Jazz Scenes and Networks in Europe: Repackaging Independent Jazz – New Strategies for Emerging Markets

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed significant changes to the methods by which artists connect with their fans. Where in the previous century these connections were primarily made through touring, media promotion and the physical distribution of product, the Internet has offered up a burgeoning range of alternatives.

The novelty of digital dissemination platforms is waning and an appetite for more direct and tangible artist/audience connection is emerging. Where iTunes and the like have afforded everyone the possibility of getting 'signed', the music of independent artists is often lost in the noise of a saturated marketplace. Social media, too, has begun to lose its charm and efficacy due to commercialisation and exhaustive applications.

This climate, in which we are reappraising our 'love affair' with the digital marketplace, charges us with innovating responses to the requirements of internet-weary audiences. The rise in farmers-market sensibility amongst consumers is being manifested in artisanal product, imbued with a sense of authenticity through 'denomination of origin'. A similar mind-set in the marketing of music might provide an alternative to the seemingly homogenised array of goods available in the Internet's virtual shop-window.

The Internet has become synonymous at best modest financial return for the musician. This paper, therefore, seeks to fresh methods of engagement with the instruments of digital interconnectedness. To profitably connect with our audience, we might begin to rethink the nature of the products that we offer and the terms by which we offer them.

"The music business in crisis: An industry on its knees!"

"The death of recorded product: The de-commodification of music!"

We can surely both pity and empathise with the fledgling (and for that matter the established) musician trying to make their way in an industry beset, as it has been for some years now, by doom and gloom. It's surely hard to motivate yourself to get out of bed in the morning when all around you are saying that the business in which you operate is both fundamentally flawed and in terminal decline – that the foundations on which it is built have undergone (in academic speak) a "paradigm shift" and that the values ascribed to your creative output are more likely to be measured in terms of social capital rather than in the form of a rent–cheque.

All the more difficult when your work is your vocation – the job that chose you (rather than the other way around). At least, that's how most musicians I've met describe their relationship to their job. "The job chose me – I wouldn't know what else to do, I don't know how to do anything else".

It takes doggedness to stay in music – a stubbornness to stick in for the long haul. Success is, after all, rarely an overnight sensation. More likely, it's a slow build over 5 – 10 years (or more) in which job-satisfaction comes in the form of step-by-step progression towards the goal, rather than measured simply in terms of cash for effort. It's always been this way. The only difference between "then" and "now" is that today's musician is operating in a brave new, digitally interconnected, environment – one in which nobody seems sure of the rules of play, who's in charge or what the future holds.

Back in 'yester-year', there was a comforting transparency in career progression. You formed a band; wrote some songs; played some gigs; came to the attention of A&R men; got signed; made an album; toured the album; made another album; toured some more etc. etc. Everybody worked for everybody else. The band took care of the music and faced the audience, and the supporting industries (management, record company, publisher, distributor etc.) made sure that it got to that audience and that everyone got paid. This model represented at best a symbiotic interdependency at worst a

holding to ransom between the various parties involved. There were, of course, differently nuanced models: for example in the case of a record company or production company 'creating' a band and 'farming out' the song writing, or bands that released through their own labels).

There were (as there are) the big 6, 5 or 4 (depending on who you ask) major labels and a host of subsidiaries and independent labels. Not uncommonly a band would release first on an independent, move to a subsidiary and then on to one of the big guns as their success grew in stature.

We know – because we're told a thousand times a day – that the major labels find themselves in troubled times. We are also told that, in these straitened times, there is little to no investment in untested bands or music and that conservatism and sure-fire sales are the watchwords for the majors. The squeeze trickles down to the subsidiaries and the independents find themselves on a more level playing field, albeit it one increasingly over-populated by net-labels and similar DIY initiatives alongside a host of 3rd party sellers from iTunes to CD Baby. Money is increasingly stretched and competition increasingly tough. This, in essence, is the music industry's "crisis" and why we should, apparently, be 'on our knees'.

There is of course the occasional 'good news' story in and amongst the doom and gloom:

"There's money's in live! There's money's in publishing and synchronisation!"

"Vinyl is making a comeback! There will always be a market for have-and-hold!"

These rare nuggets of optimism are every bit as dubious as "end of the world" predictions that they seek to balance out.

For a band with an established and well-populated audience, live performance may well offer the most immediate route to monetisation of recorded product and related merchandise. For all but what has been dubbed the 'rock aristocracy' this does not hold true, however. The 'lower' and 'middle' classes

struggle to break even on the live circuit in the absence of record company tour-support and ever-diminishing public funding for venues and government arts bodies. At the bottom end (or early career stage) "pay-to-play" is not uncommon. Thereafter it's often a case of sharing the bill with other bands and dividing up the modest income from ticket-sales-minus-costs. Out of town gigs have substantial, and often prohibitive, travel and accommodation costs and touring, in the absence of financial support, can quickly bankrupt an artist or band.

Yes. There's money in synchronisation of music for television, film and advertising. But you need a publisher, aggregator or some other kind of inside track. Synchronisation is every musician's dream but in reality, for most musicians, its realisation is a 'dark art' – a mystery not fully understood.

Yes. Vinyl sales are increasing. However, they still only account for around 8% of a shrinking market and, rather perversely in my opinion, the majority purchased never make it out of the shrink-wrap – consumers preferring to listen to a digital version and keep the physical product as a souvenir.

WHO DARES WINS

Those that will survive these turbulent times in music are those that make efforts to think positively in harnessing the new and many potentials that are afforded us by the age in which we live.

Community is the new commodity.

As never before, we are able to connect and reconnect with fans of our music on the global arena. We can tap into ready-made communities or we can be involved in building one from scratch. The Internet is the meeting place of the like-minded as well as those of diametrically polarised opinions. We have at our disposal websites, artist pages, forums and social media to spread the word about our creative endeavour (and to discover those of our peers) – instantaneous two-way transmission across borders and time zones. We can measure our efficacy and adjust strategies according to numbers of 'hits', 'likes' and 'visits' and we can collate invaluable information through demographic profiling of those who interact with us.

Compare this, for a moment, to communities of old. There was, as there still is, the primary face-to-face community that embodied the live gig. Thereafter there were once-removed, national and international communities, united as fans through common passion for the music and through the common texts of fanzine and music press. In terms of artist/fan interaction, the luckiest of fans might fleetingly meet the artist backstage (or at the bar) or get an eventual reply to a snail mail fan letter in the handwriting of their favourite artist (or more likely that of an assistant).

We have more potential for control today, both as artist and as fan. We can posit and we can gainsay without ever having to lick a stamp. Information and its communication are in constant flow and evolution. The scale and immediacy of this dynamic new world is perhaps what we find so very daunting when trying to locate the business of music within it?

There are of course also downsides to this new cyber world running, as it does, alongside our physical interactions:

Everything we view is framed within a screen. Content is to a large extent homogenised through the use of menus, hyperlinks, thumbnails etc. Quality of image and sound is often compromised for the sake of compression and speeds of download and streaming. And there's the sheer scale of what's available in the cultural blizzard that is the ever-expanding Internet – and the downside specific to the artist, is how to be seen and heard in the whiteout that is other peoples' "contribution to culture".

Then, perhaps crucially, there's the amount of time we 'need' to spend keeping up with the multiple platforms through which we project and sell ourselves. We're told that we must regularly update the gamut of available content – photos, news, gigs, retweets from artists similar to ourselves – with optimised SEO from meta-data, to picture tagging, to hashtags. Oh, and then we have to also find time to write, rehearse, perform and record some music and take care of the boring stuff like tax, MCPS/PRS and PPL claims and communications with the more 'old-fashioned' aspects of the business like agents, bookers, promoters and press.

A CASE IN POINT

Perhaps there is a golden mean to be achieved between the physical and virtual realities that shape and define our workplace? A recent example of such a hybrid approach is that of the Danish band, Efterklang (formed 2004).

After some half-a-dozen years establishing themselves on their local Copenhagen scene and touring throughout Europe with modest, though sustainable, success, Efterklang made the biopic An Island (2010) with renowned French filmmaker/director Vincent Moon. The resulting film offered fans a context within which to gain an understanding of the geographic and cultural roots of the band-members and was released through a dedicated website, on a worldwide Creative Commons licence. The masterstroke lay in the innovative mechanics of the film's distribution.

The website afforded fans the option to download for free in return for hosting a private/public screening in their home or other venue. The only stipulation was that there should be a minimum of five viewers in attendance. These five or more could be friends (private) or strangers (public) who could sign up on a first-come-first-served basis on the film's website. The band also encouraged group photos to be taken at each of the screenings and sent in for inclusion on a photomontage page on the site.

The initiative achieved more than 1200 downloads with an estimated 50,000 viewers in the time it was active. In doing so, over a thousand email addresses were harvested and, after reviewing private/public user data, a clear idea of geographically framed audience concentration and associated demographics could be arrived at – valuable in the planning of subsequent touring and marketing. Perhaps more importantly, Efterklang with Vincent Moon, had brought people together. Fans old and new, from far flung corners of the globe were physically united in the act of viewing An Island – a phenomenon that was capitalised on through the participants photo-montage on the film's website. As a busy international touring band (some 200 concerts annually), the band had been careful to keep a photographic record of audiences by taking snapshots from stage and uploading to social media. Fans photographing fans and uploading to the band's community pages

represented a step further in terms of promoting audience empowerment through shared experience.

The venture represented an important staging post in their passage from releasing through the small independent Leaf Label to their new relationship with the 4AD label. With this move came an enhanced press and marketing budget as well as synchronisation deals through the label's publishing arm with clients such as Apple and Audi. Their debut album, Piramida, on 4AD went on to spawn the film Ghost of Piramida, distributed through a similar public/private model.

The music industry has always been difficult to navigate and has bestowed significant rewards to only a few of its many claimants. History is littered with anonymous artists and acts that have come too late to the table by being been content to tread a path well travelled either in their music, in their attitude to business or, most catastrophically, both.

Innovation in product (both intellectual and physical) and route to market are key. The digital product has become almost entirely disposable following the growth in leasing platforms such as Spotify or the advertising funded YouTube and the market oversaturated with unfiltered content.

As this and similar examples illustrate, the music industry doesn't have to be perceived as being in crisis. Vestiges of the old industry remain but have been augmented by the many newcomers to the table. Changes are doubtlessly afoot – but change is not synonymous with crisis. Change is the primordial soup from which fresh perspectives and interactions are borne – fresh perspectives and interactions that keep us abreast of and in tune with the cultural zeitgeist.

If I'm to be true to the abstract that I submitted some months ago, I'm here to talk specifically about innovation in the jazz music sector. Here, examples of different thinking and original strategy are often less glamorous in their description. There are of course instances of successful jazz artist surfing the crest of a wave of contemporary culture. In recent times, Esbjörn Svesson

Trio, Bad Plus and others tapped into a culture broader than jazz in borrowing presentation techniques from the intelligent end of popular music and winning over jazz and non-jazz fans alike. More latterly the band Snarky Puppy has enjoyed both international touring success as well as domestic critical plaudits in their native USA. In building their touring network, social media and ad-hoc, local street teams were key in building a profile for the band in a remarkably short time. In cities throughout Europe, Snarky Puppy went from playing small jazz clubs with audience capacity of less than one hundred, to concert halls with audiences in their thousands in a remarkably short timeframe. They achieved this by presenting themselves as approachable, community spirited (they are effectively a musical collective) and appealing directly to other musicians as well as music fans. And as the strategy was conducted on a global scale, the social media were indispensible.

Jazz, however, has its home primarily on the local scene, with only the very few artists and bands making it onto the international circuit. Here there are numerous examples of creativity in the presentation of recordings and live performance. The Internet has allowed artists to create and present a somewhat selective myth to their fans and fellow musicians. Carefully managed and continuously updated content in the form of photographs and texts on websites and social media portals are expected from all but the most eccentrically idiosyncratic of today's musicians. Publicity photographs make reference to the musician's ideal (be it the iconographies of Blue Note or ECM) or, in an attempt gain new audiences, borrow from non-jazz, and perceptually "cool", cultural strains. One might argue that musicians are simply engaging in what most users of social media aspire to: the projection of an idealised and highly selective image of who they are, or would like to be? The major difference is that, for the musician, this virtual shop window is a potential portal to the monetising of their art. It acts as an invite to gigs and lets fans know of new and archive recordings.

Direct monetisation of the art is predominantly achieved through the musician's two, inextricably linked, strands of business: live performance and recording. These are increasingly intertwined as each has become dependent

on the other. Gigs pay little and the fee can be meaningfully enhanced by selling CDs; CDs generally don't sell well anywhere other than at the gig.

One might reasonably accuse jazz musicians as having been slow off the mark, at in relation to their cousins in the popular industries, in adapting to new technologies and adopting complementary strategies. The reasons for this being the case are too many and too complex to do justice to here but it's worth pointing out nonetheless. In order to sustain, jazz necessarily has to reinvent on a variety of levels. As a minority music, jazz relies on the balancing of very tight financial margins and, this reality often breeds a lack of ambition and, ironically for an improvised genre, imagination amongst its musicians.