to live.

Ginoli’s comments reinforce the “non-normative” or sub-cultural nature of those who congregate in independent stores. They are “prickly personalities,” “anti social people,” and “misfits” and “oddballs.” This collective “difference” – or “homology” as Hebdige (1976) refers to it – is a common theme in indie stores.

Eric Isaacson at Mississippi Records in Portland views his store as a community hub that *connects* artists and musicians within the community. Isaacson says:

We definitely work as a kind of networking house for a lot of art people and music people, which is great. I’ve seen many people meet here and they go on to do projects together. And the staff here is really good about connecting people too. People come in and ask for like, you know, do you know about any apartments for rent? Do you know anyone who plays this kind of music? Or who is looking for this kind of art venue or music venue? All that comes through here too. It’s pretty connected.

Isaacson’s comments reinforce indie stores as places that foster community interaction, where artists and bands can be connected to other like-minded artists, thus fostering cultural production outside of the actual store.

Various bands note the importance of independent record stores in terms of learning about new music and, as a result, bands and local music scenes have formed.

In the 1970s, punk culture was becoming increasingly popular in the UK with bands like the Sex Pistols and The Jam. Yet these releases were not widely available in the United States. The punk subculture was largely an underground phenomenon, and it was not part of the mass media system. Calvin Johnson of the band Beat Happening and founder of K Records, an influential independent record label in Olympia, Washington, describes punk culture during this era and how the indie record store connected him to other punk rockers:

Like in England, punk was a phenomenon. Teenagers were becoming punk rockers... The regular teenagers (in the USA), they never hear the word punk rock. So the people who were like, I've heard of this punk thing, what is it? There was no Internet... I'm living in Olympia, Washington, and I'm reading about punk rock, but I had no idea what it sounds like. I just know that it's what I wanted to be involved in... There were certain stores, like a Cellophane Square, that was the store where the Seattle punk rockers would gather. And that's where you'd find out about the new records.

Independent record stores were the first retailers to carry punk releases from the UK and experimental music from Germany in the form of imports. No other mainstream or department retail store carried import releases. Mark Hossler, one of the founders of the band/art collective Negativland, and who was responsible for coining the phrase "culture jamming," has made a career out of re-mixing popular culture into audio and video collages. In his formative teenage years, Mark discovered the import section at Rather Ripped Records, a store located in Berkeley, California. The record store in his suburban town did not carry import releases, thus Rather Ripped connected him to diverse musical releases and his future band mates. Discovering Rather Ripped had a very large impact on his aesthetic sensibility. Hossler claims:

I mean, the sounds were just so alien and different, and so wild, and so exciting, and being in this suburban environment (where he lived), that was so bland and boring, you know, just finding this stuff, was like exotic, culture from another universe or planet... And my whole education around music, you know, is entirely due to them. Entirely.

Upon discovering imported music, Hossler decided to “make the music I want to hear more of, but can’t find,” and later met Richard and David, who were also customers at Rather Ripped. They later formed Negativland, whose name refers to the German krautrock band, Neu! Negativland’s early experimental records were made by hand, and each album cover was a different collage constructed with magazines from the 1950s and wallpaper samples. Their records sold at local stores such as Aquarius and Rather Ripped, as the mainstream stores wouldn’t stock music with inconsistent packaging. Through independent distribution, the records were shipped all over the world, from Japan to Holland to Germany. Hossler recounts his feelings at the time about how independent distribution further connected the band to a wider audience in the wake of punk and the Sex Pistols:

But of course our work then got out there because it was going into independent record stores, through these new independent distributors, and really all of that, there was this explosion of independently released music in the wake of the Sex Pistols. Even though the Sex Pistols were on a major label, there was all these groups, in London and stuff, who were putting out all these 7” singles and all these people putting out independent stuff. So, it was exciting too, because, you know, definitely the businesses of distribution that grew up around it were not people doing it to make a bunch of money. They were just absolutely excited about music, and they wanted to see this music get out there.

Calvin Johnson of K Records cites independent record stores as a place that connected him to a larger underground musical milieu, especially in terms of locally produced releases.

In 1978, when I was first doing a radio show on KAOS, I would go to Cellophane Square (in Seattle), and they would have a whole wall of local 7" records. And that's when I first heard about the Wipers. Their first single was on that wall. Oh, I'll get that. And I kind of bought it, and I was like, this is really good. But their emphasis was, here is the local music, so it was all Seattle, Vancouver, and Portland bands, that had 45s out, and they were featuring them at their store. And I was like, I'm interested in local music, I'm going to check this out. In that way, the record stores were helping foster the local scene by being a connection or outlet for them.

These bands helped to foment a local scene and community, putting out musical releases by local small-scale labels with a grassroots approach in which people made their own culture on a local level. This approach was an alternative to the top-down model of mass culture; punk subcultures were participatory in nature. For example, after discovering the Wipers, Johnson organized a concert in Olympia, where his band Beat Happening opened for the Wipers. This event caught the eye of another musician named Buzz, who later formed the Melvins. Johnson and Buzz were connected to each other through the local indie store, Rainy Day Records. Johnson claims:

That was the first time I talked to Buzz, and it was a year before the Melvins existed. He was a weird kid in a small town, who wanted to make music and he wanted to play shows, and through the record store he connected with other people who were into similar things. And we were like, okay, and we're going to open this club, and I definitely want to have your band play. And that was all through Dave at Rainy Day Records connecting people. So it was definitely a focal point, it was like the general store, you know, in the old west where everyone kind of hung out on the porch, whittling and spitting.

Johnson notes that a number of local bands such as the Screaming Trees formed through the intersection of independent record stores and the local radio station KOAS. The Olympia scene later fostered the feminist leaning riot grrrl movement with bands such as Bikini Kill. Olympia was a stopping point for bands such as Nirvana, who later epitomized the popular and hyper-commodified "grunge" movement. The underground

musical scenes of the Pacific Northwest became co-opted and massified into the dominant music industry.

The punk ideology was “coerced” by the economy to eventually shift toward commercialization and sameness (Bashir, 2005). Adorno (1989) insists that “autonomous” art forms, which of course rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, are tendentially eliminated by the culture industry, which happens with or without the conscious will of those in control. Today, punk commodities are sold at a typical shopping mall, having become mainstream products where the original danger of punk has been commodified. This process of commodification relates to Debord’s (1967) concept of the spectacle; Debord writes, “Media culture proliferates ever more technologically sophisticated spectacles to seize audiences and augment their power and profit – and it unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena” (p. 10).

Tim Moriarry at Skills, an indie store in Berkeley, is devoted to the underground rave and dance music scene, and acts as a subcultural connector. As previously mentioned, the store conducts DJ workshops where one can learn to become a performing DJ. The store also connects the dance and rave subcultures to underground dance scenes that take place in unsanctioned venues such as old factories (which are illegal events), and Moriarry’s store acts as a “map point,” where the location of particular rave events are not revealed until the day of the event. Tickets can be purchased in the store. Skills connects participants to a particular subcultural community of the “late night movement.” As Moriarry notes:

Basically, we support the rave culture (laughs). The rave and club culture, because it's still viewed upon by a lot of society as being a horrible dirty place, and there are still some raves in dingy warehouses, but that's kind of the fun, playing in some place where it's a little bit more sketchy... Night time people like music loud, and day time people usually don't. And it's kind of an interesting clash of cultures and we obviously support the late night movement.

Moriarry notes that tickets for these events are now sold online. As a result, the line of 600 people winding down the block has been reduced to "the nine people waiting outside to buy tickets." However, the storeowner notes the social value of the space and how the dance subculture had connected in the store. Moriarry claims:

Because a lot of people come in here, and meet each other, and they go, 'Oh, were you at that show? I remember meeting you.' And it's like a reconnection for people that just stumble in here to buy a ticket and listen to records, and meet people that they met in the past, and chat it up.

John Klots, the owner of Anthem Records in Portland, fosters the experimental noise music scene with his "weird wall," an eclectic spread of limited edition or "micro editions" consisting of individually hand crafted cassette tapes packaged in a variety of colors and designs (see Appendix A., Figure 9). The store is known as an outpost of atonal and noise music, as touring bands will stop at his store to buy and sell cassettes and help get the word out about local noise performances at local venues in Portland, thus connecting the store directly to local music scene.

Greg Saunier, drummer for the San Francisco band Deerhoof, notes the importance of independent stores being one of the few outlets that carried his releases. By selling its records in independent stores, the band was able to connect to other people, and the record caught the attention of Thurston Moore from the band Sonic Youth. Saunier claims:

Years later after my band Deerhoof was formed, independent record stores became central to my livelihood. Our first releases were 7" singles and an LP, and the only shops that carried them were independents. In some cases, it was finding our record in such a store that initiated relationships that would become important for us later. Thurston Moore discovered Deerhoof in this way and contacted us about opening for his band Sonic Youth, which we have now done several times.

Jon Ginoli, a former employee at Amoeba Music and member of the band Pansy Division, notes that chain stores wouldn't carry his music, but that fans of the band are unlikely to shop at a major chain stores. Corporate stores lack subcultural capital. Ginoli makes these distinctions in comparison with Amoeba Music in San Francisco:

Wal-Mart wouldn't carry them. They're too risqué. A gay band, some bad words in it, some risqué album covers. But the crowd that would be interested in our music probably isn't shopping there. It's more specialized. It's more of a music fan than a music consumer. The fan vs. consumer thing is a big issue. A store like us is for someone who is a fan, someone who is a consumer, who does not dig deeper, then it's not a very useful place. We have all that stuff too, but we have all these other things as well.

A store customer at House of Records in Eugene, Oregon, commented on the social aspects of music collecting and the social importance of the store. What this reveals is the collective nature of record collecting and the importance of independent spaces, as well as how the store connects those in a subcultural community through the format of vinyl records (Gracon, 2009). This relates to what Maffesoli described as the social nature of group development and how group dynamics are learned: "The ritual perpetuates itself, and through the variety of routine or everyday gestures, the community is reminded that it is whole, or part of a tribe's collective sentiment."

For such a place to close would mean a lot, and this “collective sentiment” was clearly evident in the social aspect of buying and listening to records. Jordan, a customer at the House of Records, claims:

Well it’s something that me and all of my friends relate to. My friend Joe lives in an apartment just right across the street, and so we’d come over here and pick up records, so it’s a lot of what we talk about, and we share records and sit around and listen to records. It’s a collective part of me and my friends’ lives. If this place were gone, it would be like part of our life was displaced or gone.

Subcultural scenes are promoted in independent stores. For example, stores that specialize in hip-hop culture sell local DJ mixes. While DJ mixes are also on-line, physical hip-hop stores foster the connection between DJs and the local community (see Appendix A., Figure 15).

Another local scene, zinesters, or producers of fanzines – a localized do-it-yourself independent form of publishing, are occasionally sold in indie stores (see Appendix A., Figure 8). Zines have all but disappeared from independent record stores, with the exception of a few locations. However, in the 1990s, zines were sold predominantly in independent record stores; sales in these locations definitely fostered the zine subculture at the time, which also served to connect me to the indie/punk community in Buffalo, New York.

Flyers and posters connect customers and subcultures to other social events in the community. The posting area of indie stores acts as a “free space” where community members can connect to other communities and scenes. The flyers are often non-corporate, localized and vernacular in nature (see Appendix A., Figures 13). The posting area acts as a kiosk or quasi public space where anyone (for the most part) can post

information about cultural events happening in a given community, to encourage others to participate in these events (see Appendix A., Figure 12).

For example, a local band can advertise concerts at local music venues and unsanctioned spaces such as a house show, VFW post, or church basement. The flyers can be a main source of advertising as some bands don't get coverage or reviews in the local papers – and are thus outside the confines of mass media. Flyers on telephone poles or other “public” spaces around town can get torn down; thus indie stores represent a legitimized form of “public” discourse and serve as a vernacular form of advertising. Flyers allow musicians to seek out other like-minded musicians looking to form a band. Flyers also advertise oddball underground film festivals such as “Radical Film Night,” political protests and activist causes ranging from legalizing marijuana to World Naked Bike Ride Day. The Eugene Free School in Eugene, Oregon, hosts local do-it-yourself workshops, which serve as alternatives to institutionalized education. These workshops foster connections and interaction outside the record store. While the aesthetic of the flyers can vary, oftentimes they embody the DIY aesthetic of hand made, cut and paste, while others are computer generated and slicker in appearance (see Appendix A., Figure 30).

It is important to note that flyers and posters cannot be hung at a corporate chain store. In fact, these stores don't even offer a community space in which to post items from the community. When asked about what would happen if someone hung a flyer in his store, a Target store manager on the west coast claims, “I would have to take it down. That's what I mean, that whole branding experience is unified, and you can't add to that.”

This lack of ability to hang flyers means that customers at a corporate store have no ability to participate in or perpetuate a local discourse. Local culture is simply cut off, and it is more difficult to connect customers in the store to other community events. A big box store such as Target maintains hegemonic control over the kinds of information available in the store.

The notion of a subcultural connector allows resistance and empowerment to take shape not simply as signification and representations, but also in creating an unusual kind of public sphere (Calhoun 1992; Habermas 1991). Indie stores embody this unusual public sphere as they blur the lines between community and commodification. This situation connects to Bourdieu's (1993) theory of the "field of cultural production," wherein a network of social relationships is organized around a particular practice and is relatively autonomous from the social structure at large (Moore, 2007, p. 440). However, while indie stores might be autonomous, they are by no means external to the logic of capital.

While independent record stores foster and reinforce communities and subcultural capital, we must still ask to what degree subcultural capital is necessary for the further harvesting of commodification. If the subculture is based on style and the consumption of vinyl records, CDs, and items such as posters, t-shirts, and hair dye, then the connection between commodification and subcultural capital becomes more apparent. Subcultural identity is acquired through consumption. Tim Moriarry of Skills illustrates this point:

I want to see the scene grow, and keep moving new fans in. This store is noted as an all around dance music store, and we don't just sell records. We sell other stuff

too. Rave club wear, fishnets for the girls, and lights for the light show people, glow sticks, shirts and clothing.

Tim wants the scene to “grow” and “keep moving new fans in,” which helps to develop a subcultural scene or community in terms of rave and dance culture. As this quote articulates, being part of this subculture involves the commodification of other accessories associated with the subculture. Subcultural style must be purchased. This is a clear example of how subcultural capital and “independent” branding processes are at play.

Community and commodification intersect in other ways. Most indie stores rely on a steady stream of used music from customers or the “community.” In fact, most indie stores subsist through the sale of used music, as the profit margin is higher than with new music. However, the exchange between the stores and customers intersects with the market logic, as indie stores profit from their customers. Recorded music is bought from the customers at a low price. The music is then marked up, usually by a considerable percentage, and re-sold in the store. As a result, indie stores profit from the community during this exchange, and they need the community in order to stock “new” music.

As previously mentioned, the annual Record Store Day blurs the lines between community and commodification. Record Store Day (RSD) is a “holiday” that pays homage to the “brick and mortar” record store, and major and indie labels release limited edition and rare material to be sold exclusively on this particular day. The April 2010 event was extremely popular, receiving national media attention, and was extremely lucrative for independent stores. At the 2010 RSD, I visited Eugene’s CD World, where Frank Black of the Pixies conducted a live in-store performance. The store was packed

with customers. However, at the core of this community gathering was commodification. While the concert was free, the implicit meaning of the event was not only experience live music, but to “gather” *and* to sell music.

Upon leaving the store, I was given a bag of promotional materials and free music, most of it stemming from the major labels. The Record Store Day bag itself was designed in a way that resembled the do-it-yourself aesthetic associated with fanzine and punk culture. With its variety of flashy fonts and text glorifying the tangible nature and better sound quality of vinyl records (one quote claimed, “Truly, records are a scientific wonder!”), this promotional device was clearly co-opting the subcultural affinity towards the vinyl format. However, the textual co-option was ironic considering the major labels devised a policy that essentially phased out vinyl records in the early 1990s by making them non-returnable to distributors. This policy forced music retailers and consumers to embrace the CD format. As a result, the major labels (as well as some indie labels) and indie stores use Record Store Day as a public relations device, where the community element is harvested for economic gain. However, corporate purse strings are clearly a factor in terms of the kind of music sold, as well as the kind of promotional devices available on Record Store Day, despite the “independent” appearance of the consumer based “holiday.”

Labor in indie stores intersects with community, as well as the larger structures of capital. The employees of most indie stores consider themselves as part of a community and at times as part of a “family.” However, most stores are arranged in a hierarchical manner. While smaller stores usually have an owner and a couple of employees, larger

stores have complex arrangements that often mimic corporate culture. For example, larger indie stores such as Music Millennium have a stratified business environment. The owner oversees the entire operation and is responsible for buying music, which is a clear division of labor from those working on the floor. Floor “wage” workers sell their labor power to the owner, who profits from their time and energy. Thus, the business model is not different from other non-independent businesses, and reinforces the capitalist status quo.

Furthering this labor thread, indie store workers earn fairly low wages (typically minimum wage) and often lack benefits, although some larger chains provide benefits. However, workers gain much in terms of subcultural capital, as the job is highly coveted in the subcultural community. Upon closer analysis, indie store workers accept this exploitation of wage labor at the expense of earning subcultural capital. Because the job is coveted, there is no shortage of people willing to be exploited in this “independent” context. The spectacle of working at an indie store overshadows or conceals the inherent exploitation of wage labor.

I would argue that too much emphasis on the community aspect of indie stores can conceal the fact that indie stores are, at their very foundation, businesses. Greg Saunier of the band Deerhoof describes the relationship between his record label and indie stores:

I just know that Kill Rock Stars is an independent label, but in order to continue to exist, they are spending almost their entire workday stressed out, in efforts to turn a profit. I assume it would be the same for any indie store. If they don't turn some kind of bare minimum profit, then they can't pay their rent and they shut down. The small business is just as concerned with money as the big one, if not more so due to desperation.

In sum, the independent record store acts as a cultural hub that enables various subcultures to connect in the community. Underground musical scenes such as punk, rave culture and noise scenes have been reinforced and promoted by indie stores. These subcultures and their relationship to indie stores are, nonetheless, bounded by processes of commodification, where subcultures are harvested through the buying and selling commodities.

Indie Stores as Educational Spaces

Indie record stores can act as educational spaces. Since customers place much trust into the taste and advice of the store employees, much information is exchanged. Sometimes the flow goes both ways, from customer to employee and vice versa. Tony Green, a manager at Amoeba Music in San Francisco notes the particular vernacular of musical “language” in indie stores: “I think that if you’re a music fan, you can come in here and you know you’re going to get someone who speaks your language here.”

This “language” entails knowledge of musical history and the margins of music culture. It entails knowing who has influenced whom in terms of music, and knowing about particular releases and the labels that put them out. It requires an understanding and depth in terms of various musical genres. In a generalist store, it is likely that one of the employees focuses on a particular genre, whereas a niche store specializes in and is knowledgeable about a specific genre such as punk, classical, indie or hip-hop.

Gracon (2009) writes about an encounter at House of Records in Eugene, in which an alternative musical education takes place through face-to-face interaction

between the customers and store employees. Russ, a University of Oregon freshman, was eager to learn more about the history of independent music. He stood at the counter as Aaron, an employee, suggested a number of different artists to complement his recent purchase of the *Wire* box set. For about thirty minutes, Aaron rotated a series of records with the attempt to introduce Russ to something new, something he had never heard before. The “student” patiently stood there, deep in concentration until a small grin formed on his face, almost blushing. The explosive sounds of Mogwai blasted through the speakers. Russ appeared impressed. Russ clearly put his faith in the expert advice of Aaron, and kept waiting until he heard something he liked, and ended up special ordering a copy of Mogwai’s *Young Team*.

The counter at House of Records is an exchange of ideas, and a place where people can be exposed to music they may otherwise not have the opportunity to hear. In a way, this counter offers an informal education in musical culture, covering the mainstream to the fringes. It is a place where customers can receive a great deal of personal attention and have the opportunity to listen to and learn about new and obscure music, selectively making a purchase based on this education. The customers often trust the opinions and recommendations of the employees. Sam, a regular House of Records customer, comments:

Since I know people here, it’s nice to come in, and see what’s new, and see if they have any new recommendations. There’s a different sense of ideals behind what they’re doing. They’re like propagators of fine art, instead of counter monkeys. I like coming down here and looking and doing, rather than sitting in front of a computer.

Emily West Afanador, a local Eugene musician, produced a documentary film about gender dynamics and female bands. She utilized the musical knowledge found at the House of Records to further her own research and to learn more about the history of female musicians. West Afanador claims:

I also have gone there for my own academic research. Like I felt like there were more women in rock bands than I knew about and asked him questions and got some information from Greg (a store worker) – that, ‘Oh yeah, you should start with the Raincoats and go from there,’ and [he] just kind of went down the list, and I’d go every few months and come home with a new stack of records and go — ‘Ok, time for some schoolin.’

Jake Pavlack, the singer/guitarist for the Eugene band Yeltsin and former employee at House of Records, noted the importance of working in the store. He received an alternative form of musical education in conjunction with his formal music training at the University of Oregon. Pavlack says:

I think it had a really big impact on me working at the store and continuing to be friends with those guys... I mean those guys have been into music and have been around it for so long that they just have such an amazingly deep knowledge – that it’s such a great resource and you can go in there and say, what about this? And you can ask them a question kind of obscure and they’ll have an answer... It was the counterpart to going to music school, you know – I mean even though there are other things too, but in a way it was that kind of equal to me – you know, getting that music education and getting that education of listening to records and getting exposed to weird shit – and important stuff too you know.

West Afanador, during her formative days of visiting independent record stores in the Seattle, was socialized in terms of subcultural fashion, taste and style in the independent record store. West Afanador says:

It definitely also taught me about what that particular culture is like. What do these people talk about, what do they wear? So I think as I was kind of aspiring to be kind of an indie music fan, I got a lot of very – brass tacks, I got a lot of very tangible skills – like, ok, what am I supposed to wear, how am I supposed to look? What’s cool? What’s not cool?

Andrew Hosch, owner of Timbucktunes, a store that focuses on world and experimental music in Portland, notes that the kind of music he sells can foster learning about other cultures around the world:

It's interesting, and you talk about how we're at war in the Middle East, and you're stocking music from that part of the world. That's a really interesting situation to look at. I think by learning about another culture through its music, you can perhaps change your perspective about it. You're investing something into that other country.

With regard to learning about music in independent stores, Jon Klots at Anthem Records in Portland notes the importance of giving legitimate or "authentic" recommendations of music to customers that are free from corporate influence and sponsorship. Music in an independent store is usually there because the owners/workers are passionate about and genuinely interested in the music, not because it is part of a corporate marketing plan. Chain stores are connected to a particular money trail, and this impacts not only the kind of music available, but the kind of service as well. Thus, music recommendations can be tainted by this economic system where moving units is the bottom line. Certain popular titles are pushed by the larger retailers, regardless of the employees' actual interest in the music. Thus, recommendations at an indie store are deemed more authentic, as the employees have a personal stake in selling music that they believe in and that they actually like. Klots claims:

There is never going to be anything that's in here, because of any sort of tie in, or anything that is related to us being paid in some sense, basically, to carry it. And that's the biggest distinction (with chain stores). Everything that is in the store that stock shelf space is bought and paid for... You don't need to go to someplace, and these guys are telling me what to get, you know (mock corporate store person voice). How are you going to believe what they are telling you, what to get, when someone else told them what to get, for a certain amount of

money? It's just that everything is here because we put it here, not because someone paid us to put it here (laughs).

Scott Simmons at Exiled Records in Portland is truly excited about selling music he believes in, which is different than a mass marketing campaign he is forced to push on customers. As a result, the educational aspect of the stores and the opinions of storeowners and employees are generally not tainted by corporate culture; rather, these stores offer informed personal taste towards marginal and independent music. Simmons claims:

I'm not just pushing it to sell it, and I think that when you get involved in those of things where you're putting those things in your listening station, put posters all over the store, and like taking out ads in the *Weekly*, are all like, endorsing that you're selling this thing, and it's like, it's clear that that's just for money. It's not because that you're really excited about this record.

In terms of obtaining a similar kind of musical "education" at a chain store such as Target or Best Buy, workers in the music section are not required to have any specific musical knowledge or background, and under most circumstances, can't provide the same historical depth as their independent counterparts. A Target store manager on the west coast discusses the music knowledge of the workers in the music section:

[There is] not a lot. Every now and again you'll get someone who has knowledge, but it would just be something they picked up personally. We hire a lot of college students, so most of their knowledge is at least centered in what the guest is looking for, so they'll be aware of what the new releases are, and what's on the radio, and MTV. It's not something we hire for. We're interested in people who can find the information if they need to. We provide the tools for them to find it, but they just need to know how to find it.

If a customer wants to find out more information regarding a particular genre such as jazz, or learn more about other trumpet players, the Target manager claims:

I would say, well, we have a jazz section, and we maybe have a best of Miles Davis, but if you're looking for other trumpet players, we're not the people to come to for that. That would be about the best we could do, is point you towards the jazz section (laughs).

Ryan Polischeck at Best Buy in Springfield, Oregon, notes that at times he makes suggestions to customers about what CDs to purchase, but that having an expertise in music is not part of the job description. When asked about the average Best Buy worker's background or interest in music, Polischeck claims:

They don't have to. It doesn't hurt, but music is one of the lesser concerns of the whole area, because again, music doesn't sell that well. It's selling better digitally, than it is on CD. They want you to know more about MP3 players and game consoles, and playing video games, as those are going to be the real sales areas.

In sum, indie stores can be a space where musical information can be exchanged, and the depths of musical culture can be explored. Corporate chain stores do not require any musical background or knowledge, and the space is not oriented around learning about music culture or history. However, this process of learning connects to commodification. The more one learns about music culture, the more they are likely to purchase music based on this knowledge. Thus, the educational service provided by indie stores is intended to not only inform, but to encourage the commodification and sale of recorded music.

Conclusions

For the customers and store employees involved in independent record store culture, the stores are very much a place where social interaction occurs, becoming an

important form of community. In this context, the independent record store has more social value than the simple buying and selling of music, and the social function of the store brings people together in a variety of ways. However, there are exceptions to this community nature and, for a minority of customers, the stores can be seen as being exclusive in terms of gender and/or intimidating in terms of the validity of one's musical tastes.

The independent record store acts as a cultural hub that enables various subcultures to connect with others in the local scene and community. It has been noted that independent record stores have reinforced underground musical scenes such as punk, rave culture and noise music. In particular, independent record stores offer a social atmosphere where musicians can meet and form bands, they offer cultural diversity of musical forms, and they offer the ability to post flyers in order connect subcultural communities to other social events outside the stores.

For those socially invested in independent record store culture, the stores can be a space where musical information can be exchanged among the store employees and customers, and the depths of musical culture can be explored. Thus, indie stores can be an educational space, where one can learn about musical history, various genres, and new music. The stores can also be a form of socialization – where members can learn to be part of a subculture in terms of taste and fashion. Corporate chain stores, in contrast, do not require any musical background or knowledge from their workers, and the spaces are not oriented around learning about the depths or nuances of music culture or history.

A more complex analysis of the indie record store must, however, consider its connection to commodification. The discourse surrounding “community” overshadows the base function of the stores, which is commerce. The stores make money and stay in business because of economic exchange. The communities fostered by the stores engage in economic transaction. Customers learn about music and history in indie stores, but the aim is ultimately sell more records upon gaining this knowledge. Record Store Day, for example, feeds off of the “community” discourse, mainly because community members are consumers. Some stores provide the accessories necessary to *buy* subcultural capital and style (t-shirts, hair dye, etc.). To engage in a subculture is to be a consumer. Community members sell used music to indie stores, which in turn extract a profit. In larger indie stores in particular, the structuring of labor mimics typical business practices. Owners earn a salary, while the workers on the floor earn a wage. Labor is exploited in the indie context. Because working at an indie store provides much subcultural capital, the exploitation of labor goes un-noticed, and the spectacle of the job usurps a critical understanding of how labor and capital function.

In sum, indie stores foster community, subcultural connections and music learning. However, they nonetheless should invite a critical investigation in terms of commodification.

CHAPTER VIII

CULTURAL ANALYSIS, PART 2: SPACE AND PLACE, VINYL RECORD COLLECTING, ANTI-CORPORATE NARRATIVES, GENTRIFICATION AND COMMODIFICATION

This chapter addresses the cultural meanings and narratives regarding the physical space and atmosphere of the stores, and the primacy of vinyl records and tangible music recordings. The cultural narratives associated with anti-corporate belief systems and how indie stores connect to processes of gentrification are also explored. Lastly, I continue to analyze the inherent contradictions between counter-culture and indie stores, and the harvesting of commodification. This chapter addresses the following research question:

Under the auspices of commodification, what are the cultural meanings and narratives within the independent record store, and what are its major defining characteristics in terms of space and place, vinyl records, anti-corporate narratives and gentrification?

Space and Place

As we are becoming increasingly immersed in the digital world, shopping can be done on-line at home or from a portable smart phone. As a result of these technologies, we are increasingly removed from the experience of space and place. For those who visit shopping malls and big box chain stores, the spaces are characterized by similarity, rather

than difference. A Best Buy in Brooklyn looks similar to the Best Buy in San Francisco as chain stores are homogeneous in terms of design and store atmosphere. This sense of sameness corresponds to Ritzer's (2006) notion of McDonaldization.

While it can be easy to romanticize the past, I can't envision having the same associations with Home of the Hits in Buffalo as I would have with Best Buy or my computer screen as I view the iTunes Store. There is no memory of my first visit to Best Buy, because the experience simply wasn't memorable; neither was my first musical purchase on Amazon.com. Corporate and on-line shopping experiences are not unique. They are commonplace experiences.

Our relationship to space and place is altered by the digital world. Corporate shopping experiences are characterized by anonymity and standardization. These sentiments connect to Steel's (1981) work on space and place, where industrialization has led to settings that have no special personality or distinguishing spirit, which has wiped out regional differences in architecture and building materials. We replace a rich variety of place with homogenized "efficient" settings that have no variety, surprise, or traces of their own history and development.

In a culture characterized by the neo-liberal onslaught and corporatization of space and place into predictable and rationalized molds, the independent record store offers variety and difference. Every independent record store is unique. No two stores

are the same, with the exception of indie chains which may have similarities. In general, design and layout differs from store to store.

For example, Jack's Record Cellar in San Francisco is a dingy, dimly lit space (as the name suggests); it is a small-scale operation. Old shellac 78 records are piled in cardboard boxes with hand scrawled lettering, whereas other piles and stacks of random records suggests the customer must "dig" to find something, as opposed to product being neatly organized, clean and efficient. Accessing a certain stack of records, which are precariously on the verge of teetering over, involves climbing over other scattered stacks of records. In a sense, the store is an organized mess. However, the mess is part of its appeal.

On the opposite end of this spectrum is Amoeba Music in San Francisco, the world's largest record store. The store is an intimidating place that exists in a former bowling alley. The store is very organized and neat in appearance. Music genres are segregated by signs hanging from the ceiling read "punk" and "experimental," as if the customer is venturing through a counter-cultural supermarket. Thus, independent record stores can vary considerably in terms of their use of space and place, and the manner in which an atmosphere is created.

What follows is a brief ethnographic description of the space and place of the House of Records, a generalist store based in Eugene, Oregon. This is based on a previous publication (Gracon, 2009), which was a case study of this particular store.

The House of Records is situated in an old house. It is blue with red trim, and the appearance is almost carnivalesque, like a funhouse. The store is located midway between the University of Oregon campus, and downtown Eugene – a location characterized by heavy foot traffic and a steady flow of bicyclists. The location suggests locality, as opposed to being located on the periphery of town where the chain stores, strip-malls, and shopping centers are located, where a car is often required to visit these areas. Outside the entrance to The House of Records is a colorful array of flyers and posters, advertising everything from the hand-scrawled basement punk show to a local film festival seeking submissions. The House of Records employee Fred describes the symbolic value of the store in terms of the Eugene community:

I think that landmarks in any community help to bond the members of that community. Whether it's a bridge that everybody is proud of, or a tree that people are familiar with, I really feel that that ties members of the community together. And something that they can actually interact with, like us, a retail store, is even more effective at that... I'm not sure if we contribute to the nature of the community, or the character of the community, but I think we certainly reflect it. And I think that we help it exist.

What makes The House of Records an obvious example of anti-McDonaldization is the utter uniqueness of the space. The House of Records is one of a kind. This is remarkable when considering the corporatization of the landscape, where a chain store in one part of the country resembles countless other stores with an identical or rationalized layout and design. One customer enthusiastically comments on the inviting nature of The House of Records by saying, "It's like hanging out at somebody's house."

On a sunny day when the store tends to be crowded (as there is more foot traffic on the sidewalk), the narrow paths separating the rows of records become impassable, or

difficult to the point where it's impossible to not rub bodies with the other shoppers. During the more quiet hours, customers are sprawled out on the floor, sifting through records, or sitting on one of the small blue chairs situated throughout the space. It was common to hear customers, while holding up a record or CD, shout out from across the store towards the counter while competing with the blaring music. One man yells, "Is this any good?" while holding up a vinyl record.

The actual structure is a former house that was finished in 1918, and it's one of the oldest houses on the block. Because the actual structure has existed in Eugene for such a long time, the store acts as a historical continuum. Greg, a long time store employee, suggests the architecture and space itself plays an important role in defining not only the unique aura of the store, but a connection to and appreciation of history.

Greg claims:

One of the things about our society now that is really troubling is that old is out and new is in. And old buildings are imploded or destroyed, and people are just so into the new. I think old things are important. But as a place I think that this is very important that we do our best to keep something like this alive, fix it up and conserve. We're in the business of conserving old things (in terms of records and the store), and making sure that they still stay alive for as long as they possibly can.

Inside the store, the ambiance was often described by the employees and customers with vivid enthusiasm. Common responses included the phrases "upbeat," "funky," "inviting," "really fun," "warm," and most common of all, "comfortable." Other responses were poetic in description. Respondents adored the musty smell of vinyl records, the warmth of the natural lighting, the sounds of the creaky old door and wooden floors. It's a place where older customers relived the 1970s and can "take their nostalgia

trips.” Customers sometimes would spend hours comfortably sprawled out on the floor leafing through vinyl records while engaging in “an intimate kind of experience.” Such descriptions suggest the humanizing appeal of the store.

The inside of the store is characterized by wooden paneling and floors, and the remnants of a former house where an old fireplace stood can be spotted behind the rows of used CDs. The vinyl section is housed in what used to be the dining room. The arrangement of the handmade shelves and racks of music are slightly off-kilter, and navigating the space requires movement through some narrow corridors. While rationalized shopping spaces are designed to move a customer through the space in a highly calculated and controlling manner, all with the intention to sell, this arrangement is reminiscent of a flea market, or an estate sale in someone’s home. While the aim is also to sell merchandise at The House of Records, it does not appear to be so calculated. Sam, a store customer claimed,

It almost feels like somebody’s bedroom, with a lot of records in it, you know. There’re posters up, and kind of like homey and laid back. Organized but not overly organized. Not too meticulous, so it has that kind of organic feel to it.

The wood floors evoke a cozy home feel as the racks of tightly packed vinyl records nearly reach the ceiling. Several of the employees refer to the space as a library, rather than a store, which implies a different relationship to the objects and space – a place that implies learning and congregation, as opposed to sheer commodity exchange. In addition to the off-kilter shelves and handmade racks of music, there are signs and CD dividers that are hand drawn. The space is not psychologically designed or manufactured to sell objects, and the space feels intuitive, organic, and unique. Greg, who has worked

here for 21 years, claims, “Kids love it here, because they can run around and hide in all the nooks and crannies.” Dan, a store customer, says:

These stores in general are way more intimate, like personal. Like everything about it, the people, I mean this place is an old house that somebody turned into a record store. You can walk into it, and it’s all the smells, the smell of old records.

The walls are covered with old LP records from James Brown to Devo, and promotional posters advertising dated mid-1990s independent acts such as Bikini Kill and Unwound, suggesting the store is indifferent to the latest promotional materials, as they are non-existent. Virtually all the walls of the store feature some form of visual stimulation in terms of album covers or posters. Little to no attention is given to new promotional or major label advertising, and the posters on the walls tend to advertise independent acts, which are sponsored by independent record labels such as Kill Rock Stars. This lack of advertising suggests a different orientation towards the mainstream music industry, and the ideal that advertising in the traditional respect is not important. Sarge, a store employee, notes,

We don’t have much in terms of promotional posters and that kind of stuff because there is no room for it. Here a lot of our demographic are collectors, and they just don’t need that kind of enticement.

The music played in the store is not part of a marketing campaign or a manufactured form of Muzak. The counter is like an ad hoc DJ booth, as the employees have the choice to play music they believe in, actually like, and can likely discuss in great detail. The music includes everything from classical to free jazz to experimental post-rock, and anything in-between. An employee plays The Cure’s “Killing an Arab,” a punchy track that politicizes imperialist interventions in the Middle East, which suggests

this store is free to promote whatever it wants, even political material. Such an atmosphere is unlikely to occur in a chain store with rationalized Muzak, where the employees have no control over the music selection.

A customer comments that such independent stores give the community an important flavor, and without such spaces, the city or town lacks a particular spirit. Dan claims:

If you don't have a store like this, a lot of people would say, what is there to do in town? I mean there are a lot of social things, you can go to a bar, but a music store, there's something about it. It just gives you a feeling.

Portland's Music Millennium, a store that has been around since 1969, is considered by its customers to be a "history landmark," "Portland trademark," and "little piece of Portland." One customer comments about how the store has no "corporate gloss" and, commenting on the interior of the store, claims:

I mean, their steps are not even a consistent height, and you know, the store is all rag-tag and funky, and it feels like real people put it together... And the place is sort of, you know, discombobulated, and that's attractive. It's sort of a little adventure walking through it. It's not immediately easy to find things, and you end up seeing things you ordinarily wouldn't see.

When asked to compare the space and atmosphere of independent stores to corporate chains, the comments from customers were often very critical. A Music Millennium customer claims:

It's really loud in Best Buy. This is another one of my pet peeves of places like Best Buy and Target. They are really loud. I feel like I'm in a videogame arcade all the time. But when I come here, I can immediately relax. Because it's not as loud. And I don't feel like there is always an advertisement going on overhead. Or something being pushed at me all the time. It's just music.

The partner of this customer adds his theory regarding the atmosphere of Best Buy. To him, the big box is akin to a “psychological experiment,” a form of “manipulation.” He claims:

Because everything is so loud. So my whole belief is that it’s a disorienting strategy, to make you feel strange. Because of the lighting, and how loud everything is. It throws you off balance. Here it feels like somebody’s living room. I don’t feel like I’m being manipulated.

Another Music Millennium customer, Taylor, describes the atmosphere of the store to that of a chain store. Taylor claims:

How would you compare this store to those other stores? No comparison. Like, one's real, like, clinical and clean and weird, and this one's just kinda junky, and everything's thrown together. It's just more comfortable. It looks like you're walking into somebody's living room that has way to many records, you know.

Outside of Amoeba Music in San Francisco, one young college student visiting from out of town essentially outlines the tenets of McDonaldization. He claims:

Yeah, I’m not completely against chain stores, I mean I’ve shopped at them. No matter where you go to that chain store, it’s going to be the same. They have the same signs, they have the same menu, same selection, or whatever it is, so it’s just not unique at all. You know exactly what to expect, and for some people that’s good, but for people like me, I would much rather go into someplace like this where you don’t really know what to expect.

While I have explored the independent record store as a unique space and place, there are exceptions. For example, Everyday Music in Portland isn’t that different from a corporate chain store. The grid-like layout of the music is flavorless and lacking in character, and the drab coloring of the gray walls conveys an insipid emotional response. Likewise, Amoeba Music in San Francisco, a large cavernous space, is intimidating due to its absolute grandeur. The overall cleanliness and bright lighting in the store mimics a

corporate big box, despite the diverse range of musical product. Thus, not all independent record stores are equally charming.

But how does space and place relate to commodification? Independent record store foster an “independent” form of branding. Few indie storeowners or workers would utilize the word branding in the corporate sense. Nor is this form of branding so calculated. Branding in the indie context is based on attitudes and subcultural belief systems, and the typical independent record store creates its own kind of brand that appeals to a more idiosyncratic consumer. This “brand” is not that different from a corporate chain. Target’s clean, slick, and bright looking store atmosphere, for example, appeals to the typical suburban, middle-class consumer. However, the indie brand is somewhat of an anti-brand. Not partaking in advertising or listening stations (or knowing by word of mouth) gives the niche/specialty record store more of an authentic brand. Selling only vinyl records increases one’s unique brand. Having hand-drawn signage contributes to the indie brand. Independent record stores continually define themselves as non-corporate or anti-corporate.

As a result, the indie stores need the blandness and homogenized aesthetic of corporate culture against which to define themselves as being non-corporate, idiosyncratic and unique. In the unique space and place of the independent record store, the fundamental goal is to sell music and earn a profit. The “independent” brand of the stores works to create a comfortable selling environment that appeals to those who are typically not interested in corporate based consumption.

As discussed in the political economy analysis chapter, there is no independent record store that exists completely free from the larger dominant music industry. All indie stores sell musical product connected to the “big four” major labels and/or their various distributors. Larger stores utilize co-op advertising, paid-for listening stations, posters and promotions from major labels, indie artists distributed by major labels, and paid-for product positioning. As a result, “independence” is an ideology or belief system, rather than an economic reality. Indie stores foster or harvest the commodification of musical product through their aesthetic “difference,” and the unique design of the space and place works to promote this economic process.

In sum, the “difference” associated with indie stores counters the rationalized nature of big box retailers. The unique design of indie stores appeals to the senses, and offers a unique experience that runs counter to a culture characterized by the McDonaldization of society. However, the design of space and place is nonetheless a form of “independent” branding. The omnipresence of corporate culture contributes to the meaning of this and the “independent” unique brand.

Vinyl Records and Collecting

When discussing the cultural aspects of the independent record store, it is vital to discuss vinyl records. There is currently a “vinyl resurgence,” and according to 2009 SoundScan statistics, two-thirds of all vinyl sold during the year occurred in independent stores. This is an interesting phenomenon in a digital world where music can be

instantaneously downloaded from a computer or smart phone, either paid-for or for free. So what makes people go to a store, dig for vinyl records, and purchase a bulky and impractical format with no portability?

According to Straw (1997), record collections are carriers of the information whose arrangement and interpretation is part of the broader discourse about popular music (p. 5). However, the dominant digital discourse has gravitated towards the objectless MP3 format, as evidenced in the following television advertisement.

A recent Radio Shack commercial displays a cluttered city apartment with stacks of vinyl records filling up a majority of the space. The advertisement, through a flashy visual montage, visually explains the conversion of vinyl records into digital files via a laptop – the end result being a small MP3 player on a table, and as a result, the apartment is suddenly pristine and meticulously organized. When the presumed girlfriend returns to the apartment, she’s pleased that the boyfriend has rid his apartment of the vinyl “clutter.”

The Radio Shack commercial is evidence of a digital discourse that glorifies new media technologies and is characterized by an unquestioning reverence and euphoric attitude regarding the consumption and commodification of new technology. Vinyl is framed as the “other,” a cumbersome and inconvenient mess, whereas the conversion of vinyl to an MP3 player represents stability, convenience, cleanliness, and organization. The objective of this advertisement is to promote new digital consumption patterns and the commodification of digital formats. Multinational corporations benefit from forced

obsolescence, where technological hardware and software is rendered obsolete. This process is undoubtedly linked to larger capitalistic structures and the accumulation of capital and wealth, as consumers buy into the new technologies.

According to Gramsci's theory of ideological hegemony, mass media are tools used by ruling elites to "perpetuate their power, wealth and status (by popularizing) their own philosophy, culture and morality" (Boggs, 1976, p. 39). This concise textual analysis of the Radio Shack advertisement is one example of the hegemonic popularization of a techno philosophy where the MP3 format becomes "common sense." Vinyl is old media, a clunky item of the past to be disregarded.

Vinyl records contribute to the independent brand associated with the indie store. Despite the digital discourse, vinyl records are *de rigueur* in the context of the independent record store. Vinyl is associated with independent record store culture, and this difference designates a clear demarcation between the homogeneous musical selection associated with a corporate chain store (however, it must be noted that some Best Buy outlets sell vinyl, a format also widely available on-line). In a subcultural context, corporate stores have less cultural legitimacy simply because they don't stock vinyl. If they do stock vinyl, which is rare, the selection is often minimal. Big boxes (mainly Best Buy) mostly offer expensive re-issues from the major labels, as opposed to a wide variety of music on "independent" labels. Chain stores in general do not stock vinyl records, and instead only focus on CDs. Andrew, a college student, considers vinyl to be one of the main draws to shopping at the House of Records in Eugene. He claims:

Well, for number one, places in the mall wouldn't have vinyl, and if they did it would probably be new and crappy, and not a good selection. The vinyl section keeps me coming back – that used selection of vinyl, yeah.

This situation of the “mall” having “crappy” vinyl connects to Hays (2006), who discusses the resurgence of vinyl records and the youth consumers who collect vinyl LPs and utilize a turntable to resist industry-regulated contemporary modes of music consumption. The author suggests that record collecting is a response to the postmodern malaise brought about by consumer capitalism, where people are faced with a constant barrage of new music for (and marketed at) their demography. In this case, the “mall” represents banality and the “new.” Mall stores lack the subcultural capital and vernacular necessary to sell used vinyl, as opposed to the implied blandness of only selling “new” vinyl. Hays (2006) continues by noting that young people attempt to mark themselves as different by rejecting widespread practices of consumption maintained by the capitalistic framework (p. 58). However, I contend the selling of used and obscure vinyl is still a form of consumer capitalism, even if it exists outside of the dominant or mainstream retail outlets. In this case, the notion of buying music from an “independent” store is a form of resistance to massified mall culture, but not to commodification and capitalism in general. On a micro level, resisting mall culture can be seen as oppositional, but it does nothing to subvert the economic realities of capitalism. Buying vinyl at an independent record store is a form of capitalism.

It is important to note vinyl's subcultural appeal. Vinyl adds to one's subcultural capital. Vinyl is more “authentic,” and the rituals involved in playing records signify a kind of resistance to MP3 culture. Consuming vinyl signifies the subcultural capital

associated with the independent record store, as a chain store lacks this capital. Kelly Stoltz, an employee at Groove in San Francisco, specializes in used vinyl. Stoltz contends the medium of vinyl equates to the overall aesthetic and feeling of the store:

This one [Groove] is way more of a garage sale feeling. Sometimes an expensive one, but whereas that other one [corporate chain store] was, very, it's kind of the difference between an old record and a CD, you know. That place felt like a CD, and this place feels like an old record.

In this context, CDs represent the slick, shiny and the new – the aesthetic of a chain store. Vinyl records are dirty, scratched and imperfect. These associations reinforce the independent brand of vinyl. Vinyl gives the store its identity.

Listening to recorded music has always been a social activity. “Listening with peers or sharing musical evaluations with friends helps individuals to shape their taste while concurrently constructing group identity” (Van Dijck, 2006, p. 367). Vinyl record collecting fosters a group identity and provides a shared sense of community, at least on a small subcultural scale. Sarge, a store employee at House of Records, comments on the kind of investment associated with collecting vinyl records: “If you have vinyl, it's really evident that this is something highly important to you. That this is definitely part of your life, just like a giant book collection.”

It is commonly noted that vinyl has better sound quality, the cover art is appealing, and going to a physical store is a social activity or “human activity.” One House of Records customer, Jeff, comments on the importance of coming to the store as opposed to digital downloading:

There seems to be a lot of file sharing on the net, and I was into that for a long time. Then I got to the point where I missed going to the record store, leafing through records, you know, actually having physical album there, and the cover art, and talking to someone about the music. I think all of that is part of a healthy experience in general, and much less isolating than being on your computer. I wanted to get back to a more human experience. Something more positive comes out of it (by shopping here), rather than sheer consumerism.

Because Jeff is seeking vinyl within an independent record store, the activity implies social interaction, which results in a more “human experience,” as opposed to computer based consumption that is more “isolating.” The humanizing nature of this experience relates to Ritzer’s (1993) notion of McDonaldization, where non-human technologies – in this case, a computer and digital downloading – reduce one’s actions to a series of machinelike actions, which ultimately result in greater dehumanization and disenchantment – or as Jeff claims, “isolation.” As an alternative, visiting a store to purchase vinyl contributes to a “healthy experience,” and thus indie stores can foster anti-McDonaldization, or processes that counter the “irrational consequences” of a rationalized society.

While it is impossible to ignore the influence of the digital world, the notion that a small number of people resist new technologies in favor of the “obsolete” medium of vinyl is an interesting phenomenon. It suggests people have agency and the ability to resist the digital discourse. Greg, the buyer at House of Records, suggests vinyl influences one’s subjectivity in a positive manner. Greg claims:

The iPod is a perfect device for the attention deficit nation that we’ve become. It’s exciting to see kids being interested in vinyl again so and that takes a little more time, you know, and we’re breeding a more patient people. I hope so.

Vinyl shopping can look like a meditative act, as customers will spend entire an afternoon browsing through the racks, examining records, and reading the packaging. Patience was another quality uttered by two customers at Music Millennium (based in Portland), where a father, Matteo, and his eight-year-old son shop for vinyl records together. The father claims:

When you're searching for vinyl, you teach patience. It's part of the hunting process. We had a good lesson today. He found a Beach Boys Christmas album, that he has been looking for a long time. And we found a copy of it at another shop, and it was like \$25 bucks. And so with the lecture on patience and hunting, and we found it today for how much? (The young child responds: "Three dollars"). And it's in great shape.

This emphasis on "patience" suggests that computer mediated forms of music consumption, most notably the instantaneous digital downloading of MP3 files, is often done in "isolation." The slow culture promoted in indie stores, and the act of patiently waiting and searching to discover a particular album reinforces a different type of ontology and human experience. It is a practice that slows the speed of capital. It's a form of anti-McDonaldization.

Similarly, maintaining and owning a record collection requires hands-on work and dedication. Records have to be stored in a proper way, cleaned, and handled with care. Greg at House of Records, claims that this is part of the enjoyment and is a form of "ceremony."

There's a ceremony about playing a record. So many times I've done it, and so many times it has felt great to take home a record that I haven't heard before, and take it out of the shrink-wrap, and that's the case sometimes, sometimes I take home used stuff – you know, pull it out and feel the static as it comes out of the inner sleeve, and the first time a needle hits it and that sound and look at the cover while I listen to it. The fact that you have to tend to records isn't necessarily a bad thing.

A customer at House of Records commented on similar “ceremonial” grounds, where she favors vinyl over digital files. Kelsey claims:

I mean, I really like my record player and taking the record out of the sleeve and setting it on the player. The sound it makes when I turn it on, it’s just more fun than pressing play on iTunes. They’re totally different experiences, so I prefer the vinyl but I can’t always afford it.

Jordan, another customer at House of Records, reinforces the superior sound quality of vinyl records, a very common theme, wherein vinyl promotes a different kind of audio literacy. Jordan claims:

Like Radiohead’s *OK Computer* sounds so much more amazing on vinyl. There are just instruments that you just don’t hear on CD. It’s like you can hear a fuller range and you can hear more separation between distinct instruments, and there’s something about sitting around with your friends and putting on vinyl, and it’s a big part of my living room is just my record player and my records, you know.

Fred, a store employee at the House of Records, spends much of his time in the store buying used records from customers and cleaning the records by hand. This labor intensive process is his absolute favorite activity. Fred also reinforces the sound quality of vinyl:

Music that was originally recorded to be put on an LP tends to sound best on an LP. A lot of the digital re-mastering that has been done, in order to get things to sound as good as they sound on CD, is still inferior. Recent re-issues by the Rolling Stones that are on hybrid super audio CDS/CD, sound clean and bright, and that’s not what the Rolling Stones are supposed to sound like. The Rolling Stones are supposed to sound kind of murky and rough, and the way they sound on [vinyl] records.

Many indie store customer and workers comment on the visual appeal and packaging of vinyl records, furthering their appreciation of the tangible musical

object, as opposed to music that is objectless, such as an MP3. Martha, an employee at the House of Records, claims:

They have nice packaging, you have a 12" by 12" cover, with pictures and maybe a blurb on the back, and of course tracks. Then of course you're getting the inner sleeve, if there even is an inner sleeve. Sometimes the record is a gatefold, you have a big ole picture on the inside that you can ooh and ah over. Occasionally there will be a lyrics sheet. Especially with these used LPs. If they're nicely preserved, they're really gems. They're really fun to look at. And then you pull the record out, and the record has a beautiful label in many instances, and just the black vinyl looks so nice. It's just such a tangible experience to open your record, to unseal it, pull it out, spin it around, and then you hear the static when you brush it with your brush.

One store customer claims vinyl records can act as a form of decoration in one's living space, a form of subcultural decoration. Kelsey claims:

I just like the way records look and are. I used to have a whole wall in my old apartment, when I lived in Spokane, that was all record covers, and then the records were like a checkerboard on this whole wall.

A rare or collectable vinyl record may be from a first pressing and no longer "in print." While a vinyl record is still a mass object, its finite run or pressing separates it from other infinitely reproducible formats, and can render it collectable or scarce. On top of this, indie record stores help to debunk the myth that everything is available for MP3 download, whereas more obscure music can only be found in tangible form. Jason, a customer at Music Millennium in Portland, claims:

It seems like either really obscure local stuff, or... Do you know Tzadik Records? It's John Zorn's record label in New York, so it's a lot of weirdo Japanese stuff, and weird jazz, and weird out-there classical. So if he puts out some weird Japanese thrash thing, most of the time I can't find it just from searching online, so I have to come some place like this.

This search for obscure music not available for download, or at larger chains connects to Vaher (2008), who contends that exotic (extremely eccentric and obscure

vinyl records) record collecting is a manifestation of identity politics – a way of reasserting one’s agency in the consumerist society through an expanded consciousness of the complexities of the forgotten cultural past (p. 342). While this agency is being asserted through processes of commodification, the researcher views the collection of obscure records as combating the perennial industrial promotion of the ‘new’ with more vintage and effective ways of defining oneself through material objects of imagined value. The example of a customer wanting a John Zorn release and being able to find it in an independent record store reinforces the “independent” brand of the stores vis-à-vis their corporate counterparts.

Because indie stores do not necessarily focus on what is new (although larger indie chains and indie superstores tend to focus more on the new, as opposed to niche/specialty stores), there is a degree of spontaneity and sense of unpredictability in terms of what a customer could find in an indie store. Much like visiting a flea market or antique store, there is this sense of the unexpected and potential for the unique. While enthusiastically holding up an old record, Herman, a long time customer at the House of Records in Eugene, claims:

Well, let me give you an example. Here is something from 1975, a classic, brand new, and here’s another one, Tito Puente, from 1958, brand new. I’ll take this over a CD any day. First of all I can read what’s there, and a CD almost gives you a quarter of what’s here, and you need binoculars... here are some great albums – this is what the House of Records does, up to date, brand new, and if you’re looking for these, there’s no other store in Eugene, or I want to say the whole state of Oregon... The service here is this.

Eric Isaacson at Mississippi Records in Portland was originally into vinyl records as they were the “cheapest,” and they were a form of cultural “refuse” from a music

industry that systematically eliminated vinyl (by ceasing to make vinyl returnable for storeowners) in promotion of the CD format. For Eric, to stick with the vinyl format was to resist the controlling technological determinism of the music industry. Isaacson claims:

When people in my generation started buying records, which was because they were the refuse, the cheapest... It wasn't because they sounded better or the covers were nicer. I was poor, and they were the cheapest... Even when I started this store, records were the cheapest way to get music. I do love the aesthetics of them too... I do this because I'm a garbage collector you know, because this is like the refuse, and that's what was beautiful about it for a long time, was this marginalized thing for people who didn't buy the trend of CDs, and didn't just buckle because that was what they were supposed to buy what is new and shiny.

Furthermore, by resisting digital downloading, these customers are keeping independent stores in business, which provides the community with more cultural variety. Many customers comment that they like to support the artist as well, and by paying for tangible music objects, they're contributing to the artists more directly. Paying for records also implies supporting independent record labels that continue to press vinyl, along with the manufacturers who press the vinyl and the artists who design the cover art. The disappearance of tangible musical objects also signifies the loss of division of labor, and all those involved in the production of tangible musical objects.

While many indie stores are ideologically opposed to aspects of the digital discourse such as digital downloading, most stores embrace the digital world to varying degrees. For example, House of Records sells rare and vintage records on the Internet (via Amazon) to a worldwide market, and they maintain a MySpace page. While House of Records opposes the digital world on one hand, it simultaneously embraces it on the other hand. As Leblanc (1999) states, "Resisters after all, remain in the social system

they contest” (p. 17). If vinyl record collecting is a form of resistance, then digital formats are needed in order to be in opposition to something.

In terms of providing exceptions to vinyl consumption, it should be noted that consumer patterns in the independent record store are varied and complex. Some customers still prefer the CD format, or some combination of CDs, vinyl and digital downloads (both free and paid for). Some prefer more obscure formats such as cassettes and shellac 78 rpm records. Some customers utilize illegal downloading as a tool to sample music, and later purchase CDs or vinyl records in physical form in physical stores. Many new vinyl records come with digital download cards, where one can have the vinyl record and listen to the MP3s on an iPod as well. As a result of these patterns, there is considerable overlap between the digital world and “brick and mortar” stores.

It should be noted that shopping for music in a physical store accommodates those affected by the digital divide. It can’t be assumed everybody can utilize the latest computer technology. Depending on socio-economic status, some people lack access to computers (and portable electronics), or can’t afford to purchase a computer. For these customers, going to a record store may be the only way in which to obtain recorded music.

Lastly, vinyl also needs to be addressed in terms of commodification. Vinyl sales are no doubt contributing to the continued existence of the independent record store, as CD sales are declining, and iTunes continues to dominate the overall retail music market. Much like the unique space and place of the independent record store, the sale of vinyl records contributes to the “independent” brand of indie stores, as it separates indie stores

from their corporate counterparts, who have minimal or no vinyl selection. “Independent” labels (which may not in fact be independent, as many are distributed by major labels) are selling a lot of vinyl records, especially in terms of indie rock. While vinyl is often a fetishized commodity, it is necessary to consider the economic mode of production behind these labels – and how the purchasing of vinyl requires capital, which is determined by one’s social class status. Later in this chapter, I discuss notions of class and gentrification within indie record store culture.

Because vinyl records can be rare and out of print, their very scarcity can render them collectable. Within a collecting market, rare vinyl can come with a high price tag which can be lucrative for storeowners. For example, at Force of Habit in San Francisco, LPs by the punk band Minor Threat and the popular band Nirvana cost up to \$75 each (see Appendix A., Figure 23). While vinyl record collecting contains an aura of resistance to the “constructed popular music narrative,” this commodified form of rebellion can be very expensive. If buying, owning and listening to vinyl records can contribute to one’s subcultural capital, this is a practice linked to one’s relation to social class and their economic ability to purchase vinyl records. As a result, this practice of resistance can hardly be seen as progressive.

It should be noted the “vinyl resurgence” also includes the sale and commodification of turntables, record needles, and various technologies that allow one to convert vinyl records to the MP3 format. Target released an exclusive only Pearl Jam vinyl record, although this was the only vinyl release in the store.

It should also be noted that vinyl has been co-opted as a subcultural phenomenon, and select Best Buy locations sell new vinyl records. Eric Isaacson at Mississippi Records comments on how the dominant industry is re-issuing vinyl and simply trying to capitalize on another commodity. When framed in a historical context, this situation has particular significance. Isaacson claims:

The music industry is trying to turn records into a boutique thing, that's a money maker, and releasing all these insanely expensive re-issues... It's the same thing when they came out with CDs. It was like, how do we sell the same Steely Dan record we already sold? Oh I know, we make a new format. So that's what they did. Now they are doing that again with [vinyl] records.

However, the selling of used vinyl of the non-collectable variety can be very affordable for the consumer, as opposed to Best Buy's approach to re-issuing expensive albums. Isaacson notes the difference between his store's approach and that of Best Buy: "They are twice as expensive as us. It's like I said, they are trying to claim it as a sort of bourgeois specialty market. And we still have \$5 Black Sabbath records (laughs)."

In sum, vinyl records play an important role in terms of economically sustaining the independent record store. For some, vinyl records entail a kind of ceremony in terms of playing records, maintaining them, and listening to them as a social activity. Their tactile visual design and packaging appeals to many, and their sound quality is considered to be superior to digital technologies. Vinyl records on the one hand can signify resistance to the digital discourse and MP3 culture, as well as the limited musical variety associated with mass big box culture. They allow for greater cultural variety vis-à-vis "new" and mass marketed music in the form of rare or obscure music. But vinyl is nonetheless a commodity that contributes to the unique and "independent" brand of indie

record stores, as well as their economic success. But as we have seen, rare punk albums can come with an expensive price tag, and some big box retailers have co-opted the vinyl trend by selling vinyl records in select stores.

Anti-Corporate Narratives

The employees and customers associated with independent record stores in general overwhelmingly disdain corporate culture. This is evident with the harsh criticism for mall and big box culture, and also for the major label system. The communities associated with indie stores tend to share an anti-corporate value system, which is a form of ideological resistance to the McDonaldization of culture.

Ideology is composed of “texts that are not closed,” according to Hall (1985), who notes that ideological “counter tendencies” regularly appear in the seams and cracks of dominant forms – in this case, the corporate structuring of the music industry. Thus, hegemony is an incomplete process, power can be lost and cultural assumptions can be challenged. According to Hollander and Einwohner (2004), resistance can be through talk and other symbolic behavior. It may be individual or collective, widespread or locally confined, and it can take place with little or no coordination among subjects (p. 538). All definitions include a sense of action, or active behavior, and contain the words “counter,” “reject,” “challenge,” and “opposition.”

Those interviewed actively compare corporate culture (in terms of mall and chain store culture) as being “sterile,” “plastic,” and “homogeneous.” Greg at House of Records claims, “We’re turning the entire culture into mall culture, and that’s just ridiculous.” Martha, a store employee at House of Records, comments, “This store is not at all

corporate, which is great especially these days where you have people working in cubicles.” A long time store customer claims, “Everyone of those [chain] stores is the same, and they assume you as a customer are all the same. That kind of anonymity and distance I can do without.”

Customers describe corporate music stores as being extremely limited in terms of cultural variety and obscure items. It is assumed that their employees lack a specialized musical depth and knowledge of music history. Corporate culture is viewed as a homogenizing force and an unpleasant place to visit, whereas an independent mom-and-pop store is unique. A customer claims, “I run into people here. I visit people here. It’s a marketplace.” Andrew, a store customer at the House of Records and an undergraduate at the University of Oregon, claims,

I wouldn’t really care if Sam Goody closed, or something, and people can download music for all I care, and I don’t really mind. But you lose a good portion of the music community [should this store close]. I know that I wouldn’t have much to do on a Saturday afternoon, except for go to the record store.

Andrew’s lack of caring about the closing of a corporate chain is also a lack of emotional investment in such stores, whereas the independent store is a form of community, a weekly ritual, and part of his subcultural identity.

A customer at Music Millennium in Portland named Matteo describes the nature of corporations in terms of political economy, noting:

Corporations dumb down culture. They are designed to do that, because it’s the only way they can manage whatever product they are selling in the most efficient way. So you’re just not going to find the variety. You’re not going to find the quality. You’re generally only going to find, in their outlets you’re generally going to find stuff that has big marketing behind it, and other big corporations.

Taylor, another customer at Music Millennium derides corporate chains in terms of censorship and the control associated with exclusive only releases. Taylor describes why he doesn't shop at corporate stores:

I won't do it only because I don't like those stores, and because of the weird censorship thing that they have going. That really pisses me off. And the fact that a lot of artists that I used to really like, [short pause] we're talking teens here, like Pearl Jam for instance. Their new album is only released at Wal-Mart. What the fuck is that?! Come on. I don't subscribe to that. I think it's silly.

Marc Hossler of the “band” Negativland describes the sociological side-effects of having fewer indie stores and more big-box stores. Hossler claims:

As we have more and more big box stores, and big brands everywhere, it just turns the whole U.S. into, everything is just the same as everywhere else. It turns into a monoculture. Regional distinctions are lost. You know, it used to be, you could travel around the U.S., and you could say well, here is this brand of potato chips, and you can only buy it in this part of the country. And a lot of that stuff is just getting more flattened out.

Lisa of the Portland-based band Explode into Colors comments on Wal-Mart in terms of labor, the environment, and urban design, saying:

I think it completely sucks. Even if Wal-Mart did not censor the music they sold I still wouldn't think of them fondly. Their unethical labor policies, poor environmental record, and contribution to sprawling landscapes of poorly planned development are more than enough to keep me away from their stores.

Workers and indie storeowners often have particularly biting views of the mainstream music industry. A common narrative is that the major labels are run by “bean counters,” and corporate people are not passionate about music. They are only passionate about profits. Terry Carrier, the owner of Music Millennium, claims:

All of a sudden things changed, and you had the bean counters infiltrating more than the music lovers. To have a successful distribution company, you need a balance of both. But it really pushed the music people out of it, and more bean counters arrived. When the money people got in there, then the companies became publicly traded companies. And it wasn't about appeasing the music

buyers out there, as much as it was appeasing the stock holders. So they lost sight of the music side in many cases.

Eric Isaacson at Mississippi Records describes the major labels as a “criminal organization” that only seeks to capitalize on profits, noting:

I really don't support the mainstream music industry as much as I can. I think it's good to just sell used records all the time. I think it's a criminal organization. It's the mafia, it's the Nazis, whatever. I have a real low opinion of those groups... It's an industry built to leach off people and sort of mass produce and distribute not for the love, but always just for profit. And there is no question about that. Their motivation and every contract are built to swindle and not help, and every policy is profit driven and nothing else. I'm not saying indies don't fall to that too.

Those associated with independent record store culture can resist or oppose corporate culture and actively take actions to reinforce these beliefs. Customers can choose to shop at an independent store as opposed to a corporate chain. Storeowners can stock local music, sell used goods, and support independent labels and distributors versus stocking major label product. But in the end, it is important to note these practices do not undo the fact that the indie record store is located in a capitalist system, and the stores exist within larger structural and economic forces.

As noted previously, there is no independent record store that exists completely outside of the dominant music system. An analysis of the musical product in any indie store would yield any number of major label releases (or indie bands with corporate distribution), despite the store's unique spatial arrangement and atmosphere and “independent” brand. The anti-corporate argot corresponds with the “independent” brand of the stores. However, economic realities connect indie stores to the dominant music industry (to varying degrees) and to larger structures of capital.

These tensions are evident with Mississippi Records in Portland. Every year on Mississippi Street, where the store is located in Northeast Portland, there is a street fair where expensive crafts and other art objects are sold by various local vendors. Mississippi Records (both the retail store and label) wasn't interested in participating, as the fair has classist overtones, and is symbolic of the perpetual gentrification of the neighborhood. As a reaction, which was part protest, part critique, store-owner Eric Isaacson altered the storefront, giving it the appearance of a Starbucks. Isaacson pretended Mississippi Records had closed, and that a Starbucks was "Coming Soon." Blaring from the speakers was variations of atonal noise music. Large sheets of paper with a marker allowed passersby to note their reaction to the store's impending "closure."

This "culture jam" was a form of resistance and critique against corporate culture, where local independent stores are increasingly usurped by chains such as Starbucks. While this hoax was an interesting critique, it doesn't undo the fact that Mississippi Records is still a business, nor does it address the fact that Mississippi Records is also a place where commodities are bought and sold. While the vernacular aesthetic and independent brand clashes with the shiny gloss of Starbucks, both enterprises are a form of business, and seek to earn a profit. And by "jamming" corporate culture, one simultaneously references and reinforces corporate culture in the process.

According to Gelder (2007), Thornton (1997), and Hebdige (1979), subcultures are generally organized around their resistance to mass or dominant culture. In the context of anti-corporate narratives, it becomes increasingly clear that indie stores need corporate culture against which to define their own ideology of resistance and opposition

– which results in an alternative or “independent” form of commodification. In this context, subcultures create a kind of internal structure or organization, or as Hebdige (1979) refers to it, a homology. It’s a place where history is from the “ground up,” exploring how subcultures want to “win space back” from the dominant culture. However, this space that is “won” is never pure or outside the dominant capitalist order. In fact, these spaces need and feed off of each other. To resist corporate narratives is to simultaneously reinforce them.

Commodification and Indie Culture

Corporate culture is often defined by those affiliated with independent record store culture (store customers, workers and owners) in dichotomous and binary terms. In reality, the lines separating corporate and non-corporate culture are ambiguous. Subcultures are co-opted by the very dominant industry that they oppose. The tensions between resistance and absorption represent a space where culture is contested.

While indie stores exist to earn an economic profit, I would argue that for such stores, earning capital does not have the primacy of their corporate counterparts. While earning an economic profit keeps the stores in business, the subcultural capital associated with owning or being employed at an independent record store is significant for those involved. For example, a small independent record shop might not be swimming in profits (however, some are), but they have a supportive community and social network around the store. They are strongly connected to other music fans, audiophiles, and a variety of subcultures – and these cultures interact at concert venues, clubs, on the

sidewalk, or in a coffee shop. They form bands together, perhaps produce a fanzine, start a record label or music distribution chain. They become friends with each other, and bonds form from these connections. However, as discussed in the last chapter, the relationship between subcultural capital and exploited labor needs to be addressed in more detail.

Subcultures are guided by particular belief systems. The ideology of “independence” can be very strong, even though these beliefs can be folkloric in scope. They give the subcultural group a sense of shared meaning. Subcultures need the banalities of mass culture and cultural standardization disseminated by corporate chain stores to solidify their ideological difference to such systems. Subcultures gather meaning from the capitalistic structuring of society. Subcultures need capitalism in order to exist. Without capitalism, what would they oppose?

A related situation where the commodification of difference facilitates an independent brand is the “Keep Portland Weird” campaign started by Terry Currier at Music Millennium. The slogan “Keep Portland Weird” has taken the form of bumper stickers, t-shirts and lettering painted on various buildings around town. The idea behind the message is to embrace local culture and business, as opposed to the McDonaldization of culture promoted. Yet, this form of difference is a form of commodification, where bumper stickers and t-shirts reinforce anti-corporate ideals, while reinforcing commodification on a more localized level. While “Keep Portland Weird” is a strong statement against corporate culture, it is nonetheless a form of commodified dissent.

It has been well documented that subcultural styles and practices have become co-opted by the dominant cultural industries. All the bands associated with the canon of punk – for example, the Ramones, Sex Pistols and the Clash – are on major record labels. Contemporary indie rock, hip-hop and electronic music act as the soundtrack to television commercials and video games. Large-scale music festivals are sponsored by large corporate sponsors. Vinyl records are sold by giant retailers such as Best Buy. The film *High Fidelity* (2000) brought independent record store culture to a mainstream audience.

Yet as this corporate co-option of subcultures takes place, there are still traces of the original subcultural spirit in these places, even though it has been incorporated by the dominant culture. In other words, when a subculture is co-opted, the process doesn't render the original subcultures as meaningless. Just because punk has been co-opted into a dominant system, it doesn't mean that young kids don't still hold underground basement punk shows, form underground touring networks, and create zines, record labels, and DIY releases. Here, the music is still gritty and they are doing something different than the punk occurring on MTV, or under the auspices of the dominant culture industries.

For example, a mall based chain store such as Hot Topic has appropriated punk, goth, and skate subcultures, but this co-option is done in a very corporate and calculated manner – whereas independent stores still have more or less “authentic” essence of difference. These arguments come down to contested notions of meaning, where notions of “authentic” culture are in tension with co-option and corporate culture. By trying to massify an “underground” practice or commodity, the culture industry does it with gloss

and imprecision, which is different than the original subcultural movement or style. As subcultures look for more ways to define themselves in opposition to the mainstream, the more appealing these subcultures appear to advertisers and marketers. Capitalism thrives on exploiting new markets and difference. Thus, the tensions between co-option and resistance continue unabated. Subcultures affiliated with independent record stores create an idealized version of “independence,” and these meanings are a distortion of economic realities.

These tensions are apparent as most indie stores deliberately want to remain small-scale. The tensions of having an independent brand are at odds with becoming too large (economically), or being co-opted by the dominant industry.

Mississippi Records in Portland illustrates this point. The owners of this indie record store also run Mississippi Records, an independent record label that re-issues obscure world records, and a few local Portland bands. The label has an extremely loyal fan-base. This small label presses 2,000 vinyl records for each release, which usually sell out immediately. They spend no money on advertising and PR, and sell the records via word of mouth, and from the popularity of the physical record store. Label co-owner Eric Isaacson claims:

So I feel like that’s the noblest thing we’ve done is stay low to the ground, and not connected to something bigger than us, or rely on some bigger system, just to prove that you could still distribute stuff person to person without a website, and without a single advertisement or business card. We don’t have any of that. Not taking credit cards. That you can still do these things and manage to exist. It’s a big deal in this modern world, cause the world has kind of squeezed that out.

Their underground popularity has caught the attention of several major labels interested in buying the entire Mississippi Label and “brand.” The owners of Mississippi Records want to keep the label “small scale,” and maintain creative control over the label. ADA distribution, owned by Warner Music Group, offered to buy the Mississippi brand and label owners Eric Isaacson and Warren Hill have repeatedly rejected these offers. They insist on keeping the label local. They want to have control of the packaging and continue selling their products at a cheap price of \$10. They distribute the records through independent distributors and directly to other independent stores.

Despite their disinterest in being part of the larger, dominant music industry, the tensions of capital are at play. Because their records are so popular and obscure, other independent stores and collectors will buy multiple copies and sell them for double, triple or quadruple the original cost. Mississippi could make much more money on these vinyl releases, but they have deliberately rejected a corporate path. Warren Hill, co-owner of the label, claims:

Ultimately at the end of the day that would make it too big (having a larger distributor), or too unwieldy, and we’d lose the control and power, and that’s part of the appeal of doing it ourselves... We’re pretty satisfied with the size that we’re at, and if you wanted to really sit down and think about, you know, expanding and growing your business, then that would be something you’d be concerned about. We just want to be able to make records that we think are cool, and that we like. And, and get them to people for what is an affordable price.

Resistance is seen in the punk subculture’s practice of creating independent media for the purposes of creative expression, cultural participation, and community formation. The idea of making a lot of money may be secondary – as the spirit of punk encourages a different kind of public sphere and relationship to capital. In the case of Mississippi

Records, the independent label emphasizes control over the means of cultural production. Opposition continues to spring from punk and other corners of cultural production where peers and critics measure success not in terms of the “economic capital” of sales and profits, but rather the “symbolic capital” of making good art that is recognized (Moore, 2007). These cultural producers do not simply compete with the field on its own terms but challenge the way that the game is played by redefining the rewards worth pursuing.

However, this very rejection of the dominant industry, deliberate small-scale infrastructure, and a limited number of releases gives Mississippi Records more subcultural capital (small scale label, limited releases, do-it-yourself approach, no advertising), and an “independent” brand. Yet the simple market logic of supply and demand allows other stores and collectors to profit from the initial low prices of a Mississippi Records release. Even as Mississippi rejects the dominant economic system, the very logic of that system takes over once the records are out of their hands, and others are profiting from it. Eric claims:

I think it's the residents' theory of obscurity where the less you tell people and the less you put out there, the more they get, fast, or create their own interest or buzz, you know. So, sort of our lack of information was our best advertisement, maybe. And it wasn't conscious. I really don't know how to do any of that. I don't really know.

As a result, being obscure and having a lack of information and advertising has helped to foster their independent brand, which is popularized by their unorthodox approach towards conducting business. This approach, however oppositional to the dominant music system, is nonetheless a form of commodification, and the records circulate in larger economic structures. As the label owners reject the notion of making

large sums of money from their records, others are profiting on their low prices, and selling them with a large profit, thus reinforcing the logic of capital.

The effects of commodification can be seen when considering the history of a store like Music Millennium in Portland, Oregon. The store originally started in 1969, and the counter-culture politics associated with the war in Vietnam went side-by-side the selling of obscure music in the store. The store stocked underground publications and handed out leaflets. Steve, a long-time store employee, comments on the store atmosphere at the time:

Oh, sure. It was very left. All the way. That goes without saying. Got involved in the anti-war to a point, and not huge, but there was a feeling there. Yeah. Well, during the marches, um, we were, getting people to go, encouraging people to go. Handing out some leaflets in the store, and that kind of stuff. Yeah, it was a little bit more overt back then... I think it's a little less overt now.

However, as the store expanded over the years, the overt political edge of the store has disappeared, as the focus became more on selling music and operating as a more proper business. Storeowner Terry Currier claims:

The clientele is a lot more diverse today than it was then. The clientele grew. The fact that the store had one of the finest selections of music in the country attracted all kind of people to that store. Music is common denominator here. It's the main the main focus of what it is here... As a retail business these days, you have a hard time, you know, supporting candidates and things like that, because everybody has different views, and it's, we just, we just made a comment, a policy that we just don't do that.

This situation is significant because it illustrates the nature of counter-culture and commodification. The store was more overtly political in the store's early days. As the store grew and became more focused as a business, the political orientation of the store became less overt. What appeared to be more of a radical space has drifted into a

business, where the politics of the store in contemporary times are less clear or, due to policy, not overtly publicized. While the store continues to sell commodities referencing 1960s counter-culture with albums, t-shirts, and posters, the overt political feel of the store has been reduced. This process is in line with Kellner's (2000) interpretation of Marcuse, where "oppositional subjectivity, and the movements and revolts in which it were grounded, were fragile, subject to dispersion and defeat, or absorption and cooptation" (p. 13). Moreover, Marcuse was aware of the contradictions of oppositional subjectivities and movements that, on the one hand, reproduced tendencies of the existing capitalist societies, and opposed other aspects and seeking alternatives on the other hand.

Greg Saunier of the band Deerhoof notes the various ways in which "independent" music is co-opted into the larger dominant or corporate system, noting:

Indie bands and indie labels are nevertheless prone to having all kinds of corporate relationships. They may play at corporate-sponsored events, they may hire corporate distributors and marketers and publicists, they may license their record to a major label subsidiary in another country, they may license a song for a corporate movie or TV show, or the holy grail, a corporate TV commercial.

Saunier follows this statement by underscoring the realities of having to earn a living through the commodification of music:

Maybe one reason the combination of indie music and capitalism is often considered to be a cognitive dissonance is that, for most people, music is considered part of leisure. But of course for the people doing it, it is anything but. That's their job and they have to eat.

The "cognitive dissonance" Saunier is referring to conflicts with the notion of independence, because subcultures tend to be uncritical of their own relationship to capitalism, and view themselves as being *outside* of corporate culture. As a result, music commodities are fetishized. Corporate culture and capitalism are abstract things

occurring elsewhere, *outside* the subculture. “Independence,” from a subcultural perspective, is *imagined*. It is difficult for those in a subculture to comprehend music beyond a “leisure” activity or as a fetishized commodity. Or that larger economic forces and the mode of production play a pivotal role in the dissemination of music, even music perceived to be “independent.” And for the artists involved, they need to earn a living through their craft, which means an attachment to capital.

A similar kind of “cognitive dissonance” is apparent when talking with Calvin Johnson of K Records (a “true” independent label), where the motto is: “exploding the teenage underground into passionate revolt against the corporate ogre since 1982.” K releases are more likely to sell at an independent record store; however, when pressed about the contradictions of selling K releases to corporate chain stores, a practice that falls into a larger economic discourse, Johnson gave a moment of pause. Thus, the subcultural capital or ideology associated with K being “independent” (as they are a “true” independent, with independent distribution) and being anti-corporate clashes with the economic reality of selling records in a capitalistic system. However, there is the desire to get the records “out there,” regardless of where they sell, thus contradicting the label’s anti-corporate ethos. Johnson claims:

We make records for people to listen to. We want people to hear the music. And we’re making the record, and we’re trying to make it available to people. If you ask me personally, I would prefer you bought my record at Rainy Day Records (a local indie store in Olympia, Washington). But there are a lot of people in the world that don’t even know that Rainy Day Records exists. And they live next door. You know what I mean? It’s invisible to them. If they’re like, if they want to buy a CD, they are going to go to Wal-Mart. That’s what they do. They don’t know there is an alternative spot. That is the reality to them. If our records are in Wal-Mart when they show up to buy it, great. But the most likely thing is that our record isn’t in Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is not interested in carrying K.

This situation connects to the nature of music distribution, where an independent distributor will sell music to a larger chain – or anyone willing to pay for the records. Thus, even though independent labels have the façade of being “independent” or outside the dominant culture, once a record goes to a distributor (even an indie distributor), it is outside of their hands. As Dave Gulbif, a sales representative at Revolver Distribution, claims, “We’re willing to sell to whoever is willing to buy.” Thus, “independent” music follows the ebb and flow of capital. Indie labels and distributors sell to the big boxes, even though their policies and practices undermine the independent record store. Thus, the ideology of “independence” between indie labels, distribution and retail is merely symbolic. Media flows according to the currents of capital.

The tensions between art and commerce are reflected with Marc Hossler from the band/art collective Negativland, whose musical culture jamming offers a biting satire on mass commercial culture. In the last chapter, I discussed how the band sold its initial vinyl release with its hand-made cover art in indie stores. Now its music is available at Wal-MartMP3.com. Hossler openly embraces his music being sold at a large chain such as Wal-Mart, and embraces its absorption into the dominant culture. He claims:

You can attack it all you want, and it will just absorb you. I mean, that’s just kind of a given... Once it’s out of our hands, you know, I don’t have any issue about where... The work stands on its own. So I’d love our work to be in Wal-Mart. It would be great! I want it to get anywhere it can get, I’m happy for it to get there. No, it doesn’t bother us at all. Because, I think the integrity of the work is in the work.

At the larger corporate chains, the commodification of difference is nothing new. For example, Target sells the latest album by the Gossip, an all girl punk band on Sub-Pop Records, which a label often misinterpreted as being independent, but is almost half-

owned by Warner Bros records. Another example is the continual selling of Woodstock, and how the store design co-opted a “paisley design” that is “vaguely hippie.” A Target store manager claims, “They’re commodifying that right there, and they are trying to pull in a generation that might not be aware of it,” through the sales of commodities related to Woodstock. This same manager discusses an in-store branding design that ties into an exclusive only Pearl Jam release. The manager claims:

Well, you know, Pearl Jam in a way, even though they have become very corporate, they’re also very anti-corporate, and we gave them a huge spread. I think it would depend on how it was marketed and packaged... It all depends on how it’s packaged. That might be the only thing they [Target] care about, as far as the content.

In sum, there are inherent tensions with “independence” as an ideology, the brand associated with indie stores, and the nature of capitalism. The ideology of independence is out of sync with the nature of commodification. The independent record store utilizes subcultural capital to further harvest the commodification of subcultural taste and style. Resistance in this context occurs through consumption practices.

A Brief Look at Gentrification and Class

An example of the tensions between gentrification and class is evident with Mississippi Records. Mississippi Records is located in Northeast Portland, and this section of the city has historically been the home to the city’s African American community. Over the years, the neighborhood has been assaulted by rampant gentrification, where the young, usually “white” hipsters have moved into the area. As a result, a variety of hip businesses have followed, such as restaurants, coffee shops and

thrift stores. This caused the rent to increase, thus making it more difficult for those living in the area to afford their rent. This situation has displaced some long-time residents to other parts of the city.

When I interviewed Eric Isaacson, the storeowner of Mississippi Records, the store was flowing with a fashionable hipster clientele, those with the disposable income and economic means with which to purchase vinyl records. This scenario was juxtaposed against a member of the underclass, an elderly woman presumably living in poverty (or possibly homeless) who entered the store. She was the only minority observed in the store that day. Ostensibly, she was a regular visitor to the store, and offered a bag of old cassette tapes, for which Eric kindly gave her a few dollars (even though he probably wouldn't sell them). Then she was off and on her way. In the midst of talking about how the store is a form of community and in opposition to the corporate structuring of culture, this incident provided an awkward tension.

This incident highlighted the gentrification occurring in the neighborhood, as well as in-store race dynamics. It begs the question: Who has the money to buy records? How is record consumption and subcultural capital related to class? If someone has the disposable income to buy vinyl records, this says something about their class standing, where leisure can be purchased. However, for the poor and disenfranchised, they likely don't have the same luxury.

Another irony of Mississippi Records is that they display a giant sign from the "House of Sound" inside their store. House of Sound was an iconic African American

run record store in the area that was leveled so a new apartment building could be built, as a result of said gentrification. This sign can be seen as a symbol of carrying on the tradition of selling music and fostering local community, much like the House of Sound. But the signifier is not without its residue of power issues related to class and race in the neighborhood. An African American business closes due to gentrification, and an all white record store co-opts their sign, and sells records to a mostly white “hipster” clientele. This situation is no doubt problematic from a both a semiotic and class analysis, and is further evidence that the subcultures associated with indie record store culture are largely un-critical (or maintain a false consciousness) of class dynamics and the nature of capital.

Similar issues of gentrification were present in the Mission neighborhood located in San Francisco. The Mission is known for its Latino community, where Aquarius Records, an independent record store, is based. Storeowner Alan Horrocks claims:

Well, the Mission, there is the Mexican American population here, and we don't really go out of our way to cater to, have a whole lot of Latin music or anything, because there are other stores here, because it is the Mission, and they specialize in that... Some people are going to frown upon it, and other people like me who are part of that wave of gentrification, are like, that's fine. Opening up record stores and bookstores is cool, but we may think the gentrification isn't so cool when it's the Starbucks and stuff like that. For some people who share that, it may be a somewhat self-serving perspective, would think that we're fine because, we're more part of that independent scene... And the Mission has a lot of artists and musicians, and so forth. And it used to, when it was relatively affordable. Of course now, it's incredibly expensive to live here.

What is interesting here is the belief system that the corporations are the perpetrators of gentrification, not smaller businesses such as an indie record store. By being non-corporate, the indie store's participation in the gentrification process is

somehow more acceptable because it's part of an "independent" scene or brand. Thus, being "independent" somehow obscures the nature of commodification and capital, whereas such stores contribute to the gentrification of neighborhoods despite their "independent" nature. From the indie or subcultural perspective, it is perceived that gentrification happens *outside* the indie record store, as opposed to contributing to the problem.

However, the topic of gentrification and independent record stores can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, indie record stores can contribute to the process of gentrification, as observed with Aquarius Records and Mississippi Records. There are other instances where longtime independent record stores have been forced out and closed because of gentrification, as the rise in rent renders business unprofitable. This was the case with Portland's Music Millennium, whose second downtown location closed in 2007.

Conclusions

The space and place associated with independent record stores is significant to those involved in the culture, and their "difference" is an alternative to the McDonaldized nature of the big box retailers. The unique design of indie stores appeals to the senses and offers a unique experience. However, the design of space and place is nonetheless a kind of independent branding. Indie stores rely on the homogenization of dominant corporate culture, which gives indie stores their unique meaning and sense of difference.

Vinyl records play an important role in terms of economically sustaining the independent record store, and provide subcultural meaning and capital. For some, vinyl

records entail a kind of ceremony in terms of playing records, maintaining them, and listening to them as a social activity. Their tactile visual design and packaging appeals to many, and their sound quality is considered to be superior to digital technologies. Vinyl records on the one hand can signify resistance to the digital discourse and MP3 culture, as well as mass big box culture and the mainstream music market by allowing for greater cultural variety. But vinyl is nonetheless a commodity that contributes to the unique and “independent” brand of indie record stores, as well as their continued economic success. This can be seen with the commodification of old punk albums, where market scarcity renders them collectable, which is usually accompanied by an expensive price tag. While there are notions of resistance in terms of vinyl collecting, this resistance must be considered in terms of commodification.

Those associated with independent record store culture generally resist and oppose corporate culture. While I think it’s important to have a place where these ideas can flourish, it is important to note these practices don’t undo the fact that indie record stores are part of a capitalist system. There is no independent record store that exists completely outside of the dominant music system. An analysis of the musical product in any indie store would likely yield any number of major label or corporate releases (or indie bands with corporate distribution), despite the store’s unique spatial arrangement and atmosphere and notions of “independence.” Being anti-corporate fits in with the “independent” brand of the stores, while economic realities connect stores to the dominant music industry (to varying degrees) and to larger structures of capital.

It has been concluded that the ideology of independence is out of sync with the nature of commodification and capital, and that resistant ideologies ultimately reinforce the economic status quo. The independent record store, in conjunction with operating as a business, also utilizes subcultural capital to further harvest the commodification of subcultural taste and style; thus, resistance in this context occurs through consumption practices.

Lastly, the double-edged sword of gentrification and social class are factors in terms of looking at how the “scene” associated with an independent record store can be out of touch with the economic realities and cultural diversity of a given neighborhood. Indie stores can contribute to processes of gentrification, which can greatly impact the class dynamic in a given neighborhood. At the same time, indie stores can be pushed out of a neighborhood due to the expenses associated with increasing rents, as a result of gentrification. However, having the expendable income to buy records suggests a relationship to class, a concept that seems to be largely ignored in subcultural scenes and communities.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

This research project examined the independent record store from a political economic and critical-cultural studies approach. Both approaches have considered how the economic structuring of the music industry impacts the sustainability of the independent record store, the availability of musical diversity, and the communities associated with the stores.

I now return to the theoretical goals and research questions in order to emphasize the original contributions from the study. I discuss my contributions to the field of communication and to building upon and extending theory. I also consider suggestions for further research, future research and recommendations for those affiliated with indie store culture.

Contributions to the Field

As noted in Chapter I, recorded music is neglected in the field of communication studies. More specifically, political economy and critical cultural studies have paid little attention to recorded music. As discussed in Chapter III, some key texts, including Attali

(1977), Chapple (1978), Kelly (2005), Shuker (2008) and Whiteley (1997), offer critical interpretations of the music industry. However, this literature fails to adequately address the complexities and evolving nature of music retail. There are no theoretical grounding or empirical studies on the topic. This is surprising as music retail is so thoroughly integrated with production and distribution, as well as with related media outlets such as radio broadcasting. For example, the intersection of retail sales (both physical and paid-for downloads) and radio play ultimately comprise the statistical information by which the popular *Billboard* music charts are constructed. Understanding this economic system is pivotal in order to understand how popular music codes are manufactured by the major label system. To neglect music retail is to lack a fundamental understanding of how the music industry currently works.

The project provides an array of empirical evidence suggesting that recorded music and retail are topics worthy of study, much like new media, film, television and print. It highlights the social importance of alternative media and the multifarious ways by which recorded music makes its way (or fails to make its way) onto the shelves of retail outlets or is strategically placed on online stores such as iTunes. When recorded music is viewed in terms of commodity fetishism, the meaning of “independence” is complicated, as music labels and retailers are connected (to varying degrees) to corporate purse strings. This project reinforces the continued significance of “old” physical media in a social environment characterized by the digital world. It also highlights the importance of face-to-face consumption and human interaction, where shopping (and/or gathering) in a physical record store is deeply significant for those involved.

This project investigated the implications of the structural makeup of the dominant music industry and the specific policies and practices of this industry. It also addressed the ambiguous nature and harvesting of “independence” in terms of communities, space and place, vinyl record collecting, musical education, anti-corporate narratives, gentrification and anti-McDonaldization. I will now discuss each of these contributions in regards to the original research questions.

Structural Implications of the Dominant Music Industry

The dominant music industry is extremely concentrated. This concentration is evident with the structuring of the major “big four” record labels and the major corporate retailers. As a result of this concentration, the intersection of economic power between the major labels and corporate retailers largely determines popular musical taste. This is accomplished through the economic strength of the major labels, as they have the ability to manufacture popular artists. The labels essentially buy the fame of their artists. This occurs through corporate synergies and horizontal and vertical integration. It is accomplished through their ability to saturate the market with promotions and marketing. Popular music is heavily promoted on corporate radio, MTV and major music magazines. It acts as the soundtrack for television programming, video games and movies. Music is integrated into portable screen devices and MP3 players. Music permeates social media sites. In conjunction with these various media outlets, the manufacturing of popular music occurs through a variety of retail policies and practices.

The various interlocking relationships and powerful backing of multinational conglomerates cushion the major labels and corporate retailers from downturns in the economy. Independent record stores and labels do not have the same economic leverage. “True” independent labels do not have the same financial resources and ability to promote their artists on a mass scale. Indie artists lack the same amount of cultural exposure, and as a result, they don’t sell as many albums (either digitally or in physical form). Independent record stores are not connected to the major label system like their corporate counterparts are (except for larger indie stores and chains), and they can’t compete with the economies of scale, corporate “buy ins,” co-op advertising and selling music as a loss leader. Because of this neo-liberal discourse, multinational corporations (both labels and retailers) continue to manufacture the dominant music culture.

A major implication of this economic consolidation is that musical choice is limited and standardized according to corporate interests. The extremely broad range of music available in a global context is narrowed down to a small cross-section of popular musical acts (usually Western acts). This pattern is consistent with the tenets of political economy, where issues related to media standardization and a lack of choice are of primary concern. If a fundamental aim of political economy is to provide alternatives to standardized media culture, the independent record store provides this cultural diversity and richness.

However, many critics and scholars will argue that the dominant industry has lost its control over the market and that it no longer continues to monopolize music culture as it has in the past. Illegal downloading allows everyday users access to the means of free

music distribution. Free digital downloading grants unprecedented agency to users interested in exploring musical diversity outside the confines of the dominant system. But even in the face of illegal downloading, the popular music charts continue to be dominated by major label acts, and the major corporate retailers still continue to sell the majority of physical recordings in the United States.

As the music industry (both labels and retailers) is characterized by extreme market concentration and standardization, the independent record store fills an important cultural gap in regards to musical diversity and cultural pluralism. Indie record stores are antithetical to cultural standardization. Each store has its own unique musical identity and character. The musical content is individualized, idiosyncratic and unpredictable. As a result, indie stores are filling an important cultural void vacated by the corporate structuring of culture. While indie stores are not completely outside of this dominant structuring, they nonetheless provide greater musical selection (and service) than the typical corporate retailer.

Indie record stores, to varying degrees, stock music that is generally not available at corporate big box stores and on-line retailers. But on-line retailers such as Amazon and iTunes have a greater musical selection than typical big box stores. In fact, both of these on-line entities are capable of transcending the music selection of smaller indie stores. However, although on-line retailers such as Amazon and iTunes can carry a broad range of “digital” titles, they are more limited in terms of format (only available on MP3 or CD, as opposed to vinyl and other fringe formats). And while obscure music can be

obtained through eBay and other on-line sites, it is the physical experience of shopping at an indie store that distinguishes it from e-commerce. Consuming music through a computer (or smartphone) is a mediated experience. In a physical retail store, one can interact with people, physically browse tangible music, and even smell the musty vinyl records. These are vastly different experiences. It is this connection to the physical and tangible that keeps customers of indie stores coming back.

Music in an indie retail context often reinforces the cultural fringes. The music can be rare, obscure, limited edition and out-of-print. The music can exist outside the radar of mainstream radio, MTV and the major label system (to varying degrees). There is often a deep specialization in terms of specific genres such as jazz, hip-hop, punk, world and indie music. The owners and workers at indie stores “curate” the music according to their taste and interests. Because of this, each store has its own personality.

The music primarily comes from “indie” labels and distributors (the ambiguous nature of “independence” is discussed later in this chapter). Indie stores sell local music and help foster the local music community and music scene (it must be noted, though, that iTunes and Amazon also sell “local” and self-produced releases). The stores often sell used music and a broad range of musical formats ranging from vinyl, 45 and 78 rpm records to hand-made experimental “noise music” cassettes. Indie stores sell music not available on iTunes and Amazon, thus debunking the myth that “everything” is available via download. Indie stores focus on back catalog and the releases not commonly emphasized at the big box stores. Indie stores do not censor music due to its political content, nor do they typically stock sanitized or edited versions of albums.

In a neo-liberal epoch marked by extreme media concentration and standardization, the independent record store provides greater cultural variety in terms of music titles, various genres and musical formats. If the selection at an indie store isn't as encompassing as a corporate retailer (such as, more specifically, on-line retailers like Amazon and iTunes, not the big boxes), these stores compensate with a personalized store atmosphere, knowledgeable store employees, the experience of face-to-face interaction and the communities associated with the stores.

The very existence of the independent record store is symbolic of greater musical variety and access to the depths of musical history. Indie stores challenge the tenets of cultural homogenization and provide a vital space where agents can learn about and consume alternative media. While on-line retailers also have access to musical variety and musical history, the physicality, atmosphere and human interaction associated with the indie store is extremely significant for those involved in the culture.

Policies and Practices of the Dominant Music Industry

The policies and practices of the dominant music industry systematically work to reinforce market dominance and media consolidation, and manufacture popular music through a variety of corporate channels. As noted, a number of these policies and practices have not been exposed or thoroughly explored in the political economy literature.

A key example illustrates this point. While radio-based payola has historically received much attention, similar retail "payola" tactics are relatively unknown. The

major labels have a long history of borderline corruption in terms of rigging the music charts in order to construct popular musical taste. Essentially, storeowners and employees were bribed (with free music and other lavish items) and label representatives manipulated sales figures. An album on the popular charts receives more media attention, which further ignites the sale of music commodities. In this context, audiences were constructed through an artificial range of music. This extends Smythe's (1977) notion that media institutions are a "consciousness industry" and form of "psychological manipulation." Since SoundScan (point of sale scanning device) was introduced in 1991, this overt corruption has declined. As noted in Chapter VI, however, label representatives still find ways to manipulate the charts via SoundScan.

The practice of co-op advertising is a relatively unknown topic within the academic literature. The practice allows record labels (usually major labels) to purchase space in retail outlets, much like ad space might be purchased in a magazine. Thus, a very standardized form of music makes its way on the shelves of the corporate big boxes, space that is paid for. This situation furthers Attali's (1977) discussion of repeatable molds and formulas, where mass production leads to the standardization of cultural molds. Indie labels, on the other hand, don't have the financial power to get their wares into chain stores (although some larger indies do have this ability). At the same time, indie stores (except for larger indie stores) don't get paid to sell music by the major labels; thus the corporate chains have a distinct economic advantage and are able to perpetuate a system of "repeatable molds." Likewise, music is a "loss leader," where the big box stores exploit economies of scale by selling CDs for less than they pay for them.

The stores make their money from selling expensive electronics, whereas indie stores simply can't compete with these prices and practices. This cutthroat competition has been a key factor in the demise of some indie record stores.

Buying practices shed much light in terms of the nature of corporate and indie retail culture. Corporate buying ensures that big boxes contain the same "popular" music in all of its outlets (although some local variation does occur). Store workers have no agency in terms of the music buying process, and customers can't obtain music outside these stores' rigid music selection (such as local and independent music). Music is ordered from a corporate center, which is out of touch with the ebb and flow of the local culture. In this context, the major big box retailers construct audiences through its narrow selection of titles. This is problematic as the big boxes have an inordinate amount of control over the type of music available in the U.S.

However, indie stores carry local music and "independent" releases, and they can special-order a broad range of music titles. Indie stores are much more flexible in terms of obtaining obscure, non-mainstream and independent music, which is far more representative of a pluralistic society. This is because the buying practices at an indie store are predicated on providing musical variety, not media standardization.

In terms of the major labels and corporate retail, the dominant industry has been known for its ability to control and monopolize. Most notably, Wal-Mart and its censorship policies have been thoroughly documented. However, the control of technology with the introduction of the CD format, and the development of a major label policy that systematically made vinyl records non-returnable, is more insidious. As a

result, this example of forced obsolescence effectively guaranteed the financial success of the CD format, while virtually eliminating vinyl (the format of choice for most indie stores). Also in the early 1990s, the major distributors wanted to eliminate the sale of used music in indie retail stores, as the corporate labels were not benefiting economically from these sales. The sale of used music is a financial cornerstone of the independent record store and to eliminate these sales would have decimated the stores.

In terms of new media, Apple's iTunes intentionally utilizes practices that undermine the independent record store by selling music several weeks before "brick and mortar" stores can access it. Labels provide bonus material to iTunes in exchange for better placement and visibility within the virtual store. iTunes then releases the music weeks before other physical retailers can access it. As a result, the potential sales of an album at indie retailers are compromised.

Also, if a physical "brick and mortar" store wants to obtain a piece of the digital download market, the financial barriers to entry make it virtually impossible. This process entails obtaining intellectual property rights from the major labels, which is extremely costly and time consuming. It should be reiterated the major labels earn a large portion of their revenues through the exploitation of copyright and intellectual property, and thus have a *virtual* monopoly over the back catalog rights needed to sell MP3 files via iTunes and Amazon.com. Indie retailers will continue to have a difficult time entering the download market, as the expenses are simply too substantial. Apple's market dominance is also reinforced as the company is vertically integrated with the manufacture of media-based hardware, most notably the iPod, iPhone and iPad. This

intersection of hardware and retail essentially guarantees continued market dominance for years to come.

In sum, the policies and practices of the dominant music industry have provided some key insights into the nature of control, the manufacture of popular taste, and the standardization of music culture. Ultimately, these policies and practices make it difficult for the indie store to remain financially sustainable. As a result, many indie stores are going out of business or subsisting precariously from day to day.

The Ambiguities and Harvesting of “Independence”

Taking a closer look into the economics of indie stores, one must consider how they are connected to processes of commodification and the logic of capital. The “independent” brand associated with the independent record store illustrates how they are connected to commodification and corporate culture. Depending on the type of indie store, the lines separating independent and corporate culture can be thin.

The true essence of “independence” becomes increasingly ambiguous upon further investigation. For example, some indie storeowners fostered the sentiment that indie stores are somehow “external” to corporate culture and capitalism. This belief system is out of touch with reality, as indie record stores are fundamentally a business venture. There is a chasm between actual economic independence and the social perception of “independence” as an ideological construct.

Independent record stores can never be completely autonomous from the dominant music industry. Larger indie “generalist” stores and some indie chains sell

major label product, embrace co-op advertising, utilize in-store listening stations, and can buy directly from the major labels. Such practices are reflective of the major corporate retailers. The music sold at most indie stores is connected, to varying degrees, to the major labels, as many “indie” labels are actually distributed by one of the “big four.” Those associated with indie store culture generally lack a shared definition of what independent music is. “Independent” music distributed by one of the big-four labels ceases to be independent.

However, I argue that “used only” stores are the most detached from the dominant music industry. These stores don’t rely on the dominant distribution system, as they buy directly from their customers. In fact, many used only and smaller niche stores outright resist the corporate promotional machinery (such as buy-ins, co-op advertising and in-store displays), as the stores only sell secondhand music, or rely solely on independent distribution. These stores represent the most autonomy from the dominant industry and are much closer to “true” independence. This is a direct result of the distribution channels utilized by the independent retail outlet.

Contradictions in terms of “independence” are also evident with independent labels. Indie labels, even those with a staunch anti-corporate stance such as Kill Rock Stars and K Records, will sell and distribute music to anyone willing to pay. Thus, there are ostensible contradictions when conceptualizing independence, especially in terms of the logic of the market. This includes selling music to corporate sponsors of censorship (Wal-Mart), big box stores that systemically undermine the competition with loss leaders and co-op advertising (Best Buy), and on-line merchants who exclusively sell music

before indie stores can obtain it (iTunes). Indie labels follow the logic of the market, even if it's antithetical to their *image* and independent brand. When indie labels and distributors sell to the corporate retailers, it effectively undermines the economic sustainability of the independent record store.

“Independence” is usually a state of mind, not an economic reality. From a cultural framework, the ideology of “independence” is out of sync with processes of commodification. The independent record store thrives on subcultural capital, and the stores ultimately harvest the commodification of “oppositional” taste and style. Subcultural resistance occurs through consumption practices. Difference is bought and sold in the form of obscure vinyl records, punk t-shirts, hair dye and paraphernalia associated with rave culture. Consumption of these objects reinforces the subcultural group identity. In order to perpetuate this group identity, the subculture needs to consume its style and taste.

While the subcultures associated with indie stores are often resistant to corporate culture, indie culture *needs* corporate culture in order to define its own sense of difference. Without corporate culture, what would those associated with the indie record store be opposing? And as we have seen, resistance is rigorously co-opted by the culture industries, and subcultural style and taste is simply another commodity to be massified and marketed. However, I would argue that the narratives and content associated with punk, hardcore, and hip-hop music in particular can foster critical and counter-hegemonic belief systems, albeit in a capitalist framework of commodity exchange.

Community, Subcultural Connections and Gentrification

Indie record stores serve a social function. They offer more than the buying and selling of commodities. Indie stores foster a very particular community interested in face-to-face interaction and interpersonal communication. The stores provide an important social outlet for music enthusiasts, where they can openly discuss music culture with other likeminded individuals and collectors. Relationships and bonds form between customers and workers. These relationships are solidified as musical knowledge is exchanged, and a personable camaraderie permeates. For some customers, shopping in an indie store is a weekly ritual. Others venture into the stores simply to chat and “hang out,” without buying anything at all.

But like most communities, indie store culture can be exclusive. Outsiders, or those who lack a subcultural vernacular, might feel intimidated by indie stores. Women in particular are somewhat of a minority in this context, as the stores lean heavily towards a male clientele. Thus, for those who are insiders, indie stores are very much a community oriented gathering space. However, this community trait is not universal.

I extended subcultural literature by developing the concept of the *subcultural connector*. This is a concept where the physical space of an indie record store actively connects subcultures to other scenes and localized communities (it must be noted that various social spaces can serve as a *connector*). Connections occur by posting flyers, selling localized fanzines and music, and engaging and networking with other people in the stores. This networking can lead to various social gatherings and activities such as forming bands; putting on shows (or live music events); creating zines; organizing music

listening parties; and coordinating other various social gatherings. These interactions reinforce a community both inside and outside the stores.

Both Calvin Johnson of K Records and Marc Hossler of the music group Negativland noted the cultural significance of being introduced or *connected* to punk culture by way of the independent record store. In both situations, punk music reinforced the do-it-yourself ideology of creating and maintaining localized music scenes, as opposed to having culture manufactured from the top down. The punk subculture reinforces human agency, where anyone can be an active producer of culture, as opposed to a passive consumer of media. The subcultural connector – in this case discovering punk and obscure music in indie stores – perpetuated a localized scene or community where subcultural members reinforced a group identity. The subcultural connector also builds on Straw (2005), who notes, “As punk scenes stabilized, they developed infrastructures (record labels, performance venues, lines of communication, and record stores) within which a variety of other musical activities unfolded” (p. 471). These local scenes often exist outside the dominant music industry, yet are susceptible to being co-opted into the larger economic system. These tensions are perpetually at the heart of “independent” music culture.

The independent record store has been considered in terms of how communities and subcultures cultivate *subcultural capital*, where the stores facilitate *subcultural connections*. However, the “battlefield,” as Hall (2002) refers to it, between subcultures and corporate culture ultimately constitutes and reinforces the economic status quo. Resistance is shaped and constituted by the dominant culture. Independent record stores

and their related cultures need corporate culture to conceive of “difference” and to solidify their own “independent” brand.

There is a chasm between distorted notions of “independence” amongst those affiliated with indie record stores and the economic realities of how musical commodities circulate under late capitalism. Ultimately, the *subcultural capital* associated with indie stores is harvested to further the commodification of an “independent” brand. Being part of a scene or subcultural community means consuming a particular style, as well as other tangible commodities (vinyl records, CDs, record player, clothing, etc.). As a result, this exchange of commodities is very much part of consumer culture and the nature of late capitalism.

Gentrification and social class are factors in terms of examining how the subcultures associated with the indie stores can be out of touch with the economic realities and cultural diversity of a given neighborhood. As noted with Mississippi Records (Portland) and Aquarius Records (San Francisco), indie stores can contribute to processes of gentrification. Rents become unaffordable to the local residents, as a more economically privileged population inhabits the area. Having the ability to freely buy music suggests a privileged class position, and my sense is that music based subcultures are relatively uncritical of their own class position. This builds upon Bourdieu (2004), who provides insight as to how “taste” (for example, in the form of buying vinyl records) is impacted by one’s social class. This study indicates that false-consciousness and

commodity fetishism permeate the subcultures involved in the indie record store, and as a result, they are largely uncritical of their class status.

Post-subcultural studies (Hollands and Greener, 2006) build upon the earlier subcultural foundations, as does this study, which confirms that subcultures in this context do little to foster any meaningful or large-scale social change. Subcultures in the indie record store context have little potential for social change, and are largely defined by their consumption practices and fragmentation from the mainstream mass culture. This builds on Duncombe's (2001) work on zines, a culture in which individuals can be radicalized through underground culture, but who have to make the step to political action themselves.

However, there are examples where indie store culture and civic engagement have intermingled. Terry Currier of Portland's Music Millennium described a situation where the local community surrounding Waterloo Music and Video in Austin, Texas, effectively banded together and thwarted the construction of a Borders bookstore, which was to be built in close proximity to the iconic indie record store. This example is evidence that culture is a contested space, and that localized culture is worth fighting for. It is evidence that corporate culture can be resisted through civic engagement and local business can persevere in the face of the corporate structuring of culture. To do so reinforces locality and a society predicated on media pluralism.

Anti-McDonaldization

Lastly, I extended Ritzer's (1996, 2006) notion of McDonaldization by coining the phrase *anti-McDonaldization*. This phrase is highlighted by a series of cultural moments where the practices associated with the independent record store resists or challenges the rationalization of society. For example, the fact that every record store is unique and different in terms of space and vernacular design (with the exception of some indie chains), coupled with their unpredictable music selection, challenges the standardization brought about by the McDonaldization of corporate retail. This is accomplished by selling used music, where the selection can shift depending on the music coming in from customers, or by the way music is "curated" by storeowners and employees. Processes of anti-McDonaldization in the indie store context foster an atmosphere that is more "humanizing" and breeds more "patient" people, as opposed to the rapidly normalizing process of obtaining music instantaneously via a computer or in the context of an anonymous big box chain.

The buying practices at indie stores are a form of anti-McDonaldization. Because inventory is not standardized, the music buyers can conduct special orders and can obtain obscure and non-mainstream music. The corporate buying of music is highly "irrational," where employees don't have the agency to order music demanded by store customers. The music is imposed upon the store from a distant buyer. Special ordering more nuanced music outside this "irrational" ordering system is an impossibility. Centralized buying practices embody standardization, efficiency and control. This perpetuates the McDonaldization of society.

The concept of anti-McDonaldization builds upon Kellner's (1999) critique of McDonaldization, in which the author contends that Ritzer (1996, 2006) needs to integrate aspects of production, commodification and capitalism to his theoretical framework. In this case, practices of anti-McDonaldization contribute to the independent *brand* associated with indie stores. This brand is created through the unique space of the stores, the sales of used music and vinyl records, as well as the fostering of an anti-corporate sensibility amongst the store participants. However, as Harold (2007) notes, corporate and anti-corporate rhetorics do not oppose each other so much as feed off and respond to one another. As a result, oppositionality provides the conditions for novelty and difference in which global markets thrive. As Leblanc (1999) states, "Resisters, after all, remain in the social system they contest" (p. 17). As indie stores resist the rationalization of society, they are still part of commodification and capitalism. Their very resistance and "independent" brand fosters further commodification.

In sum, the independent record store is located in a complex web of economic structuring, and the related communities and social aspects of the stores have a deep significance for those involved. The often-contradictory intersection of counter-culture and commodification in indie stores presented here lays the groundwork for future research on the music industry, music retail, "independent" media and media-based subcultures.

Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the scope of this project, there are several gaps still to be filled in terms of the scholarship related to music retail and independent record stores. What follows is a listing of theoretical gaps and suggestions for further research.

From a critical cultural studies approach, an entire study investigating women and gender in the context of the independent record store would provide a rich insight into how gender dynamics and politics are at play. Straw (1997) examines gender and record collecting, but his theoretical insights could be advanced through empirical fieldwork such as interviewing and ethnography. Several of the females I interviewed had not noticed the gender imbalance in indie stores and, upon further reflection, agreed that the situation was unbalanced and rather unusual. This suggests that gender imbalance is hegemonic in scope, and such an analysis could reveal other gender-based inequalities associated with the larger music industry.

It was very apparent, as I conducted my fieldwork, that an overwhelming majority of indie storeowners were white males. This pattern is no doubt emblematic of the racial structuring of the dominant music industry, wherein white males own the means of production. This particular situation could build upon Kelley's (2005) collection of essays, which examine the political economy of black music but which contains no mention of music retail. While my project briefly addressed gentrification and class issues, an analysis synthesizing race, class and music retail could deepen theoretical insight into the structuring of music retail and the dominant music industry.

In terms of the political economy of music industry, there has been virtually no research conducted on music distribution, especially in terms of independent distributors and one-stops, both physical and digital, which is unusual given the significance of music in our culture. Because distribution channels are evolving so rapidly, studies on this topic would be particularly relevant.

In terms of specific retail issues, a political economic analysis of in-store listening stations, co-op advertising and “buy ins,” as well as the manufactured nature of the music charts and buying practices should be explored in more detail. There is next to no literature on these topics. Likewise, a political economic history of music retail is relatively non-existent. More specifically, there is next to nothing on the history of music retail and the independent record store. The history of music retail in terms of consolidation, integration, and corporatization is another gap to be filled.

While the history of the punk subculture has been thoroughly researched, there is no literature examining the role the independent record store has played in fostering the movement. Arguably, any subcultural scene could be accompanied by a similar analysis, such as hip-hop and jazz.

Moving into the digital realm, there are a host of issues to be explored, particularly with regard to indie stores gaining entry to the digital download market. The exploration of the barriers associated with intellectual property rights is pivotal, as Apple dominates the digital market. Apple’s iTunes store and its synergistic relationship with the iPod, iPhone and iPad could spawn some fascinating research in terms of how new media is altering the music industry and giving birth to new forms of commodification

and market control. For example, the major labels are shifting their synergistic energies towards cross-platform, portable screens and players, where recorded music is increasingly ubiquitous and commonplace in everyday life.

The fetishization of new media technologies and their relationship to the history of political economy is a trajectory that needs to be mapped. Commodification is nothing new, but the myriad ways that cross-platform and converged media facilitates the *branding* of musical commodities invites further investigation. It is vital for critical scholars to consider how new media is spawning new forms of commodification more broadly, and specifically in terms of recorded music.

New media is not only altering the physical nature of music retail. Other media outlets such as video and bookstores have encountered similar issues in terms of staying relevant. As a result, we need to consider how technological change is altering the nature of human communication (both positively and negatively), as well as our relationship to physical space and place.

Recommendations for Those Associated with Indie Record Stores

What follows are some suggestions for indie storeowners, record labels, bands and music consumers in terms of sustaining the independent record store.

Indie storeowners, or those interested in opening an independent record store, could benefit from the following observations. In order for indie record stores to succeed, they need to be flexible and adapt to technological change. Many stores are already “hybrid” stores, with both a physical and on-line presence. However, some

storeowners are reluctant to make this change, which perhaps adds to their subcultural capital and independent *brand*. However, this doesn't make sense economically for most stores. Flexibility means embracing on-line sales, and perhaps diversifying in terms of products, such as selling DVDs, t-shirts, video games and toys. However, doing so steers the orientation away from music, and this can be unappealing and less "authentic" for some customers. Being sustainable also means creating an on-line presence with social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace and YouTube. It is vital to catch the attention of the younger generation by introducing them to the cultural and social value of "brick and mortar" record stores. A small minority of youth today shop at record stores, but they do not constitute the majority. If this intersection doesn't occur, who will sustain the independent record store in the future?

Continuing this new media thread, indie stores must find a way to tap into the on-line digital download market, which could work in conjunction with a physical store. As noted, obtaining intellectual property rights from the major labels is prohibitively expensive. Amoeba Music is currently in the process of creating an on-line store to compete with iTunes, at a cost of \$15 million. Obviously, most indie stores don't have this financial strength and, as a result, indie stores are excluded from the download market. As of this writing, the US Department of Justice is investigating the legality of Apple's iTunes operation in terms of potential anticompetitive tactics.

For a select number of indie stores, resisting new media and on-line retail can be part of their appeal, or independent *brand*. For example, Mississippi Records in Portland mostly sells vinyl (mostly used), and they do not sell products on-line, nor do they

advertise or have any promotional materials in their store such as posters (or “buy ins”) or listening stations. They also have various unorthodox business practices, such as not using a cash register, writing down sales by hand, memorizing the inventory, and not having a web-page. These practices are part of the store’s “independent” brand and, however unorthodox, and their business appears to be thriving.

As noted throughout this project, there is no shared meaning regarding what constitutes “independence.” Many “indie” labels are distributed by the major label system, and thus they are not “truly” independent. Many indie artists distribute digitally through iTunes. Are they still independent? Without a shared meaning, the word “independent” becomes virtually useless. It’s simply too arbitrary. However, a shared definition of the term would enable artists, labels, distributors and retailers to better strategize around promoting “true” forms of independent media. The definition of “true” independence embodies the following characteristics: The record label is free from corporate financial backing and the music is distributed independently. However, this definition is just a starting point and can be modified. But in the end, “true” independent music is a political endeavor and a critical stance against corporate culture. To be non-corporate is to embrace a do-it-yourself approach, and to explore alternative models for conducting business more equitably. The definition must entail vigor and integrity, as well as an understanding of the political economy of the music industry. Otherwise, “indie” is just another corporate brand.

In terms of storeowners, focusing on used music is key for success due to the large markup, and the ever-changing range of diverse product coming into the store.

Focusing on new and used vinyl records, if the local market can sustain it, is key for future success. Regardless of what digital format comes our way, vinyl is the backbone of the indie store, as it is too niche and specialized for a mainstream market. The big boxes, despite their various policies and practices, simply can't compete with the range of musical diversity in an indie store. Indie stores will always have this advantage.

I recommend fostering the local music scene by selling local music, and allowing local bands to post flyers in the store, which allows the store to act as a *subcultural connector* to other local scenes and communities. Likewise, only a few independent record stores currently sell independent fanzines (unlike the number of zines sold in indie record stores in the 1990s), and all indie stores could benefit by dedicating a small amount of store space for zines and independent publishing. This would reinforce a localized vernacular culture in the stores and the do-it-yourself community. As a result, a more active public sphere can emerge.

In terms of labor, I would encourage hiring female workers, as it would alter the male gaze of the stores, thus making it more inclusive for female customers. Also, there are cooperative models and strategies in terms of running a business; thus the typical owner/worker model can be challenged.

Indie stores should be better connected and organized with each other. While the Coalition of Independent Music Stores (CIMS) is a start towards this direction, this organization's practices are somewhat exclusive and mimic corporate culture (selling music exclusively, only allowing one store per market to partake, dealing with major

label product, etc.). A strong network between indie stores could create more solidarity amongst independent retailers.

In terms of major record labels, a key recommendation would be to lower CD prices. While this advice was extremely pertinent 15 years ago, high CD prices today only encourage illegal downloading. The greed associated with inflated prices reinforces animosity towards the major labels. The major labels are still slow (if not too late) in making this change, which no doubt contributes to their continued financial difficulties. Indie labels must be cognizant of how their dealings with on-line distributors such as iTunes are highly problematic, particularly in terms of iTunes' practice of selling music weeks before brick and mortar indie stores can access it. Also, indie labels need to consider how selling music to the big boxes economically undermines the indie store. Indie labels will continue to profit from the popularity of vinyl records, and the independent record stores will continue to harness a majority of these sales – thus reinforcing the store's niche nature and *brand*.

In terms of musicians and bands, many need to become more literate in terms of how music retail functions and how music is bought and sold in the marketplace. Artists need to consider how their music is distributed and where the product is sold. They should be aware of how the practices and policies of the dominant retailers ultimately undermine the indie store. Artists and record labels can control where their product is sold. If they feel the practices of a larger chain are unscrupulous or engaging in unfair business practices, they can refuse to sell to them. Most bands want to get their music out there, regardless of who sells it. However, bands and labels need to be aware of how

the major “big four” labels and corporate retailers conduct business, and what the consequences are for the independent record store. I would recommend that bands consider independent labels such as Dischord, Kill Rock Stars and K Records, and explore the business model of these labels in terms of 50/50 contracts, greater creative freedom, and use of independent distribution.

Lastly, I urge consumers of music to support their local independent record store, even if the price is slightly higher than various corporate and on-line outlets. Customers can learn about musical history and the workers can guide you into interesting musical terrains. This can no doubt evoke a more complex understanding of music history and culture. Not only does supporting an independent record store keep money in the local community, but it also supports musical diversity and cultural diversity, which is fundamental for a healthy pluralistic society to survive. It promotes anti-McDonaldization, where the standardization of culture is met with unique difference and nuance. This is not something with which corporate big box retailers are concerned. And if there is no independent record store in your town, many independent record stores have an on-line presence.

As mentioned throughout this project, the stores are gathering spaces. While communities do exist on-line, they are nonetheless mediated through technology. I believe there is still something to be said about face-to-face interaction, gathering in a physical store, and embracing *old* media. To me, indie record stores promote these very ideals of community and interaction. In a world characterized by rapid technological and social change, the slow pace typical of indie record store culture represents stability and

continuity. As a result, I think we could all benefit by spending a leisurely afternoon browsing through records, chatting with others, and learning more about the depths of music culture and history.

Further Research

In the future, I will produce a 30-minute documentary video case study on the House of Records in Eugene. This video will feature ethnographic interviews regarding the store and culture, as well as ethnographic video footage of the participant's behavior and actions in the store. This means visually documenting the architecture and exploring the social meanings of the store. I am interested in exploring how those affiliated with the store identify with and behave in the space, and how the humanizing nature of the store contributes to this relationship.

According to Berg (2007), action research is a highly collaborative, reflective, experiential and participatory mode of research in which all individuals are involved in a study. Action research can be defined as "the integration of some practical outcomes related to the actual lives of participants in a research project" (Berg, 2007, p. 222).

Upon completion of the video, I will host a public event in Eugene at which the documentary video will be screened. The participants of the video – mainly the workers at the House of Records and myself – will form a panel to discuss record store culture and the nature of independent business. Thus, this research project, and particularly the video portion, is meant to benefit independent record store culture and raise awareness in terms of the social importance of alternative media. I plan to screen the film at a variety

of film and video festivals, and perhaps construct a multi-media web page devoted to indie record stores, where a much broader audience can access the project.

Concluding Thoughts

A common question emerged during this research project. What happens culturally and socially when independent record stores close or disappear?

According to Gracon (2009), the overall social effects of closing an independent record store are difficult to accurately gauge. When asked what it would be like if House of Records in Eugene were to close, a store employee named Fred touched upon the complexities of the human condition and its precarious relationship within a standardized, or McDonaldized world. He said, "It's suffocating. It would be like a whole organ of your body has died. And I think everybody feels it in some way or another. They may not know what's causing their discomfort, but they feel it."

APPENDIX A

FIGURES: PHOTOS AND DOCUMENTS



Figure 1. The former Home of the Hits located in Buffalo, New York. This store was the inspiration for this project after its closure in the winter of 2006.



Figure 2. House of Records based in Eugene, Oregon. The store has been in operation since 1971.



Figure 3. Interior of House of Records.



Figure 6. Amoeba Music in San Francisco, California. This location has been in operation since 1997.



Figure 7. Interior of Amoeba Music.

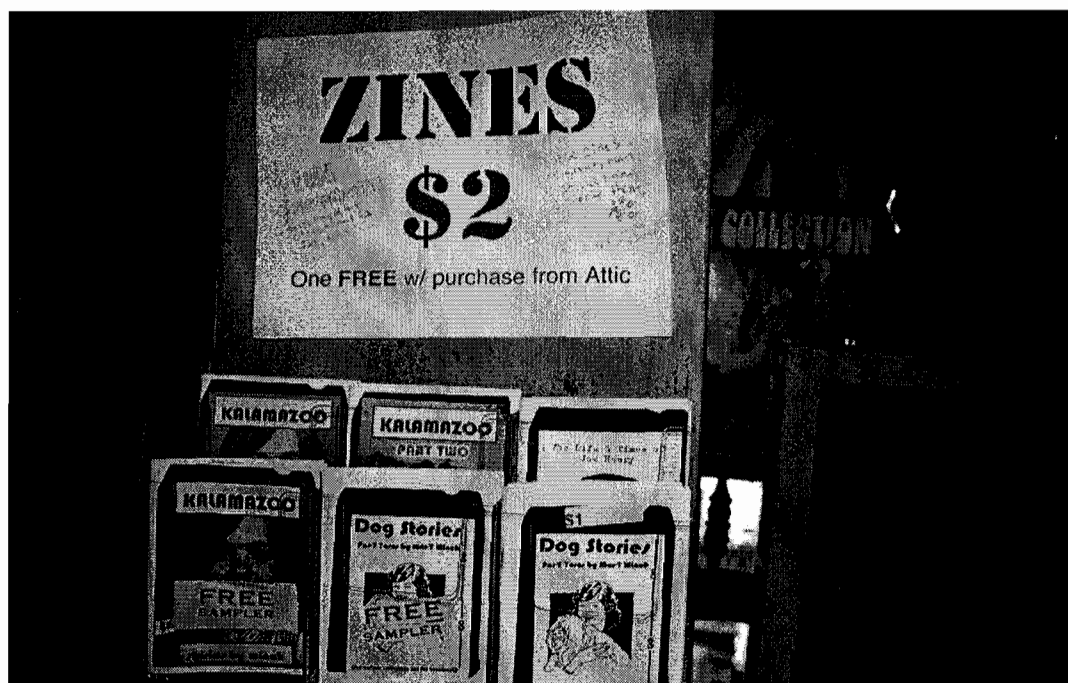


Figure 8. An example of do-it-yourself fanzine culture at Green Noise Records in Portland, Oregon. Fanzines are currently a rarity in indie record store culture.



Figure 9. The “weird wall” consists of limited edition hand-made cassettes and CDR releases of noise and experimental music. Anthem Records, Portland, Oregon.

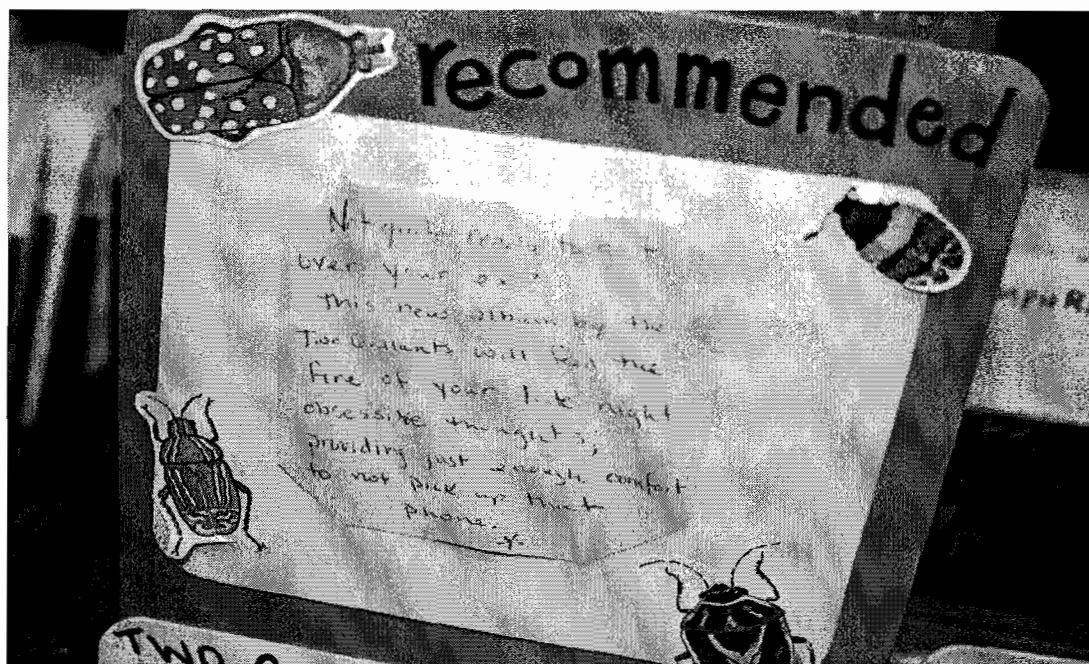


Figure 10. Hand written personal “fanzine” style album recommendation in the CD racks of Music Millennium.

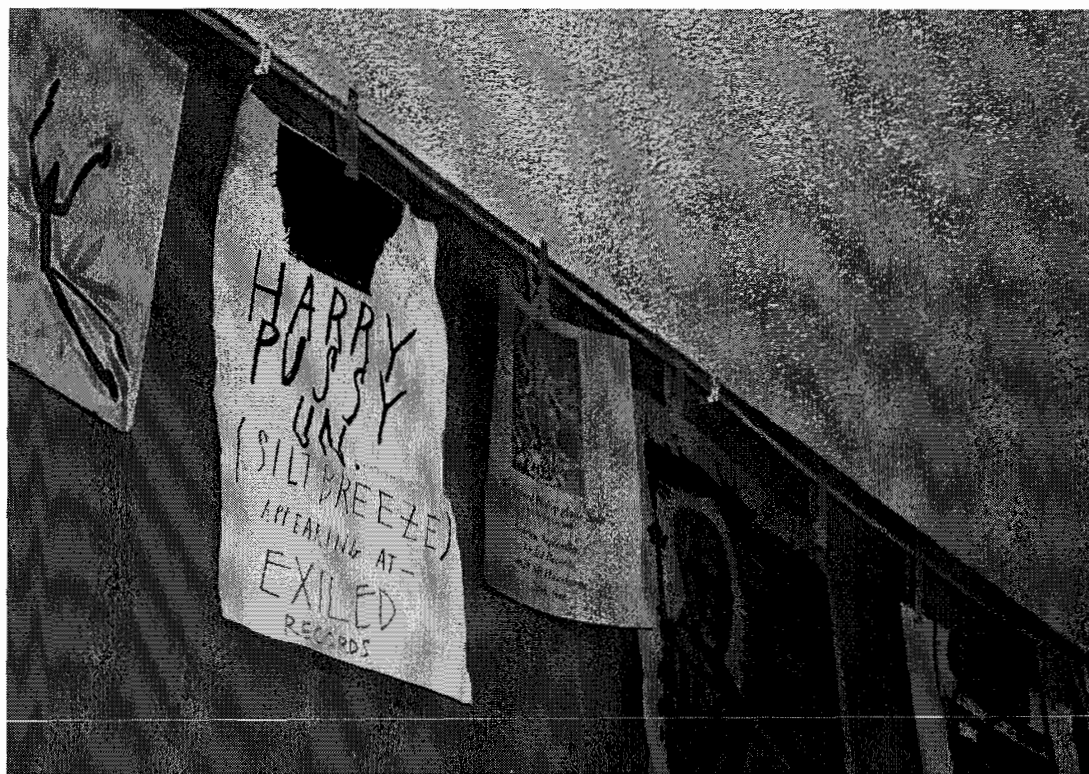


Figure 11. Flyer advertising the noise band “Harry Pussy” for an in-store performance at Exiled Records in Portland, Oregon.



Figure 12. Subcultural Connector. A place for flyers to be posted and seen at the entrance to the House of Records in Eugene, Oregon.

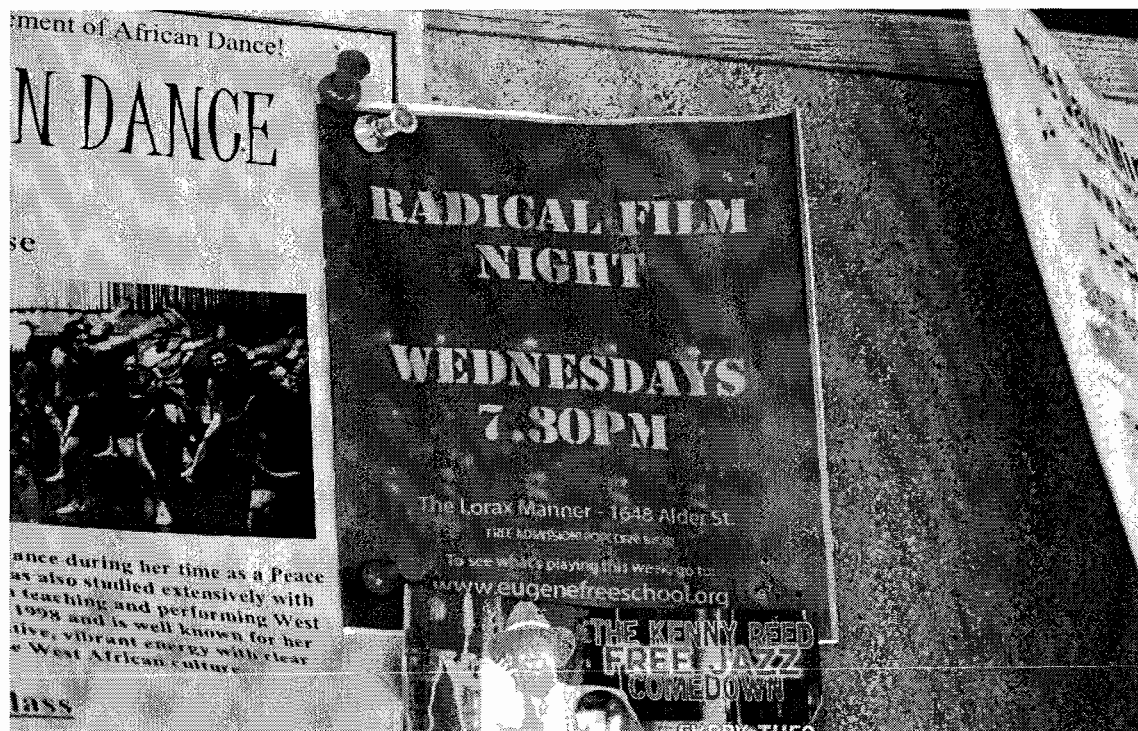


Figure 13. A flyer advertising "Radical Film Night" hosted at a Eugene housing cooperative. House of Records, Eugene, Oregon.

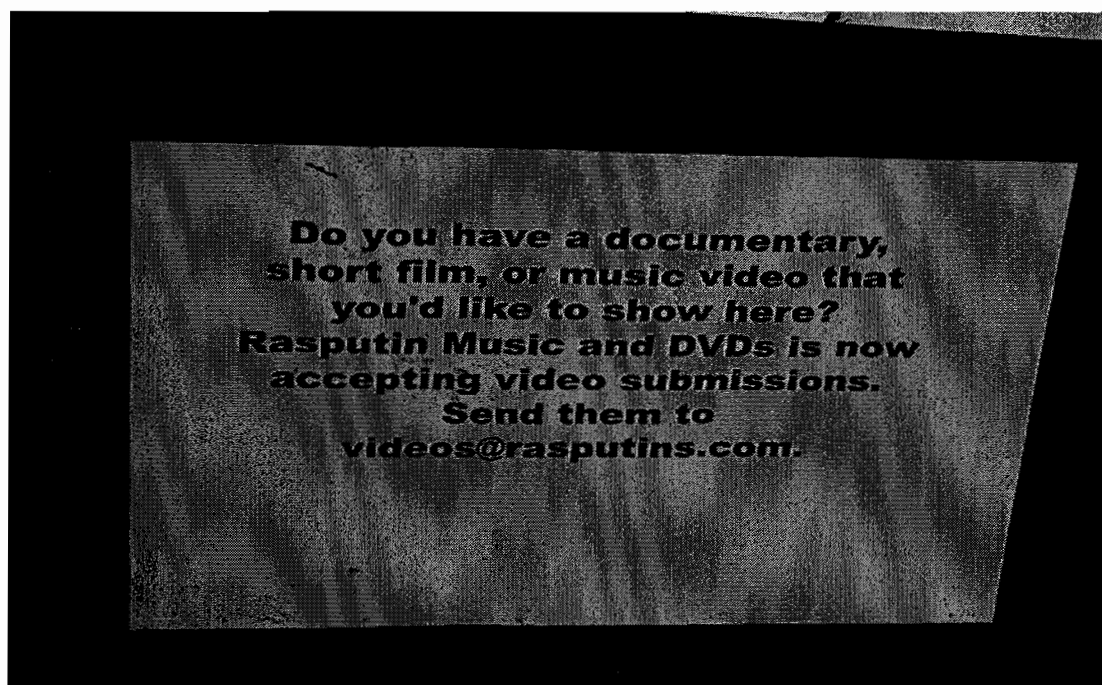


Figure 14. An example of participatory culture at Rasputin Music, Berkeley, California.



Figure 15. Locally made DJ mixes are emblematic of hip-hop culture. B-Sides Records, Berkeley, California.



Figure 16. Labels pay for placement in listening stations. Everyday Music, Portland, Oregon.



Figure 17. “Keep Portland Weird!” supports local business, but is also an example of the commodification of dissent. Music Millennium, Portland, Oregon.



Figure 18. Branded band. In-store performance by the Mae-Shi blurs the lines between community and commodification. Amoeba Music, Berkeley, California.

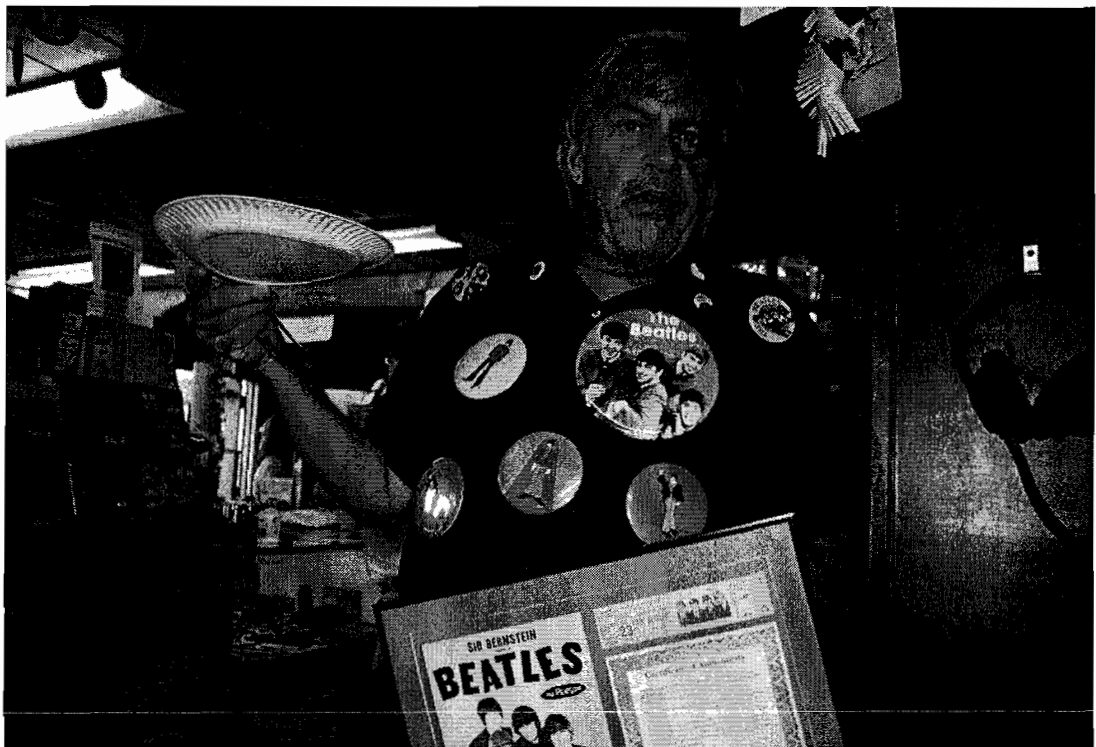


Figure 19. Customers gather to share memories about the Beatles, eat snacks, and purchase the latest Beatles re-issue box-set. Music Millennium, Portland, Oregon.

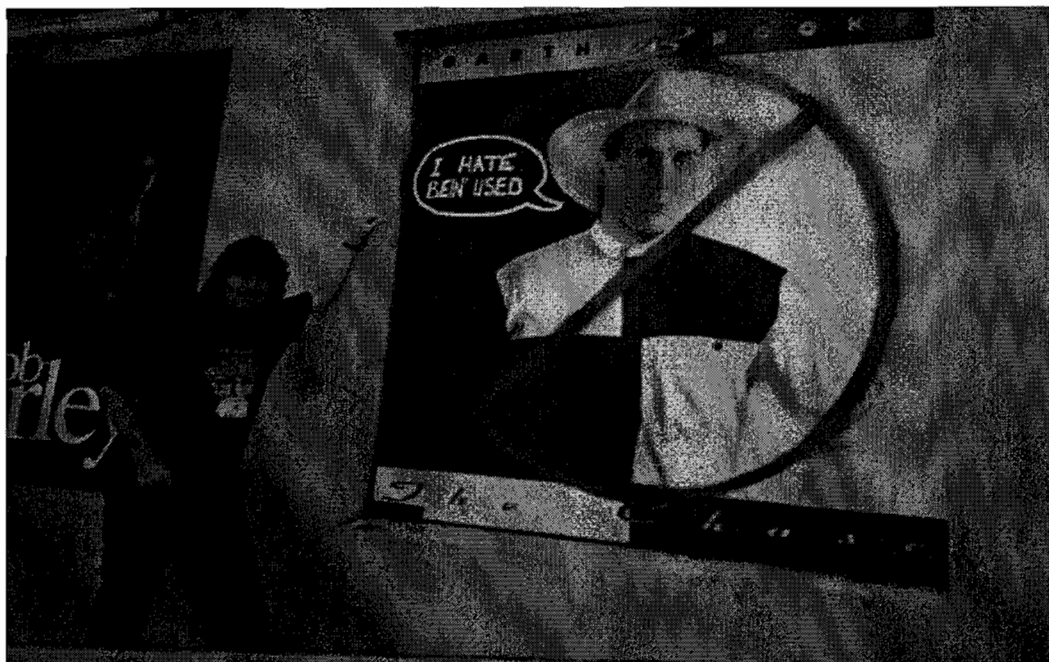


Figure 20. Terry Carrier, owner of Music Millennium, fights the major label policy against the sale of used CDs, permanently banning Garth Brooks from his store (photo courtesy of MM).

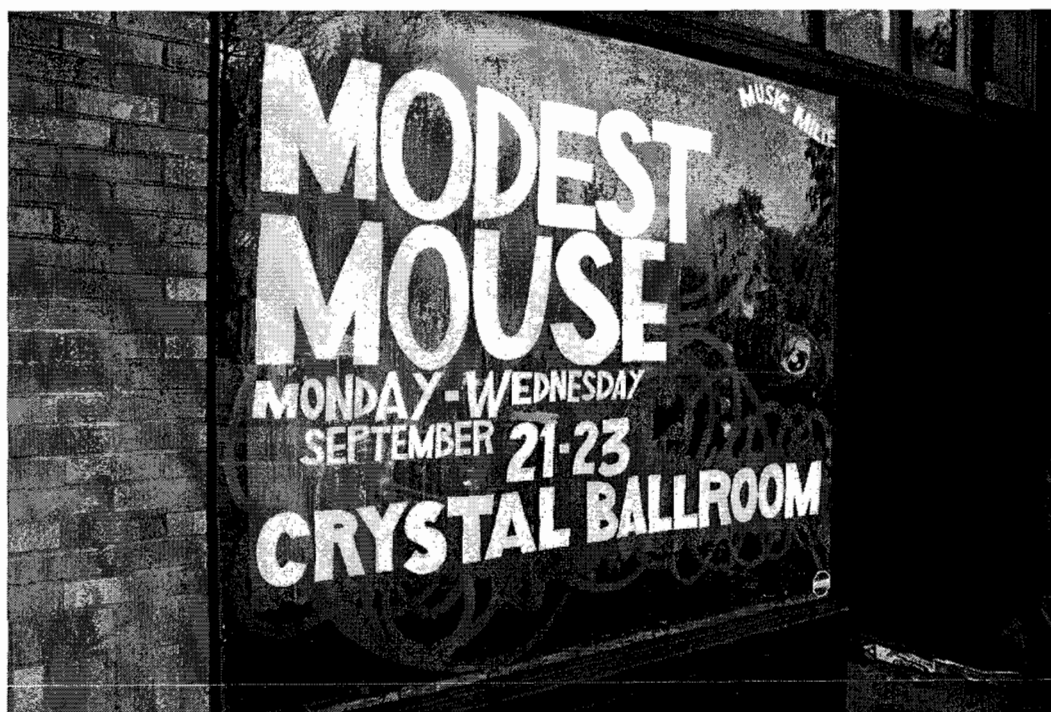


Figure 21. Modest Mouse “DIY” advertisement outside Music Millennium paid for by the band’s record label.



Figure 22. WEA, a subsidiary of Warner Music Group. Major label product for sale at Music Millennium.



Figure 23. Commodification of counterculture. The infamous punk band Minor Threat vinyl LP sells for \$75.99. Force of Habit Records, San Francisco, California.



Figure 24. Co-optation of counterculture. Punk fashion for sale at the now-defunct Virgin Megastore, San Francisco, California.

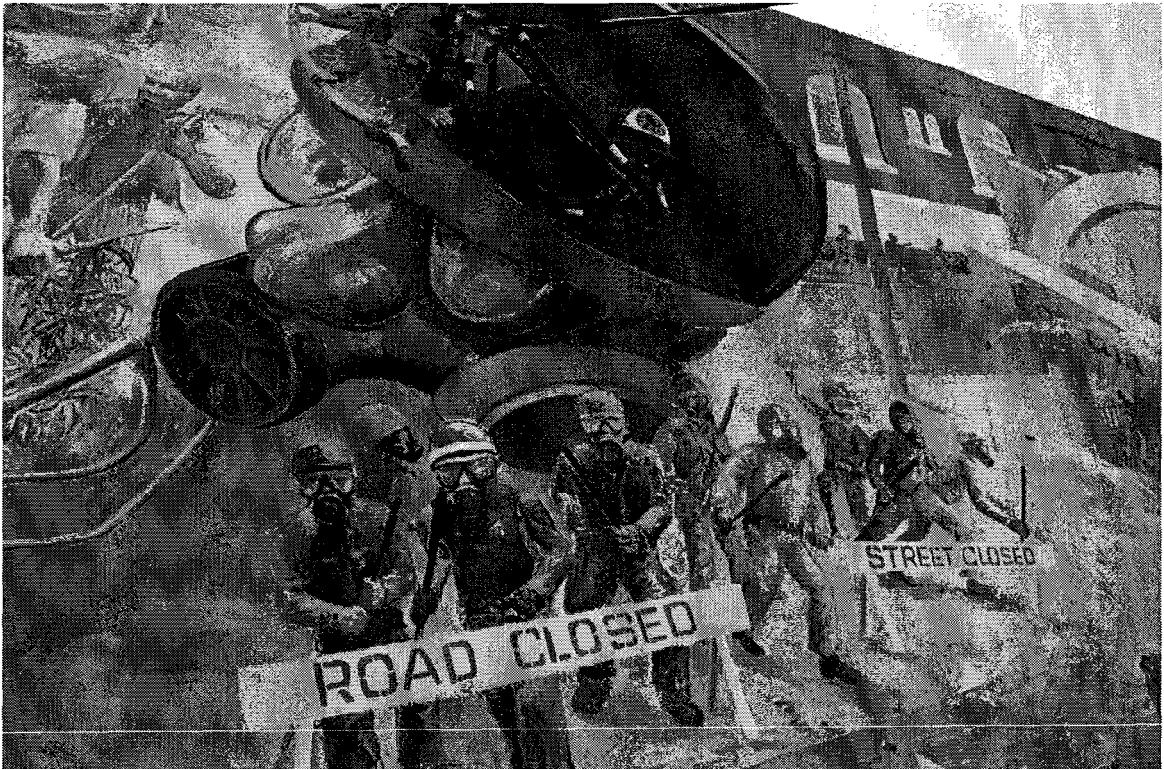


Figure 25. Harvesting commodification/representing history. Mural outside of Amoebe Music on Telegraph Avenue, Berkeley, California.



Figure 26. The Museum of Unfine Art in Eugene, Oregon, doubles as an art gallery for local artists.



Figure 27. A “Must Die” sticker parodies Best Buy. Anti-corporate sentiment at Music Millennium, Portland, Oregon.

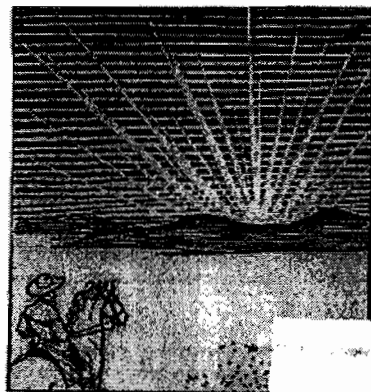


Figure 28. The last days of Virgin Megastore in San Francisco, California.



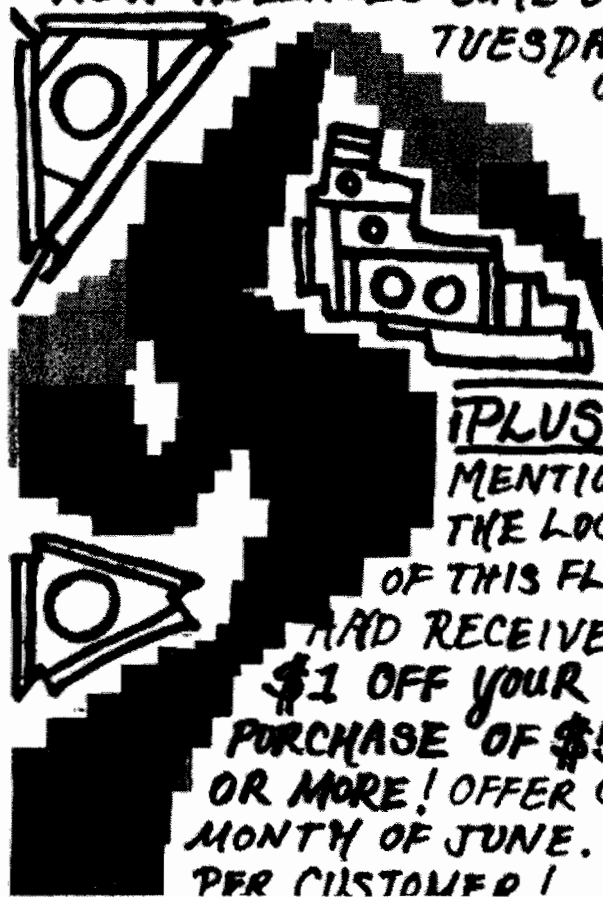
Figure 29. "I Loved You Guys!" post-it note left on the door of Streetlight Records, an indie store that went out of business. San Francisco, California.

HOUSE OF RECORDS
258 E. 13TH
EUGENE'S MOST
EXTENSIVE COLLECTION
OF VINYL!



JUST SO YOU KNOW!
-NEW RELEASES COME OUT
TUESDAY'S!

-NEW
ARRIVALS IN
USED VINYL
GO OUT ON
MONDAY'S.

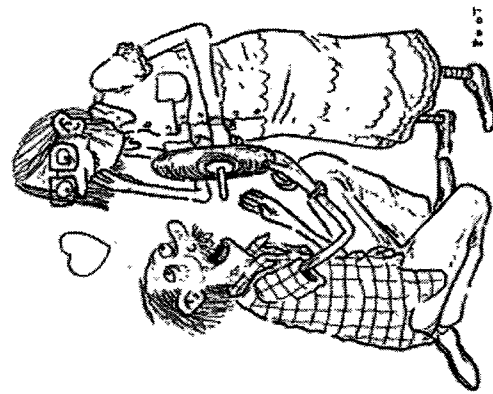


PLUS!
MENTION
THE LOCATION
OF THIS FLYER
AND RECEIVE
\$1 OFF YOUR
PURCHASE OF \$5.00
OR MORE! OFFER GOOD THRU
MONTH OF JUNE. ONE DISCOUNT
PER CUSTOMER!

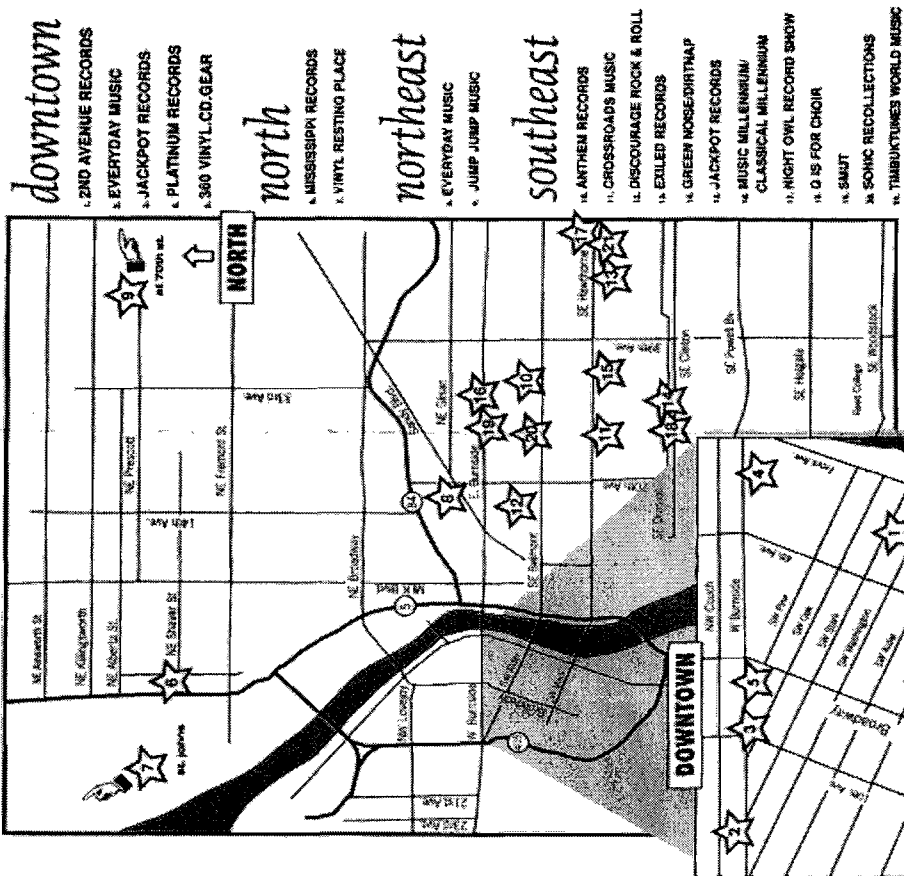


Figure 30. This flyer (2010) for the House of Records embodies the hand-drawn do-it-yourself aesthetic associated with punk culture. Eugene, Oregon.

♥ **PORTLAND**
Guide To
independent
Records · Tapes
and CD Stores ♥



2009



*think independent,
 support independent*

Figure 31. "Portland Guide to Independent Records, Tapes and CD Stores" (2009). Free pamphlet distributed at indie stores in Portland, Oregon.

APPENDIX B**LIST OF STORES AND OTHER INDUSTRY PARTICIPANTS**Three Primary Field Sites

House of Records, Eugene, Oregon
Music Millennium, Portland Oregon
Amoeba Music, San Francisco, California

Other Stores (Eugene, Oregon)

CD World
CD and Game Exchange
Museum of Unfine Art

Other Stores (Portland, Oregon)

Mississippi Records
Anthem Records
Exiled Records
Timbucktunes
360 Vinyl
Everyday Music
Platinum Records Light and Sound
2nd Avenue Records
Green Noise Records
Crossroads Music

Other Stores (San Francisco, California)

Grooves
Jack's Record Cellar
Aquarius Records
Force of Habit
Rooky Ricardo's Records
Shaxul Records
Recycled Records

Other Stores (Berkeley, California)

Amoeba Music
Skills DJ Workshop
Musical Offering
B-Side

Record Labels

Kill Rock Stars
K Records
Alternative Tentacles
Marriage Records

Music Distribution

Revolver/Midheaven
Universal Music Group
Super D

Artists/Musicians

Yeltsin
Telepathic Dumpster
Explode into Colors
Calvin Johnson
Deerhoof
Negativland
Portugal the Man

Other Stores (in general)

Home of the Hits (Buffalo, NY)
Record Theatre (Buffalo, NY)
New World Records (Buffalo, NY)
Harvest Records (Salem, Oregon)

Chain Stores

Target
Best Buy

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE INTERVIEW INSTRUMENTS

Store Employees/Owners Interview Questions

“CULTURAL” QUESTIONS

1. (Warm-up.) Could you tell me some basic information about yourself (name, where you're from, occupation, age, duration of store being in business, etc.)?
2. Could you tell me about the history of this store?
3. How did you initially become involved in record store culture?
4. Any comments about what this store means to you?
5. When you walk in here, how would you describe the atmosphere of the store?
6. Does this store have any meaning in terms of the local community?
7. Does this store have a social value beyond the buying and selling of music?
8. Does this store and related culture have any counter-cultural values?
9. How would you describe your customers?
10. Who is shopping in this store?
11. What is the best selling item at your store?
12. Is this store a form of community?
13. If so, could you provide some examples of community?
14. Any story or experience that you would like to share from working here?

“POLITICAL ECONOMY” QUESTIONS

15. Is it important to you that you work at/own an “independent” record store?
16. What characterizes or defines this store as being independent?
17. Could you talk about the variety of records and products you sell?
18. Why do you sell these particular products?
19. What distinguishes this store from a corporate or chain store?
20. Is new technology impacting your store in any way?
19. Why shop at a brick and mortar store when one can download music for free, or obtain it from Internet stores?
20. What is the current economic outlook of this store?
21. How do your current sales compare with your sales in the past?
22. What were your peaks and low points in terms of past record sales?
23. What is your relationship with independent record labels?
24. What is your relationship with corporate record labels?
25. How do you obtain your music in terms of distribution?
26. Are there any differences in terms of dealing with indie/corporate distribution?
27. What are your views or opinions on the mainstream music industry?
28. Do you have any thoughts in terms of the relationship between the independent record store and mainstream/dominant music industry?
29. Is the mainstream music industry in any way controlling in terms of their business practices regarding your store?
30. Do you believe independent record stores are closing?
31. Is the closure of the independent record store related to the practices of the mainstream music industry?

32. Are you doing anything in particular to keep this store in business?
34. What does the future look like in terms of the independent record store in general?
36. What happens to a community or culture when independent record stores close or disappear?
37. Any final thoughts or comments?

Store Customers Interview Questions

1. (Warm-up.) Could you tell me some basic information about yourself (name, where you're from, occupation, age etc.)?
2. Why did you come to this (store name) today?
3. Do you regularly come to this store?
4. When did you start coming to this store?
5. Is it important to you that you shop at an "independent" record store?
6. What characterizes this store as being independent?
7. Any thoughts or comments about what this store means to you?
8. Do you have any thoughts about the atmosphere or space of the store?
9. Any story or experience that you would like to share from shopping here?
10. What type of music do you usually buy here?
11. Do you primarily buy CDs or vinyl records (tangible musical objects)?
12. Do you download music or purchase music through the Internet?
13. Do you ever buy music at a corporate chain store?
14. How would you compare this store to a corporate chain store?
15. Does this store connect you to other people?
16. Do you feel like you are part of a community at this store?

17. Does this store have a social importance to you?
18. Do you ever verbally interact with other people within the store?
19. What kind of conversations do you have with people in this store?
20. Does this store have a meaning in terms of the Berkeley/San Francisco community?
21. Do you learn about music within this store?
22. What are your thoughts about the workers at the store?
23. Many independent record stores seem to be closing around the country. How would you react if this store were to close?
24. Any final thoughts or comments?

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORMS/VERBAL SCRIPT

CONSENT FORM:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by David Gracon, from the University of Oregon, School of Journalism and Communication. I hope to learn about the various cultural meanings that employees and customers apply to the independent record store and/or how such stores are related to the larger music industry. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you either work at the store, or are a customer who frequents the store, or are in some way affiliated with the music industry.

If you decide to participate, you will partake in an interview that will be documented by a video camera (which will result in video recordings) or will be recorded via a digital audio recorder (which will result in audio recordings). I'll also be interested in documenting the daily activities of the store (with both video and/or photography, and through audio recordings), such as interactions between shoppers and employees, and shopping patterns etc. This information will be used as a tool for research, and possibly in a documentary film about independent record store culture. This research will take place on a weekly basis, probably every Friday, and on the weekends, for a several hour span. Some activities will be videotaped, recorded via an audio recorder or photographed, unless the subject doesn't want some aspects of the store or activity to be filmed, photographed, or recorded by audio. Most filming and audio recording will take place within various independent record stores located in Eugene and Portland, Oregon, and well as within San Francisco, California. Specific interviews with the store employees will be recorded with either video or will be recorded via audio. Each interview will be approximately one hour in length, for each subject. Interviews with the customers will be approximately 20 minutes in length, for each subject.

Should the interview entail any discomforts or inconveniences, please notify me and actions will be taken to remedy the situation, or your materials (video and audio files) and information can be removed from the study. This research is designed to explore the various cultures of the independent record store, and how this culture may be disappearing due to changing technologies, and because of economic reasons. I want to learn about the community associated with independent record stores, and the cultural value of this community. However, I cannot guarantee that you personally will receive

any benefits from this research, and they're will be no monetary compensation for taking part in this research.

For purposes of this project, your confidentiality will not be maintained, as the video footage (and audio recordings) might appear in the documentary video project (voice and image will be recorded and possibly shown publicly). Your name may also appear within the written portion of my dissertation, and later a book on the topic. Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact David Gracon, 541-914-7113 (cell), SOJC, University of Oregon, 1275 University of Oregon. Eugene, OR 97403-1275, or my advisor, Carl Bybee at 541-346-4175 (same address).

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Office for Protection of Human Subjects, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403, (541) 346-2510. You have been given a copy of this form to keep.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you have received a copy of this form (if you want one), and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

Print Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

How to contact the Office for Protection of Human Subjects.

Phone:

(541) 346-2510

FAX:

(541) 346-6224

Address:

Riverfront Research Park

1600 Millrace Drive, Suite 105

5237 University of Oregon

Eugene, OR 97403-5237

Consent Agreement for “Observational” Video Taping/Photography/Audio Recording:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by David Gracon, a doctoral student at the University of Oregon, School of Journalism and Communication. I hope to learn about the various cultural meanings that employees and customers apply to a variety of independent records stores located in Eugene and Portland Oregon, and within San Francisco, California, as well as learn about individuals associated with the larger music industry. This project is my doctoral dissertation topic at the University of Oregon.

I have received an adequate description of the purpose and procedures for videotaping, photographing and audio-recording sessions during the course of the proposed research study. I give my consent to be videotaped, photographed, and recorded via an audio-recorder during participation of the study, and for those videotapes, photographic images and audio recordings to be used by those involved in the study, as well as for other professional purposes, such as a tool for academic research, screenings at academic conferences and presentations, and the eventual compiling of a documentary film which will eventually be screened publicly (this doesn't mean your images will necessarily be included in the final version of the film). I understand that all information may be used for future research related to a doctoral thesis. For purposes of this project, your confidentiality will not be maintained, as the footage (and/or audio recordings) may appear in a documentary video project (voice and image will be recorded and possibly shown publicly). This footage (both video, and audio recordings) will capture observations and activities within the store, but will not include any video interview recordings. Your participation is voluntary, and you can refuse to partake in this project at anytime.

The researcher, David Gracon, can be reached at 541-914-7113, or at dgracon@uoregon.edu for further information about the project. As a participant, you will obtain a copy of this document for your records.

I further understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time.

Print Name _____

Signature of participant _____

Date _____

How to contact the Office for Protection of Human Subjects.

Phone: 541-346-2510

Fax: 541-346-6224

Address: Riverfront Research Park, 1600 Millrace Drive, Suite 105, 5237 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5237

Verbal Script

My name is David Gracon, a doctoral student at the University of Oregon, in the School of Journalism and Communication. I'm currently conducting research on the various cultural meanings of the independent record store, and its relationship with the larger music industry. This research will eventually become the data for my dissertation, and eventually a book on the topic. I'm exploring the culture of stores located in Eugene and Portland, Oregon, and San Francisco, California. I want to learn what these stores mean to the customers and workers involved, and what the future of such stores might look like in terms of their ability to survive (while others are failing). I'm also interested in how such stores are linked to the larger music industry as a whole. Do you have any further questions, or would you like more information about the project or research? In addition, you must be over 17 years old, and there will be no compensation for your participation.

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