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Micro-independent record labels in the UK

Discourse, DIY cultural production and the music industry

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ABSTRACT This article examines the relationship between the practices of do-it-yourself (DIY) micro-independent record labels in the UK and wider mediated discourses surrounding the music industry. It is suggested that a heightened version of the art versus commerce dichotomy central to rock ideology provides the basis for a number of legitimizing theories through which the aesthetic and industrial conventions of these practitioners are justified and given importance. First, the article suggests that these legitimizing theories serve to narrow the scope of, and draw distinct boundaries around, small-scale cultural production. Second, through a self-conscious critique of globalized corporate media they serve as an engagement with the politics of cultural production and, ultimately, media power. Finally, using two prominent case studies relating to new technology (Arctic Monkeys and Clap Your Hands Say Yeah) the article examines the ways in which discourses relating to DIY cultural production impact upon mainstream music industry practice and discourse.

KEYWORDS *art/commerce binaries, DIY culture, media power, music industry, popular music, production of culture*

This article is concerned with the interplay between discourse and practice within the social contexts of popular music.[1] Using ethnographic research with small (micro) independent record company owners based in the United Kingdom, it attempts to give concrete examples of how common discursive formations surrounding popular music actively affect its practices.[2] In particular the article examines the importance of mediated discourses relating to the 'professionalized' world of the recording industry, to other types of 'industrial' practice relating to popular music, namely 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) independent record production.[3] The article focuses on the way in which images and myths of the mainstream music industry are used by DIY micro-labels to justify and make sense of their

own activities. With specific reference to new technologies, the final section then examines how there is a converse appropriation of discourses related to DIY cultural production *by* the mainstream recording and media industries.

A significant body of work within the sociology of the arts and culture (Becker, 1982; Peterson, 1976) and Anglo-American media and cultural studies (Born, 1995; Lopes, 2002; Negus, 1992, 1999) has suggested that culture is produced within and shaped by its relationships to particular institutions. Here, the social relationships and institutional practices that constitute the very fabric of such organizations work in differing ways, actively shaping an 'end product'. Within such work (Burnett, 1996; Jones, 1997; Negus, 1992, 1999) there is an almost axiomatic conflation between the 'popular music industry' and the recording industry. There is an assumption that the production of popular music (or at least the production that matters) takes place in a fairly narrow range of contexts; those organizations directly or loosely connected to the four major record companies.

It is clear that the industrial production of popular music (that is, the production and distribution of recordings) occurs across numerous sites not necessarily encompassed by such a conceptualization. Outside of such boundaries lie a whole host of amateur and semi-professional bands, hobbyist record labels and reissue imprints, collectors, fanzine writers and small-scale distributors working across a variety of genres. This is not to deny that the recording industry is a dominant institution; rather that its very dominance either may be studiously ignored or may inspire industrial and aesthetic strategies which are perceived as counter-hegemonic (or at least at odds with the dominant aesthetic paradigms of the recording industry). Small-scale cultural practitioners of this type are not 'professional' but are deeply engaged (and highly aware of) the machinations of cultural production, while at the same time they often base much of their shared identity in opposition (or relation) to an othered music industry.

A key theorist who has touched upon small-scale cultural production is Bourdieu (1996). However, as Hesmondhalgh (2006) notes, Bourdieu and his followers generally have ignored large-scale cultural production (in particular with relation to popular culture) just as 'restricted production' has been neglected by Anglo-American media and cultural studies. He notes that 'these two torn halves need to be put together' (2006: 229) and makes a call for empirical work which draws connections and parallels between the two.

This article aims to make tentative steps towards such a position. It argues that like the aspirant, bohemian avant-gardes associated with small-scale cultural production identified by Bourdieu (1996), small-scale popular music practitioners tend actively to shun the economic capital favoured by large-scale cultural producers in favour of (informal) symbolic capital. Unlike the avant-gardes studied by Bourdieu (who are based within high

art forms) the small-scale cultural producers discussed here (and those involved with small-scale popular music more generally) cannot be seen as autonomous from either the dominance of large-scale institutions or the larger of field of power. Instead, this article argues that because of the historical dominance of major labels, small-scale cultural production related to popular music is dialectically bound up with the aesthetics and discourses of large-scale cultural organizations.

The specific focus of this article is upon micro-independent labels involved in releasing music within genres which, from the early 1980s, through critical discourse and the vernacular classifications of audiences, became collectively associated with the term 'indie' (see Hesmondhalgh, 1999).[4] These labels are small-scale operations usually run from private addresses by one or two individuals who undertake all the tasks necessary for the commercial release of a recording themselves (from making contractual arrangements with musicians to organizing finances, from designing and packaging to promotional activities and the organization of distribution). They are linked through an international DIY network of labels, musicians, fanzines and distributors similar to the self-sustaining routes of communication and exchange or 'trans-local scenes' (Harris, 2000; Hodkinson, 2002; Kruse, 1993) common within many popular music cultures centred on distinct taste configurations. As such, micro-labels are not integrated within the structures of the media and music industries, yet they are engaged with a similar set of practices: the sale, promotion and distribution of recordings.

This article details the common discursive constructions that affect and justify aesthetic and industrial practice for such practitioners. It argues that these constructions are based largely around an internalization and naturalization of well-worn tropes embedded within rock ideology relating to art, creativity and commerce. It examines how such assumptions are used by micro-label owners to frame and contextualize their own small-scale commercial and industrial activities. Through an exploration of the way that micro-label owners commonly articulate their attitudes towards motivation, rewards, success and failure, it is suggested that the internalization of such discourse provides a number of 'legitimizing theories' for commercial and creative action. First, the article suggests that these legitimizing theories have an active effect in that they serve to narrow the scope of, and draw distinct boundaries around, small-scale cultural production within this context. Second, they serve as an engagement with the politics of cultural production through an overt critique of globalized corporate media.

The connection between independent labels and distinct ideological positions has been a central motif of scholarly work on the subject. Hesmondhalgh (1996) uses a study of UK labels to suggest that often the independent project has been a failed attempt to democratize the music industry process. He suggests that independent companies often start by

challenging traditional business practice and received knowledge, but are inevitably compromised by the need to incorporate and collaborate with the majors. Similarly, Lee's (1995) case study of Chicago's Wax Trax label concludes that the ideological elements and goals of independent companies are sublimated by their necessary interaction with the 'totalizing capitalism' of the major labels. Lee argues that as independent labels face crises relating to factors such as funding and distribution, there is an inevitable acceptance of the 'logics' of capitalism (through the working practices of major labels) as self-apparent and necessary.

For the DIY independent practitioners under discussion here, the issues are somewhat different. A combination of industrial and aesthetic factors means that few are likely to either challenge the mainstream music industry, or have to collaborate with or sell a share of their label to major recording companies. The article argues that instead, drawing such distinct lines around their practices also provides a symbolic resistance to the totalizing discourses of capitalism. By attempting to engage with cultural production in an overtly self-conscious manner, they offer a critique from the margins and attempt to address the problems of 'media power' (Couldry, 2000, 2001). The article then argues that the symbolic resonance of DIY cultural production is further illustrated by the appropriation of DIY discourses by the mainstream recording industry as a marketing tool.

Art, creativity and commerce

A concern with the aesthetic and ideological consequences of the 'culture industries' was central to the Marxist-derived mass culture critique that provided the foundation for the contemporary study of popular culture (Adorno, 1991; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979). Although convinced of the liberatory potential and progressive nature of popular music, later critics continued to express concern over the negative impact of its industrial contexts, and concluded that the radical possibilities of certain types of popular music are ultimately diluted, erased or subsumed through their 'co-option' by the music industry (Chapple and Garofalo, 1978; Harker, 1980). Subsequent scholars have seen the tensions between creativity and the commercial as in themselves ideological constructs which serve particular purposes within the machinations of popular music production and consumption. Stratton (1982, 1983) argues that the creative process has often been mystified by the artist and the recording industry in order to conceal the rational workings of capitalism. Here, the ideological construction of artistic autonomy and mystical representations of creativity seek to foreground the aesthetic value of popular music, while playing down its position as a commodity within a commercial framework. Negus (1995) points out that within the industrial process of popular music it is often difficult to draw lines between 'creative' and 'commercial' decisions. For Negus, creativity and commerce are actually closely related and many

tensions during the production and marketing of popular music are about what is creative and what it means to be commercial.

While such deconstructions of art/commerce binaries are helpful in that they demystify everyday discursive positions, it is also clear that such discourses continue to hold power. They actively affect a variety of musical practices, are constantly negotiated across a number of musical cultures and continue to resonate with small-scale cultural practitioners and popular music consumers. Thus, it is not the aim of this article to further deconstruct art/commerce discourses, rather it is to examine how such discourses continue to have material effects and how they are reflective of wider engagements with the concentration of ownership within large media conglomerates.

Attitudes to the 'music industry' among micro-label owners

Attitudes towards the recording industry among DIY independent micro-label owners clearly mirror well-worn tropes within rock ideology relating to art and commerce. These polarizations are articulated in two main ways, both relating to common narratives about 'the music industry'.[5] First, there is an assumption that the organizational structures of the recording industry necessitate that creativity suffers; second, that creative people (i.e. musicians) signed to major labels suffer. Phil of Ferric Mordant Records gives a typical example, commenting:

> I don't like it! [the record industry] For me, true independence is about music, whereas the mainstream is about money, and where they meet it's generally the music that suffers. I've not had too much experience of the mainstream record industry, but it's been enough to repel me. (Interview with Phil Tyler, 10 November 1999)

Similarly, Dave from Polygraph Records commented:

> Most of the big companies are folding like pancakes all because it's just business to them, there is no apparent appreciation of any art. Greed is the only aesthetic compulsion here, nothing else. (Robots and Electronic Brains e-zine, 2000–1)

Gayle Brogan of Boa Records, recounting her own connections with musicians who had experienced the major label process, suggested that signing to a major label is a disempowering or corrupting experience for musicians. She commented:

> I was involved with a moderately successful indie band who ran their own label but had involvements with majors, and subsequently a less successful band whose members had had past glories on majors and large indie labels. Both bands were keen to play the game and it was sad (and rather hurtful at the time) to see how quickly principles were diluted and good intentions

> turned to self-preservation. I have seen a good few individuals and bands dumped and fucked over by the mainstream recording industry. (Interview with Gayle Brogan, 3 August 2002)

These discursive formations are used by micro-label owners to explain and justify why they are involved in small-scale cultural production, what rewards they gain from such involvement and ultimately what they hope to achieve through it. There is an internal logic to the discourses of micro-label owners related to the scale and logistics of their working practices. The small-scale cultural production of recordings is consistently hindered by an unstable relationship with certain crucial bridging institutions (such as distribution companies, radio and the music press). The resultant economic uncertainty means that it is difficult for micro-labels to increase the scale of their operations with any degree of confidence. Faced with the economic realities of small-scale record production, the expectations and ambitions of label owners often differ from those of the wider recording industry. Such differential horizons are borne through an acceptance that there is limited potential for production at this level. In turn, these realities are positioned in relation to common art/commerce discourses to provide a number of 'legitimising theories' (Berger and Luckman, 1966: 104)[6] through which practitioners' actions are explained, justified and given importance.

The legitimizing theories of micro-label owners are most clearly illustrated by the way in which they position and identify themselves, commonly justify their involvement in popular music production, and judge success and failure. In order to position themselves against the 'music industry' and thus against the inherently insidious nature of 'business', micro-label owners commonly use a number of strategies which serve to legitimate their activities in differing ways. They may discuss their activities as being grounded within a particular moral or 'political' standpoint. Small-scale industrial production is reconceptualized as being part of a collective project, grounded within a network that eschews the primary aims and practices of the recording industry. Third, the small-scale cultural producer is often recast primarily as a fan whose primary rewards are gained from a sense of personal satisfaction and engagement.

Moral or political standpoints

In many instances micro-label owners attempt to explain their activities in moral or political terms. Often this is articulated by equating the commercial activities and perceived 'corruption' of the recording industry with capitalism as a whole. For example, during its nine-year existence the Newcastle-based micro-label and mail order distribution company Slampt! consistently represented itself as an organization in which musical

production was inherently linked to political motivations. In the label's mailouts and promotional flyers, through their fanzine *Fast Connection* and in niche media interviews, its joint owners were conscious to highlight the 'political' element of their activities. Polemic pronouncements such as 'I don't separate music from politics. I'm tired of explaining to people why we don't review or distribute records with barcodes on them. It's just so fucking obvious: it's because their records have barcodes on them and ours don't' (Dale, 1999: 6) and explanations that they were 'using the music industry as a metaphor for the general corrupt shittiness of Western society' (email circular, Slampt!, 1999) were common throughout the label's existence. This type of polemics is echoed in the way in which a number of other labels position their activities in relation to wider political issues.

The 'political' is also expressed though a more specific concern with the overriding logics of capitalism and their pervasive effect upon the production and consumption of popular music. Small-scale cultural production in these instances is framed within, and commonly articulated as being driven by, a moral objection to the dominant practices and processes of the recording industry. Thus any opposition to capitalism or corporatism tends to be distilled into a critique of the business of popular music. Mark Hibbert of Artists Against Success Records gives a typical example by framing his activities not only in terms of providing a musical alternative, but also as working towards alternative business practices. Here, both a moral indignation and desire for change to the status quo are put forward as primary reasons for his label's existence. He commented:

> Damn right there is a political element to what we do. The mainstream music industry is horrifically corrupt and obsessed with sales and short-term talent, while the 'alternative' is only interested in aping them. The 'alternative' must stop using vile terms like 'unsigned' and 'minor label' if it wants to gain any self-respect. The big business end of music is wrong and bad, only by constructing new ways of doing things can it be changed. (Interview with Mark Hibbert, 21 October 1999)

Hibbert's comments also express another commonly-stated 'political' aim of micro-labels. In keeping with the perceived continuity between contemporary micro-labels and their 1980s predecessors, micro-label owners often see themselves as the true inheritors of the democratizing project of post-punk networks (see Hesmondhalgh, 1998) and the DIY aesthetic inherited from punk (see Laing, 1985; Rosen, 1997). Even though labels are working on very small scales of production, they often view themselves as offering a challenge to the hegemony of the mainstream industry. Rather than individual labels growing to a level sufficient to compete with the majors on their own terms, many see this challenge as taking place through a collective project. The engendering of a strong independent scene through distribution networks and the sharing of

information between labels is seen as a step towards undermining the structures of the majors. Pete Dale of Slampt! gave a typical response:

> I'm happy to give out advice to anyone who is going to do their label independently, because I figure that the more DIY labels there are, the weaker the mainstream record business will become. (Interview with Pete Dale, 1 June 2000)

This ethic of collectivism was a central defining feature of identity for DIY independent practitioners and the attempt to create a support network among labels is clearly defined in opposition to a perceived hegemonic mainstream. By actively encouraging the involvement of a larger number of individuals, practitioners are attempting to demystify the popular music process, and open up access to it.

Separation

Related to this sense of community and collectivism is the way in which label owners saw independent culture as a whole. The networks between labels and practitioners are conceptualized as being 'outside' the confines of the music industry. Andrew Clare of Infinite Chug stated that 'the music industry is as closely related to what I do as the beef industry' (interview with Andrew Clare, 7 November 1999). This enclosed world is distinguished not just in terms of channels of small-scale commerce and communication, but also by a perception that indie practitioners have a different motivation and mindset. Musicians, labels and fanzines are seen as being primarily concerned with caring about the music rather than business. Conversely, there is a widespread perception that professionals working within the recording industry care little for music. While this conception is clearly a construction configured from mediated narratives, the notion of 'difference' is nevertheless an important marker of identity. 'Separation' may be understood as an attempt at forging 'authentic' or 'real' relationships with like-minded individuals outside the constraints of capitalism. Ideas relating to the 'personal' and 'direct communication' are important aspects of commerce and communication within DIY indie culture. For example, releases bought direct by mail order are almost always accompanied by handwritten letters from the label owner, often with requests for feedback and sometimes with small details of their personal life. Such practices clearly serve to configure small-scale commerce as a personal rather than commercial activity.

This foregrounding of the personal is clearly positioned also in order to contrast it to the depersonalized and alienating environment of other forms of popular music production. Many of the responses of label owners indicated a split between 'industry' people and 'indie' people, who were considered to be different, 'nicer' or more honest. John Jervis of WIAIWYA

recounted an incident when one of the acts on his label had received interest from a major record company. He commented:

> An A&R man from Sony came along to one Marine Research [UK indiepop band] gig and was a wanker, completely disinterested in anything I or they had to say … perpetually looking for someone more important to talk to. (Interview with John Jervis, 22 March 1999)

However, Jervis then explained that such contact with music industry professionals was rare, and that his ability to operate largely within the structures of the 'indie scene' meant that

> generally people I have met through the label have been lovely, though admittedly most of these have been from an 'indie' background … basically I have had too little experience of anything else to judge for myself. (Interview with John Jervis, 22 March 1999)

Such a lack of actual contact with music industry professionals is fairly commonplace. Thus perceptions of the music industry tend to fall back upon mediated narratives of exploitation. Another label owner's response was typical:

> I am well aware that there are some really nasty pieces of work involved in the music industry, but fortunately I haven't had the displeasure of meeting many of them. Overall, I would say I find the music industry repugnant, but fortunately it has not encroached too much on what we have been doing for the last seven years. (Interview with Pete Dale, 1 June 2000)

Notions of separateness, then, often involve practitioners consciously absenting themselves from the major label process in order to retain power and agency over the music-making or producing process. For instance, Paul of Diskatopia commented in a fanzine interview:

> I was surrounded by extremely talented musicians who didn't know how to or want to play the major label game, and who didn't want to become the next one-release wonder in the flood of 'product' that some Majors were and are emitting. (Possession, 2000–1: 1)

Stuart Anderson of 555 commented: 'We don't play by the rules dictated by having to sell a certain amount of product. I'm happy to exist in my own universe' (interview with Stuart Anderson, 18 January 2000).

This critical and deconstructive approach to the industrial processes of popular music is significant not only in the way in which it serves to justify certain practices, but also because of its symbolic resonance. The constant attempt to unravel and problematize the control of large-scale media corporations is a clear engagement with what Couldry (2000, 2001) calls 'media power'. Couldry uses the term to address a gulf in material and symbolic resources between 'media' and 'non-media' people which, he argues, serves to legitimize the power of large media organizations. He highlights 'the *concentration of symbolic power* in media institutions:

that is, the fact that we take it for granted that the media have the power to speak "for us all"' (2001: 157; emphasis in original). By attempting to create a 'politicized', critical or separate form of cultural production, DIY independent practitioners are self-consciously highlighting such a concentration. The dialectic elements of DIY discourse champion the possibility that people other than media professionals can engage with, and successfully promote, symbolic goods which fall outside of the tastes and economic imperatives of the established or mainstream media industries. Thus in both a practical and discursive way, small-scale cultural practitioners demonstrate that large media organizations do not necessarily speak 'for us all' and that, albeit in marginal ways, small-scale cultural production can add to the conversation of what is being said (or promoted) in the public sphere.

The small-scale cultural producer as 'fan'

This engagement with media power is mirrored in other common discursive positions among label owners, which attempt to place both their industrial practices and consumption outside of the remit of large-scale capitalism. Often, running a label is seen as in keeping with a label owner's day-to-day consumption of popular music as a direct extension of their fandom. For example, Dominic Martin of Earworm and Enraptured, described the decision to start a label as a 'natural' progression of activities in which he was already engaged:

> I was spending all my money on records, and doing a fair bit of trading and selling. By doing this I amassed one or two contacts, bandwise, notably Windy and Carl [US post-rock band] who became friends and featured on the first … release. From there, we just felt it almost a logical step to take it somewhere, if you like. I think a chief reason [for starting the label] was that I've always been a huge fan of the seven-inch single. (Interview with Dominic Martin, 23 March 1999)

By framing their engagement in the production of records as an aspect of their fandom, label owners are connoting a deep personal investment in the process, and rendering 'the commercial' as a relatively unimportant facet of their activities. Here, the act of small-scale industrial production is related primarily to personal aspects of an individual's life, such as taste and identity. It is extremely common for aesthetic judgements to be put forward as the major reason for involvement when label owners justify and explain why they run labels. In turn, these aesthetic judgements are viewed as being largely autonomous from what they see as being commercially viable. For example, Paul of Guided Missile commented:

> The majors will chuck money at everything in the hope that something will stick. One in 10 bands ends up being a hit with the kids and the remainder get dropped … Labels like [us] invariably lose money but do it for the love of the

> music. Personally I often offer a band a record just because I want to have a copy of that record myself. (Interview with Paul Kearney, 9 October 2000)

Engagement

One of the most important reasons given for being involved in record production was that active participation in producing and releasing music was seen as being worthwhile in itself. For example, John of Awkward Silence commented:

> My main motivation was the other labels out there doing similar things and all of the great artists producing some really special music. I liked the idea of becoming a small part of the scene and doing something worthwhile, and so far it's been really rewarding. (http://www.fat-cat.co.uk/demo/)

The rewards of small-scale record production are, again, largely conceptualized in non-commercial terms. For example, label owners often measure success by the amount of personal satisfaction and the sense of achievement gained from a particular release. Sometimes this is expressed through a pride in the actual artefact that they have produced. John Jervis of WIAIWYA commented that success was 'being able to put out another release that I love at least as much as the previous one, in a sleeve that I am dead proud of' (interview with John Jervis, 22 March 1999), while Phil Tyler of Ferric Mordant indicated that he judges success through

> a combination of actually getting out a product that you're pleased with, in sound and appearance, and then actually managing to sell some of them. Artistically I'm well pleased with the label's output. Commercially it's not been bad, but could be better, (no releases have broken even yet) so obviously it's not primarily a commercial venture. (Interview with Phil Tyler, 10 November 1999)

Similarly, Phil Rodreguez of Elsie and Jack Records commented:

> We are proud of the way our releases look. A fair bit of blood, sweat and the usual goes into the packaging. We'd like to think that we are affording the music the care and attention to detail it deserves. (Interview with Phil Rodreguez, 18 July 2002)

He continued that the main way that he judged success was through receiving 'positive responses from the people who created the music, then the people who buy the records'.

Recognition

Rodreguez's response also points to another common conceptualization of success. The rewards of small-scale production may be associated with being respected as an important and active participant within an international DIY independent scene. The sense of recognition that label owners receive

from other like-minded individuals provides an important affirmation for their activities. For example, Pete Dale of Slampt! commented:

> To me, success is putting out a great record which will grab people by the throat and excite them completely. Thus every record or tape we have ever put out is a massive success, because even if we only sell between 500 and 1500 of each release, I have boxes and boxes full of letters which prove that our records have connected on a gut level with tons and tons of people all over the world. (Interview with Pete Dale, 1 June 2000)

Similarly Matt Haynes, who has been involved in releasing more than 200 records since 1987 via the Sarah and Shinkansen labels, reasoned that he continues to be involved in producing records because:

> I enjoy it, I still like putting out records, and getting letters and sitting in pubs waiting for soundcheck – and even lugging rucksacks full of CDs and seven-inches round from gig to gig … especially when people are willing to fly me to Spain or Japan in order to do it. Although Sarah [previous label] had to stop when it did … it seems silly to simultaneously stop doing something I was still enjoying. (Interview with Matt Haynes, 24 October 2000: http://diskant.future.easyspace.com/shops/interv/shink.html)

The activities of small-scale production are seen as enjoyable within themselves, and there is a self-contained pleasure in engaging in something that they find aesthetically satisfying. Often, running a label is seen as an area of an individual's life untouched by the 'compromising' demands of work and commerce that they may experience in other aspects of their lives. For example, Nigel Turner of Pickled Egg commented that although he would love to sell enough records to make a full-time living out of his label, this would lead to an inevitable compromise:

> It would be great to be able to give up my day job. However, I wouldn't want to do this at the expense of artistic integrity. After all, I'm already prostituting myself in my day job (as a computer software engineer), so I can't really see any point in prostituting the label. My job is quite well paid, so it's hard to see how the label could generate that sort of income without severe compromise … [As] I said before, it's not even breaking even yet. (Interview with Nigel Turner, 3 December 2002)

Expectations and success

Turner's comments are indicative of the general level of expectations held by many label owners within the scene. However, some respondents did express their desire to go full-time with their labels, seeing their participation at the micro-label level as a stepping-stone from which they could gain contacts and experience. In some cases, the success of a small group of independent labels that started out as micro-labels before going on to achieve critical and commercial success has acted as a template for those with ambition to turn their labels into a full-time concern. However,

the dilemma of whether to gamble on increasing a label's operation or to enter into agreement with a larger label, is very rare. To make a living out of running a label is extremely difficult. Richard of Jitter Records, for example, estimates that in order for an individual to live solely off the proceeds of releasing records, a label has to sell 'in the order of 10,000 [albums] per year', but adds:

> Ten thousand records is quite a lot for a UK indie release: the *Electrelane* album[7] sold about 13,000 in its first year, but had quite a lot of [expensive] promotion [and thus less profit per unit]. The *Meanwhile, Back in Communist Russia* … [an act released by Jitter who have had a considerable amount of niche radio and music press coverage] album has sold about 2000 units over the course of one-and-a-half years, and that was with John Peel on their side, so to speak. (post to Indielabels email list, 3 February 2003)

Problems in distribution and promotion mean that to sell even 500 to 1000 units of a seven-inch single per release is far from guaranteed. The projected sale of 10,000 albums is an unrealistic figure for most micro-labels. As day-to-day practitioners attempting to produce, market and sell their own releases, micro-label owners are clearly aware of the extreme difficulties in attaining such sales; thus, the ambition to move onto a different level of production is fairly rare among them. Most are either resigned to the realities of, or are happy to continue working at, such a small level. Rather than believe that their activities will lead to 'bigger things' and a high level of financial reward, there is a general shared acceptance that working at this level provides alternative rewards. The worth of a release is rationalized primarily through its value as a successful artistic artefact and how well it is received by the label owner's peer group rather than how financially successful it may be. Hence there is a heavy onus on the symbolic value of the text in itself rather than its economic value.

Musicians, out-of-house A&R and the mediation of DIY discourses

While the overwhelming majority of musicians within the DIY independent scene have similar aspirations and ideologies to those of the label owners[8] described above, some do see music in terms of a progressive career from which they could eventually make a living. Such artists consider micro-labels as a springboard into contracts with the majors or larger independents. Indeed, since the downturn in music sales in the 1990s, the mainstream recording industry has used small independent labels often as a second tier or 'out-of-house' rung of the artists and repetoire (A&R) process.[9] As major record companies have cut the size of their artist rosters and promotional costs for new signings have increased, so acts have come under more pressure to prove themselves (in terms of press or radio support) before a recording contract is offered. Because of the working practices

of micro-labels (releases are often done on trust without contracts and are subject to singular agreements), releases such as one-off, seven-inch singles can be seen as convenient profile-raising exercises by artists and as market research by larger record labels (Webb, 2005). These working practices mean that major labels rarely get involved in licensing or buyout deals with micro-labels.

In instances where artists have gone on to sign to major or large independent labels, micro-label owners tend to be stoic or resigned rather than bitter about missing out on an act's success. Unlike the inevitability of the adoption of discourses of large-scale capitalism suggested by Lee (1995), there tends to be a reaffirmation of a label's separateness from the larger industry. Dominic of Earworm, for example, has released early career records by acts such as The Earlies (who later signed a major label deal with Warners) and Hood (later of the large independent Domino). He commented:

> I only care about Earworm and the bands I hook up with. If they go on and progress, I wish them the best of luck. But I'll just carry on as before in my own little world. I just try and avoid the sharks and rip off merchants and get on with it. (Interview with Dominic Martin, 23 March 1999)

The trend towards 'out-of-house' A&R is part of a wider climate of change within the recording industry, which also has seen discourses surrounding DIY cultural production mediated by the mainstream media and given credence within the wider music industry. Despite the overarching economic truths of most DIY record production, the *idea* of democratization and separation from the 'music industry' feeds back into the recording industry itself. These ideas are related partially to distribution, where due to the disintermediary nature of the internet, digital downloads are seen to have the potential to break the dominance of major entertainment conglomerations. They also relate to the promotional possibilities of the internet. Within this configuration, new technologies give artists the means to reach their audience 'directly' without the aid of traditional promotional campaigns.

Both 2005 and 2006 saw the commercial success of a number of bands who were very consciously framed in terms of DIY ethics and independence. The most prominent examples here were Clap Your Hands Say Yeah from New York and Arctic Monkeys from the UK, who both received concerted media attention focused around their seemingly spontaneous emergence with the help of new technologies. Clap Your Hands Say Yeah sold albums directly from their website and the Arctic Monkeys' demos were posted as MP3s on internet discussion boards by fans (for examples, see Pfanner, 2006). Both acts were actually launched through concerted web-based campaigns to raise their profiles and build a fanbase. Both had management teams who had strong major label connections: Clap Your Hands Say Yeah's manager Nick Stern is a senior PR at Atlantic

(Warners), while their publicity was handled by Ken Weinstein, head of the independent Big Hassle Media, who was central in the success of acts such as The Strokes and Kings of Leon. After concerted exposure at the market-leading US indie rock website Pitchfork (www.pitchforkmedia.com), the band began to sell copies of their album on their own website before signing a direct distribution deal with Warners-owned ASA. Similarly, Arctic Monkeys had been involved with the London management company Wildlife Entertainment (responsible for large selling acts such as Craig David and Travis) from a very early stage and had used their position within the industry (and a professional PR company) to create a simultaneous 'buzz' among the recording industry. The band eventually signed to the large UK independent company Domino and have a global deal with the major label Epic.

Clearly, both acts had music industry intermediaries working on their behalf from an early stage, and their passage from obscurity to success is more complicated than media accounts suggest. Indeed, we can see these web-based activities as a slightly different version of the independent as out-of-house A&R model. However, it is not the veracity or otherwise of these 'spontaneous' success stories that is interesting. Rather, it is the way in which they feed into and expand existing discursive constructions around DIY. Leyshon et al. (2005) suggest that the emergence of online music companies mirrors the out-of-house A&R or research and development role by assisting in the development of business models that then are taken on by the large media conglomerations in the quest to develop online strategies. Similarly, the promotional trajectory of acts launched through the internet became assimilated very quickly into the common discourses of the recording industry. For example, many panels at the 2005 UK music industry conference 'In The City' were dominated by talk of the success of the Arctic Monkeys' viral marketing, and how it provided a new promotional model.[10] Similarly, in November 2005 the UK trade magazine *Music Week* published a 'DIY Special', which ruminated on the implications of the 'DIY explosion' for established and emerging acts and existing label structures. However, the main conclusions of the piece were far from radical, and pointed to slight changes in the flexible relationships that already existed between majors and independents (Hesmondhalgh, 1996; Negus, 1992). A 'growing number of unique and flexible development deals' will see independent labels 'retaining close day-to-day relationships with their artist, but plugging into the major company's marketing and distribution muscle' (*Music Week*, 2005: 1). In other words, the music industry has reacted to new DIY strategies by adapting and incorporating them into their existing overall logics.

Such representations of DIY draw upon spectacular examples which, in turn, are drawn back into the dominant discursive framework of the recording industry. But most DIY popular music production remains at a micro-level, where to be self-sustaining is considered to be a financial

success. While as Wallis (2006: 304) notes, new technologies provide an opportunity for 'suppliers of niche music genres to reach an international audience', there is little evidence to suggest that small-scale practitioners such as DIY labels and musicians have benefited as a whole from 'the shorter value chain afforded by disintermediation' (2006: 304). It is likely that in the long term, intermediary businesses of the type referred to by the venture capitalist David Hornik (2005) as aggregators (i.e. those businesses which provide access to lots of niche products, such as itunes and Amazon.com) rather than 'content owners' will benefit from the easier access to niche products facilitated by the internet.

However, the use of DIY as a marketing tool used to launch the acts discussed is indicative of the continuing efficacy of art/commerce binaries within rock culture as a whole. While as Coyle and Dolan (1999) note, authenticity has long been a central marketing concept within Anglo-American popular music, the *appearance* of spontaneity and separation from large media conglomerates remains important. The DIY ethic and their 'separation' from standard industry methods were written into the promotional strategies of both acts from a very early stage. The appeal of these back stories can be read as part of the same urge to critique large-scale media and engage with media power, central to many DIY independent practitioners. Writing at Pitchfork, Hogan explains the success of web-launched 'DIY' acts as due to 'the rising value of even the humblest truths in a media landscape devoted to spin and paid prevarication' (2006: 1).

Conclusion

The desire for cultural products viewed as growing organically, 'outside' of the mainstream media and its attendant promotional and industrial structures, is part of a strain of anti-consumerist consumerism which has been a constant within popular music cultures throughout the 20th century. To various extents, genres such as folk, rock, punk and world music have sought to position themselves not only against the music industry, but also a wider consumer culture. Indeed, it should be noted that the DIY independent rock practitioners mentioned previously are by no means the only small-scale cultural producers to engage with these issues. Similar micro-businesses in other musical genres such as jazz, folk, electronica, improvised music and various forms of the avant-garde have an equally developed set of discursive constructions relating to mainstream consumption. Chris Cutler has referred to these networks of small-scale cultural producers as 'engaged cultures', the audience for which includes a high proportion of performers and scene activists (quoted in Reynolds, 2005: 44).

The DIY independent practitioners discussed in this article form part of a number of differing networks based around the small-scale production

of popular music, who have a dialectic relationship with the mainstream recording industry. In many cases, the idea of an artistically homogenizing and exploitative music industry provides a powerful construction against which this type of small-scale cultural producer defines itself. This article has suggested that for DIY independent practitioners, this is the basis of a number of legitimizing theories through which their activities are given importance and placed in opposition to the wider industrial context in which popular music is produced. A concentration on the perceived pitfalls of the music industry process serves to uphold micro-labels' position as offering an (albeit small-scale) alternative to such practices, and serves to justify the small-scale levels of production in which they are engaged. While the limited ambitions common among micro-labels may negate the possibility of spectacular financial success, they simultaneously cut out the potential for fantastic failure. What practitioners are left with is a mixture of realistic pragmatism framed within a distinct set of discursive positions which both highlight and heighten the importance of their small-scale cultural production.

The art/commerce binaries outlined in this article also illustrate a symbolic negotiation of the power relationships of popular music production and, ultimately, media power. By positioning themselves against a perceived insidious corporate and globalized recording industry, micro-labels engage with the politics of cultural production and question the power relationships of media corporations. Therefore, label owners' shared critique of the power relationships of cultural production is significant at a discursive level, even though the small-scale nature of their operations means that they are relatively 'powerless' in an economic sense or in their ability to reach a mass audience. While their vision of 'the music industry' might be rather homogenized and reductive, nevertheless it provides the basis of some form of critique which can be seen as part of a wider move among consumers and producers of small-scale media to question the dominance of globalized media conglomerates.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. While discourse here refers to groupings of utterances 'enacted within a [particular] social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way in which that social context continues its existence' (Mills, 1997: 10), the article also explores how particular dominant discourses might hold power or be negotiated across differing social contexts.

2. All responses are taken from interviews carried out by the author between 1999 and 2003, unless otherwise specified. The responses given in this article are broadly representative of the views held by DIY scene participants.
3. DIY is a concept inherited from the punk movement of the late 1970s.
4. The generic term 'indie' is a loose and unstable grouping referring to different (and often amorphous) stylistic and discursive groupings over differing periods of time and often has been used interchangeably with other terms such as 'alternative' or 'underground', or is rejected in favour of more specific subgenre terms such as 'lo-fi', 'post-rock', 'indietronica', etc. The constant between music grouped under (or at least discussed in relation to) these terms has been their relationship to particular institutions (most obviously the independent record company, but also fanzines and certain sections of the music press).
5. These discourses are highly pervasive within what Negus terms the meta-context of popular music, the 'everyday knowledge of music fans and journalists' (Negus, 1997: 319), and they are commonly circulated within popular cultural narratives. The channels through which audiences gain information about popular music often contain negative accounts of the circumstances of its production. The art versus commerce dichotomy is reinforced and perpetuated through the media, leading to a perception of the music industry as a 'bad place'. This construction tends to be articulated in three distinct ways that are circulated across TV, journalism and fiction. First, there are a number of myths about the workings of the music industry and common stereotypes related to those working within it. Second, there are testimonial accounts from insiders or exposés that attest to the 'nature' of the music industry process (Garfield, 1986; Jones, 1998; Otway, 1998; Stokes, 1977). Third, there are common critical orientations that permeate rock journalism (see Toynbee, 1993).
6. Berger and Luckman propose a theoretical model in which the ideologies and conventions of particular social actors and groups are strongly related to the activities in which they participate. These 'sub-universes' of meaning (related to particular occupations, demographic groups or aesthetic taste groups) result from 'accentuations of role specialization to the point where role-specific knowledge becomes altogether esoteric as against the common stack of knowledge' (1966: 102).
7. An album released on the band's own Let's Rock label with significant financial backing from the distribution company 3MV.
8. The following are typical responses:

> I just want to carry on doing the music for as long as it's enjoyable. I never expected anything to happen with it … it was always just a hobby. Each new record or CD is a pleasure to have released and I'm genuinely touched that people like the music and get in touch to say so. (Interview with Scott Sinfield, Portal, 13 June 2002)

> I would love to be able to make a living from music but don't see that as a real possibility as what I do isn't really commercial enough. As long as I can continue making records which enough people buy to make them viable, I'm happy. (Interview with Jon Attwood, Yellow 6, 3 June 2002)

9. For a nuanced account of the downturn in sales and rationalizing measures taken by the majors see Leyshon et al. (2005). It should be noted that at the time of writing there is an overall stabilization in global sales figures (IFPI, 2005).
10. Author's own observation as a delegate at the In the City Conference, Manchester, 30 September–1 October 2005.

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