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# Towards another musical ecology

*Author François Ribac, translation by Jean-Hugues Kabuiku*

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## Notes of translation:

This piece by François Ribac, sociologist and composer<sup>[1]</sup>, was originally published in the french critical revue Audimat, it was inspired from heated discussion around the ecological question in culture and especially dance music after a talk I was moderating and curating last year called “Écologies sonores : Vinyle, streaming et culture matérielle de la musique” during les Nuits Sonores Festival in Lyon, France for Bellona Magazine. Alongside Guillaume Huguet, editor in chief of Audimat, we were wondering if a materialist ecology in culture would be possible as so far all we have come across is petty bourgeois guilt and managerial ecology stuck on a surface level comprehension of what is at stake.

We’ve seen a growing number of initiatives and discussions around limiting carbon imprint for venues with a focus on commercial flights for touring DJs.

The following excerpt from Chal Ravens’ article “[What can dance music do about the climate crisis?](#)” published in 2019 are a perfect example of the most platformed discourse in dance music regarding the environment.

“Climate change is a very real question for dance music, simply because it's a question for everyone—particularly in the over-polluting, over-consuming developed world, which has already taken more than its fair share of the planet's resources. It's a good moment to start asking: what can we do?”

It's also noteworthy that Pitchfork recently released an [article](#) on extreme weather without discussing how these festivals affect the ecosystems of where they happen and how that impacts the extreme weather in the first place. How can we ignore the impact of large vehicles like SUVs and vans with an attendance of 100,000 people in the example of Lollapalooza, in the car-centric United States of America, and its impact on global warming, and in the same breath praise one artist solar-powered stage at this same festival. Perhaps it’s difficult to be critical in a situation where the musical press already depends on the festival (with money from their advertisements).

While discussion of the strategy or political attitude that would save our living environments is ongoing in critical and ecological thinking in general, the professional world of music somehow still sees itself as a virtuous activity whose "carbon footprint" simply needs optimizing. This text aims to save us some time. By analyzing the limits of technological solutionism, green accounting and the tendency to entrust economic players alone with the management of ecological and social issues, it prevents us from being seduced by the recycling of pseudo-solutions already called into question by numerous research studies. In his conclusion, François Ribac calls for collaborative investigations that can include people who are in a precarious position in the professional sphere of popular music (which is as

much a question of ecology and health as it is one of social issues), as well as those who are already engaged in practices of reflection and care, in the music world and beyond.

*Jean-Hugues Kabuiku Co-Editor at Bellona Magazine*

## Introduction

In the summer of 2022, intense heat, drought, fires and storms severely affected music events across Europe. In June 2022, during the Hellfest festival<sup>[2]</sup>, the scorching heat prompted the emergency services to open a first-aid post, while the organizers sprayed spectators in front of the stages.<sup>[3]</sup> 800 spectators fell ill. At the other end of France, in July, severe weather damaged part of the facilities at the Eurockéennes Festival in Belfort, forcing the evacuation of festival-goers and the cancellation of the first two days of the festival: 7 people were injured.<sup>[4]</sup> A few weeks later, at the Medusa Electronic Music Festival near Valencia in Spain, a stage collapsed during a storm. The toll: 40 injured and one dead.<sup>[5]</sup> Other types of festival have also been exposed to comparable perils. During the Festival d'Avignon, from July 7 to 26, 2022, a very violent fire destroyed more than 700 hectares a few kilometers from the Cité des Papes. Photos posted on social networks and press articles showed the immense plume of smoke floating over the city. The massive fire blocked train lines and roads, forcing festival-goers to make long detours to reach or leave the city.<sup>[6]</sup> That same summer, wildfires spread to normally unscathed regions of France. In a recent report, the Copernicus Climate Change Service listed most of the extreme events on the European continent in 2022. The correlation of these episodes and their consequences (water scarcity, droughts, rising greenhouse gas emissions) shows that climate change is intensifying and that Europe seems particularly exposed.

For some analysts, the extreme fragility of infrastructures and the widespread and lasting disruption of the Earth system mean that the world already looks like a field of ruins. Under these conditions, the way the musical world currently functions hardly seems tenable, and it seems essential that it adapts now to the threats already present and embarks on a genuine ecological transformation<sup>[7]</sup>

Themed shows, warning concerts and eco-responsibility

Historically, the worlds of performing arts and music have tackled environmental issues (when they have) in three main ways (which can be combined):

- the exploration by artistic teams of new relationships/connections with the environment, nature, ecology, animals, living things. Examples include Bernie Krause's soundscapes and his 2016 Paris exhibition *Le Grand Orchestre des Animaux*, which suggests that it was animals that introduced humans to music.<sup>[8]</sup>
- a posture of alert where artists warn of environmental degradation. Live Earth, a series of concerts and worldwide broadcasts by pop groups organized in 2007, is the culmination of this awareness-raising process, which began in the early 1970s with George Harrison and Ravi Shankar's *Concert for Bangladesh* (1971) and continued in subsequent decades.<sup>[9]</sup>
- an approach inspired by sustainable development (a concept popularized by the Brundtland Report for the UN in 1987<sup>[10]</sup>) which generally has two dimensions. On the one hand, spectators are encouraged to limit the impact of their actions, in line with

the eco-responsibility approach adopted by some music festivals. Users are encouraged to carpool, sort their waste on site, consume locally-produced organic food and drink, use ecocup, dry toilets and so on. On the other hand, trying to limit the impact of music production and focusing in particular on (measuring and reducing) the carbon impact.

In this article, I'm mainly interested in the third approach, which could be described as managerial, and which aims to make music production sustainable without fundamentally altering its structure and functioning.

## The limits of individualized carbon footprints

In the world of music, and first and foremost in popular music (festivals), the focus has been on the audience, without paying too much attention to music production. But focusing on consumer empowerment and action is not enough. Relaying a study by Carbone4,<sup>[11]</sup> an article in the French newspaper Reporterre shows that, when it comes to greenhouse gas emissions, individual action alone is not enough.<sup>[12]</sup> Firstly, because some individuals (particularly the privileged) refuse to commit themselves and, secondly, because even if a considerable number of people reduced their heating, favored public transport, limited their consumption of animal products etc., it wouldn't be enough. To really reduce CO2 emissions, we need a profound transformation of production activities and an immediate end to the use of fossil fuels. As long as the predatory practices of industry (including music), Big Tech, intensive farming and fishing, construction, oil and gas companies, supply chains, etc., continue nothing will be possible. Reporterre notes that such metamorphoses cannot take place without laws, regulations and treaties to constrain and control them. To confirm this point even further, let's take another example.<sup>[13]</sup> According to the French Environment and Energy Management Agency (Ademe),<sup>[14]</sup> France produces tons of waste per year: 41% from construction and public works, 41% from agriculture and fishing, and 4% from private households (the rest is unidentified). While consumer waste is on the decline, production-related waste is on the increase! What's more, as Baptiste Monsaingeon's recent work has shown, domestic waste recycling, managed by transnationals like Veolia, is not very efficient.<sup>[15]</sup> Many types of plastic, for example, are impossible to recycle, and those that have been recycled once degrade very slowly. Similarly, the reduction in waste in the metropolises of wealthy countries is often linked to its export to other countries, particularly to poorer regions.<sup>[16]</sup> We empty in one place to fill (and pollute) in another. To drastically reduce waste (agricultural, chemical, etc.), we need to stop producing it. Otherwise, it will continue to pollute soils and waterways, interfere with organisms and destroy ecosystems and human health. In the music industry, as elsewhere, eco-responsibility aimed at the general public is not very effective and does not lead to real change. It's a surface ecology that neglects the crucial role of production.

The material dimension of musical practice.

Taking note of the meagre results linked to eco-responsibility and the rise of discussions around ecological issues, the world of music, particularly where live performance is concerned, has evolved significantly in recent years.

Created in 2019 Music Declares Emergency (MDE) federates record labels (including majors), popular music groups and artists (some of them world-renowned), production, distribution, management and management structures, studios, festivals, schools, professional networks - in short, all the components of the music industry.<sup>[17]</sup> Linked to British NGO Julie's Bicycle, which aims to mobilize the art world to tackle ecological challenges, and sympathetic to activists such as Extinction Rebellion and Greta Thunberg, MDE's main aim is to tackle the carbon footprint of its sector. In other words, MDE acknowledges the music industry's contribution to ecological collapse. For example, Coldplay stopped touring for a time, and trip-hop band Massive Attack commissioned a study of the carbon impact of their tours from the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of Manchester. The report, produced by this leading environmental research organization, is now available online. It lists the various carbon emission factors and proposes a series of possible improvements, both in terms of the band's activity and the venues and festivals that host their tours.<sup>[18]</sup>

In the same vein, at the end of 2021, the Shift Project<sup>[19]</sup> published a report entitled "Décarbonons la Culture", a series of recommendations that are part of a broader plan to transform the French economy.<sup>[20]</sup> This well-documented report, which has been met with a strong response from the cultural industry, focuses in particular on the conditions under which shows are produced and on their circulation: the areas that emit the most greenhouse gases. In particular, it recommends that artistic activity be reduced, rationalized, shared and made more sustainable, and that immediate steps be taken to reduce carbon emissions, especially when it comes to touring. Echoing these various initiatives, Fedelima<sup>[21]</sup> has organized an event in April 2022 entitled "Ecology and contemporary music".<sup>[22]</sup> While workshops were devoted to all manner of subjects, the event's subtitle was "acting collectively for eco-responsible touring".

Generally speaking, the multiplication of professional and institutional initiatives - so numerous that it is impossible to list them here - attests to the fact that something is happening: the material dimension of music, and in particular touring, is now taken seriously. In these various initiatives, carbon emissions and touring are the main focus of attention. Ecological transformation is therefore often seen in terms of energy transition.<sup>[23]</sup>

## The rise of the KPI

How is the decarbonization of touring generally proposed? In the many professional meetings I've attended over the years, and in the Shift Project report, decarbonization is associated with a rationalization of activities. Structures must systematically and voluntarily move towards energy sobriety (eliminating superfluous consumption, reducing travel etc.). It is also recommended to replace energy-hungry technologies with more energy-efficient ones, e.g. switching from old, power-hungry spotlights to new bulbs. These options are frequently accompanied by a defense of small and medium-sized organizations and a (sometimes very sharp) criticism of the gigantism of very large events and/or transnational structures. I'll come back to this point later.

So how can we assess and reduce emissions? With indicators. It's common practice for structures (or individuals) with environmental expertise to provide artistic teams, venues, show producers, associations, festival (groupings) and various networks with methods for drawing up assessments and tools for transforming practices. IT tools and networks are

frequently used in this context. In the spring of 2022, the “Centre National de la Musique”, a public body supporting the professional music sector in France, awarded grants and prizes to innovative structures.<sup>[24]</sup> One of the prizewinners proposed to provide show organizers with connected digital tools capable of measuring various impacts, in particular carbon emissions.<sup>[25]</sup>

As is often the case in the world of contemporary music, the structure indicated that process development would be a collaborative process.

This trend for indicators and measurements in general is part of a long-standing dynamic. In correlation with the rise of the Scientific Revolution, government by numbers began in 18th-century Europe, when statistics began to be used by states (and then private companies) to measure certain phenomena, such as mortality, and adjust their actions. In the 19th century, the rise of state bureaucracies, particularly in France and Germany, went hand in hand with an ever-increasing use of numbers.<sup>[26]</sup> Neoliberal policies, which began in the 1970s, have accentuated and systematized this government by numbers. In public environmental policies, numbers are increasingly used to raise awareness. Buying a train ticket? The French railways show you the carbon cost of your journey on the ticket. Want to understand the impact of streaming video, sending an e-mail or videoconferencing? Ademe shows you your carbon footprint in kilograms on a website, and on its Datagir site, it offers simulators capable of calculating the impact of individuals in terms of waste, food, transport and housing.<sup>[27]</sup>

However, the production of this type of data is often the result of questionable bias or even concealment.<sup>[28]</sup> When we look at how industry sectors or states compile data on their ecological commitment, we feel ripped off.<sup>[29]</sup> The NegaWatt association, which draws up energy transition scenarios to achieve the elimination of fossil fuels, has shown that many calculations and reports by public bodies and private companies do not correctly account for carbon emissions, failing to take certain parameters into account.<sup>[30]</sup> NegaWatt shows that it is vital to consider imported emissions, greenhouse gas emissions generated by the manufacture abroad of goods imported into France, and "possible changes in the consumption and production of materials (steel, concrete, copper, plastics, lithium, etc.)".<sup>[31]</sup> In short, the best way to quantify an emission is to include all its components and, another key point, to make explicit how the data was produced.

In the neoliberal regime, widespread digitization also means converting human activities and ecosystems into money equivalents. Each component of a system is given a monetary value, which is then factored into a financial equation. In hospitals, for example, a cost is assigned to every act and every object. To achieve budget savings, managers then limited operating and personnel costs as much as possible, as well as length of stay. This policy has brought the public health care system to its knees, and spawned a bureaucratic armada that harasses caregivers and chastises patients.<sup>[32]</sup> From an environmental point of view, this approach also has its supporters, and is reflected in public policies in particular. Carbon markets, where states, cities and the European Community trade their emissions, were created in 2005. If an operator does not use its emissions quota, it can sell it to other operators who have exceeded it. The latter then have the opportunity to buy (the usual word is compensate) their pollution. Similarly, it is possible to finance actions with NGOs to offset emissions.<sup>[33]</sup>

These examples illustrate two ideas. Firstly, increasing the cost of a practice would encourage all players to adopt good practices and, secondly and consequently, the market would be a good regulator. In reality, things are less rosy. And why is that? Well, because the famous

rational economic agents of classical economics belong to social classes or countries that follow the dichotomy wealthy vs pauperized.

Secondly, monetization doesn't allow us to appreciate the real contribution of things and beings. Ascribing a monetary value to a territory, a forest, or the services provided by ecosystems amounts to neglecting essential interactions, players, entities and alliances. If you assess the quality of a forest in terms of the amount of firewood that can be cut each year, or the amount of Co2 it absorbs, you are neglecting everything that cannot be quantified.<sup>[34]</sup> You're forgetting the bacteria and micro-organisms that transmit information to the trees and help regenerate the soil.<sup>[35]</sup> You overlook the ways in which the forest's various ecosystems contribute to biodiversity. You also fail to take into account the pleasure of the people who walk through it, and the forest's contribution to local culture. Monetization not only instrumentalizes things (forest = mass of wood cut each year), it also prevents us from grasping all the contributions, complexity and richness of ecosystems.<sup>[36]</sup>

This shows the limits and biases of quantified and/or financialized approaches to carbon emissions and, more generally, to environmental issues. While monetization can be of some use, for example in estimating the damage (oil spills, chemical pollution) that transnationals and/or states have caused to sites and populations, and paying them compensation, systematizing this approach atrophies the perception of socio-environmental problems and issues. Similarly, while the quantification of pollution/emissions is often necessary, it must be part of a systemic approach that considers all environmental and social degradation and their interactions.

## Technosolutionism

Let's turn our attention to digital tools and new technologies. Can they help us drastically reduce consumption through greater efficiency, and radically reorientate our activities? Not for sure.

When it comes to energy, the first objection was put forward as early as the 19th century by the British economist William Stanley Jevons (1835-1882), and is known as the Jevons Paradox. In a regime based on profit and expansion, the optimization of a technology is more likely to be used by economic players to increase their production capacity and margins. For example, there's no guarantee that the widespread use of LED spotlights will automatically lead to electricity savings. As many of these devices are motorized and controlled using digital tools (converters, software, consoles, web updates, etc.), it is likely that the savings achieved with bulbs will be wiped out by the other functions and systems associated with the projector. It's also likely that the savings achieved will lead venues and festivals to expand their projector fleets or invest in other activities.<sup>[37]</sup>

Secondly, it is rare for one technology to be replaced by another. Rather, the rule is accumulation and coexistence, a point clearly illustrated in Edgerton's work on the history of technologies, and more recently in Fressoz's work on the energy transition.<sup>[38]</sup> In fact, oil hasn't replaced coal, coal hasn't replaced wood, and renewable energies haven't replaced fossil fuels (we'll see why later). Likewise, with the notable exception of the telegraph, no communications technology has really disappeared since the end of the 19th century: television has not replaced radio, home video has not replaced cinema, e-mail has not replaced the telephone, the Web has not supplanted earlier media, but survived them! All

these technologies have hybridized, and we've seen a considerable increase and diversification of uses<sup>[39]</sup> and...energy consumption.<sup>[40]</sup>

The third reason why digital indicators and technologies are unlikely to make a positive contribution to ecological transformation is the toxicity of these tools and the infrastructures that support them.<sup>[41]</sup> Digital tools (whether personal or professional) are extremely polluting. Their electronic components contain metals that are extremely toxic to extract, transform, manufacture and dispose of. This toxicity is also reflected in the millions of kilometers of terminals and data centers that keep these systems running. At every stage in the life of this equipment, precarious employment - particularly of children<sup>[42]</sup> - and violence against employees is commonplace.<sup>[43]</sup> In addition, the increasing connection of people, organizations and objects to the Web and the digitization of all activities are also contributing to a sharp rise in electricity consumption, which is often dependent on fossil fuels. This dependence on electricity and digitization is well documented.<sup>[44]</sup>

If renewable electricity is to make a real contribution to the shift away from fossil fuels and the reduction of energy consumption, it needs to be disconnected from big networks and its production and distribution relocated.<sup>[45]</sup> Public policy would then have to encourage greater autonomy and the development of micro-grids.

In short, and as the Jevons Paradox has already suggested, a technology cannot be sober when connected to an expensive mega-network. In the words of José Halloy, Nicolas Nova and Alexandre Monnin, it's not by using zombie technologies. The right direction is more likely low tech, maintenance and repair of existing systems and dismantling mega-infrastructures.<sup>[46]</sup> Measuring and attempting to reduce one's carbon footprint in an ocean of CO<sub>2</sub> is futile. The entire system needs to be decarbonized and depolluted from below, of course, but also and simultaneously from above.

## **At what scale? The example of the UFA FABRIK**

Another weakness of techno-solutionist<sup>[47]</sup> approaches is that their scope of efficiency is often not clearly defined. At meetings devoted to ecological issues in music circles, I've been struck by the fact that there's a lot of talk about solutions, new ways of doing things (for example, a company giving up touring or flying, or switching to LEDs for stage lighting) and imperatives (like environment based sobriety), but without ever specifying the exact scope of these actions and the mechanisms that would guarantee their success. Suddenly, the indicators disappear! When virtuous behaviors (to use the usual vocabulary) are carried out by only part of a professional community, they have no chance of being effective, and greenwashing is not far off.

An example from one of my field studies illustrates this point. At the end of the 1970s, a Berlin collective moved into a series of buildings formerly used by UFA, the major German film company.<sup>[48]</sup> This vast space has become a kind of small district for shows and artistic activities: the Ufa Fabrik.<sup>[49]</sup> There are halls dedicated to theater, music and dance, an open-air concert hall in summer, a cinema, as well as spaces for workshops with/for amateurs, a restaurant, an organic grocery store and gardens. Throughout the year, a wide variety of shows are presented here. From the outset, the collective has strived to be as environmentally



friendly as possible. For almost 40 years, thanks in particular to the efforts of one of the collective's members, an amateur percussionist and engineer, various installations have been developed, tested, discussed and readjusted. Water recovery systems are used for toilets, and roofs are planted with vegetation and fitted with solar panels. Air-conditioning systems are installed in the summer (Berlin is suffocating during this period). Most of the time, Ufa Fabrik generates its own renewable electricity, using the external grid only when its own production is insufficient. A vegetal installation protects local residents from decibels during outdoor concerts in summer. Much of the waste is recycled. This vast know-how has been financially supported by public institutions, notably the European Community, and has regularly inspired festivals, artistic production venues and other spaces.

However, whatever its local, regional, national and international influence, and even if some of its installations have been replicated elsewhere, the Ufa Fabrik method has not become widespread. The very many companies, groups and artists who perform there continue to move around and tour in conventional venues where resources and energy are squandered, masses of waste are produced, technologies and materials are used and so on. In the world of the German "off" (i.e., professional show-businesses receiving little or no public subsidy), job insecurity is just as acute, and competition is fierce. Clearly, for the low-tech of the Ufa Fabrik to flourish, public policy needs to support all German venues and artistic teams, regulatory frameworks need to be established, and this transformation needs to be the result of democratic debate. We also need to put an end to the unbridled competition between artistic and technical teams and theaters, which encourages environmental disasters and exploitation of the weakest. Without levers of this kind, Ufa Fabrik's magnificent experiment will remain isolated. Here we find the reason why sustainable development policies have failed: by acting only at the margins of a large system and without constraints on the agents, the dynamics of transformation are weak. What is true at Ufa is also true in other social spheres. After years of social and technical innovations, struggles and debates, we have to admit that the pendulum has not swung: actions in certain areas (local organic production and distribution, etc.) are struggling to be translated to a larger scale. This failure to turn the tide at national level is also evident at international level. Transnationals are circumventing borders and regulations, accentuating the destruction of the environment and social insecurity, while treaties intensify these disasters and climate and biodiversity conferences falter. The inertia of governments and international organizations, the activism of lobbies, and the decisive weight of production systems and infrastructures (energy and resources, transport, communications) certainly help to explain why the various environmental counter-cultures have (had) great difficulty in asserting themselves.

## **The way forward ?**

I've shown the inadequacy, the dangers and the ideological foundations of the managerial ecology that strongly permeates the music business. In this final section, I'd like to sketch out a few avenues for a profound ecological transformation of music. To do this, I'll refer to the galaxy of structures and activities dedicated to popular music and benefiting, to varying degrees, from public funding.

### **A wide network**

The "current music" sector includes many of the components of what the English-speaking world calls the music industry. In other words, concert halls spread throughout France, with

varying capacities (small associative and/or municipal venues, Parisian clubs, SMACs, etc.)<sup>[50]</sup> but also large venues such as La Cigale, Zenith(s) etc., multitudes of festivals, some of which welcome several hundred thousand people, production, communications and graphic design companies (which can also work for other sectors), and booking agencies,<sup>[51]</sup> stage equipment suppliers, sellers, repairers and importers of instruments and sound equipment, ticketing companies, transport companies for equipment and artists, catering companies. Music also means recorded and filmed music, record labels (of all sizes and linked to other cultural industries for the larger ones), recording and audiovisual production studios, specific equipment (software, computers, amplification, sound processing, cameras), websites (artists, labels, production companies, fans, instrument vendors) and social networks for all protagonists. And let's not forget the media (specialized and generalist), the press, public institutions, professional organizations (unions, territorial networks), and events organized by the industry. Schools and associations teach these vocabularies, and laws and contracts govern some of these exchanges. All these activities and systems are studied by academics, giving rise to research, reports, books, articles and professional symposia, commented on and relayed by the media. In this connected galaxy, many people and collectives are active: administrators, technicians (roadies, webmasters, community managers, lighting engineers, etc.), solo or group artists, teachers, programmers, managers and employees of public institutions, journalists, press and mediation officers in the media, etc. All these live, recorded and/or broadcast activities are part of the "live" world of the festival. All these live, recorded and/or online activities engage and bring together audiences. Depending on musical styles and structures, skills, tools, service providers and connections with other equivalent structures, with other countries, with other activities (e.g. catering or security for a large festival) can vary greatly.

This network includes very large structures and events (e.g. some of the festivals mentioned at the beginning of this text) as well as very medium-sized and small (or even micro) structures. Innumerable "transformers" connect these protagonists: a territorial financier, a stage and electrical connection supplier, a booking company, technicians, artists and vehicles, etc. When we analyze popular music in this way, we realize that it's the innumerable connections between small, medium and large components that make it a great system. To put it another way, fifty simultaneous tours by small bands are not necessarily less toxic from a socio-environmental point of view than a mega U2 concert in a stadium. *This is an essential point: the interconnection between all the protagonists of today's music is at least as important as the size of each individual unit.*

### **A scene that feeds and depends on other infrastructures**

As is the case with large interconnected electricity grids, largely managed by private interests, the intrinsic logic of music in a modern world is to keep growing. This dynamic of extension, typical of large networks, is reinforced by the appetite for novelty that characterizes artistic activities. This need and taste for perpetual renewal lies at the heart of the modern cosmogony. Without respite, artistic worlds program new things, new devices, unearth and promote emerging artists, new styles, new formats, new geniuses. If we often pay tribute to those who last, we often fiercely criticize those who don't renew themselves enough. Like the programming of shows (naturalized under the term seasons in the theatrical world), the professional music world washes (almost everything) and all the time, we could speak of musical washing.

In this specific form of programmed obsolescence, it's the artistic works and teams (in the sense of all those who contribute to a work) that are rapidly outmoded and discarded. Supported by an art history populated by white male geniuses, this frantic race for novelty extends far beyond the worlds of music and art. It lends credibility to the (modern) idea and necessity of progress and the constant renewal of goods and people. While certain artistic teams and structures are supported by (para)public schemes (subsidies, unemployment allowance, hosting of new creations), the logic of market selection is very much in evidence in these worlds. Competition and meritocratic ideology are very much alive: the idea that some succeed and others don't, which would be considered intolerable in education, for example, is accepted, often justified, and widely internalized in a world that benefits from subsidies. The vast majority of artists, technicians and administrators are precarious, dependent on the goodwill of the organizations that employ them and the programmers who select or eliminate them.<sup>[52]</sup> The recent paralysis of artistic networks and infrastructures at the height of the Covid crisis highlighted the fragility of the precarious. Finally, the world of contemporary music is dominated by men, and not very open to visible minorities, whether on stage, in recordings, or in offices and technical booths. Focused primarily on the production of artistic value, the world of "music industry" has until recently been fairly indifferent to what it draws from the Earth and to all the precariousness that sustains its operation. Its reliance on external, globalized infrastructures - what anthropologist Mario Blaser calls infrastructures of displacement - supports their endless growth and increases its dependence. The music industry is thus a vast system of technical, logistical and social interdependences, which bears growth and competition at its core. Under these conditions, how can we imagine an ecological (in the sense of systemic) transformation of these worlds?

## Investigate!

### 1. Negative externalities

In 2006, the late Bruno Latour published a book entitled *Changer de société. Refaire de la sociologie*<sup>[53]</sup>. In it, he praised the early 20th-century American philosopher James Dewey. According to Dewey, public problems, i.e., problems that concern the common interest, cannot be solved solely with the tools of parliamentary democracy.<sup>[54]</sup> To deal with unprecedented situations and the complexity of organizations, surveys enable us to better grasp the ins and outs of a problem, debate different options and then take action. Why not proceed in this way with popular music? Rather than adopting methodologies and managerial concepts whose limitations and patent failure we have already seen, why not investigate the various components of music worlds, its specific infrastructures (transport, communications, etc.), the logistics it requires, the various flows (of data, people, materials), the energy consumed, its buildings, the rules governing them (copyright, for example), the forms of employment, work organization, precariousness, etc.? This first inventory would aim to document the various negative socio-environmental externalities of this world, as detailed above. In the tradition of ecological economics, the aim would be to take into account not only all the environmental externalities of musical activities, but also discrimination, social exploitation and the relationships between these different elements.

### 1. Positive internalities

To understand this galaxy holistically, we also need to take into account the positive experiences that take place within it, what we might call its positive internalities. In several

works, sociologist Joëlle Le Marec has investigated the concern for the public in museums and libraries.<sup>[55]</sup> In each case, she has focused not only on the nature of users' experience, but also on how the practices that take place there constitute common goods and specific forms of knowledge. In a recent book on (public) libraries, for example, she shows that this space is largely dedicated to care: care for the users we welcome and guide to access documents, respect for those who stroll between the shelves, consult a newspaper, a book, access or come in search of a little warmth or coolness depending on the season.<sup>[56]</sup> Care, too, for the documents that librarians cherish and maintain, and that we consult or borrow, without actually owning them. Tact and attention between users and librarians, who respect silence and concentration in the reading rooms. All these discreet but essential forms of attention and care for people and things are undoubtedly also present in music. As far as users are concerned, we could mention the socializing that goes on in the various festival spaces, the reunions between regulars (and managers) in concert halls, the wonder of discovering artists at concerts, the rehearsal rooms where amateur groups play together, the years of enchantment while listening to recorded music, watching videos online, online discussion forums etc. We could also list all the formal and informal exchanges between the animators of venues, labels and websites and users, the activity of technicians, the upkeep and maintenance of venues and electronic networks by thousands of little hands.<sup>[57]</sup> All this attentive work, which holds these artistic worlds together, and the countless forms of pleasure and practical knowledge forged by users, are certainly an essential part of the cultural sector. Moreover, taking this dimension into account is important if we are to counter neo-liberal approaches. Indeed, the denunciation of the inability of public systems to fulfill their missions, for example to ensure cultural democratization (a concept that is, moreover, highly debatable), has been instrumentalized by neoliberals. Under the guise of improving services to the public, they promote managerial methods to the detriment of employees, and privatize cultural structures and public services. This is the route taken by many museums, for example, where marketing and merchandising methods have been employed to the hilt, and the door has been opened to foundations financed by transnational corporations. The example of the Louvre, sponsored by Total Energies and exporting its brand to petro-monarchies, illustrates this drift.<sup>[58]</sup>

By paying attention to care, pleasure and sociability, it seems to me that we're also moving away from a posture that essentially consists in lashing out. Instead of merely documenting the toxicity of a world, we're also striving to account for everything that makes it endearing to those who move in it, everything that makes it (a public) service.

## **2. Situated knowledge**

To carry out such an investigation, we should also pay attention to what Joëlle Le Marec and Hester du Plessis call the knowledge of precariousness or Donna Haraway's situated knowledge.<sup>[59]</sup> Indeed, these authors show that the experience of precarious people and collectives (in various ways) enables situations and issues to be appreciated from a different perspective. The Yellow Vests movement, which started in France in 2018, for example, has shown that in territories (urban, suburban or rural) where public services (schools, post offices, administrations, health services, facilities etc.) have disappeared, getting around by car is less a choice than a constraint. By uniformly applying a carbon tax to all users, we are proceeding as if the SUV user in the city center and the resident of an impoverished area had the same responsibilities. By demonstrating the importance of environmental justice, the Yellow Vests have shown that environmental issues are always social issues, that they are linked and need to be tackled together. The Yellow Vest movement and the recent work of the

Citizens' Climate Convention in France<sup>[60]</sup> illustrate the value of involving lay people in public debates. Placed in a different place from experts and professionals, mobilizing its own experience, lay expertise helps to broaden understanding of problems and build consensus geared towards the common good .

The other lesson of the Yellow Vests movement, and not the least, is that environmental issues can be addressed in non-directly environmental ways. To prevent people from using their individual vehicles, we can reopen train lines closed due to insufficient profitability, finance cooperative grocery stores instead of setting up supermarkets in decentralized areas, stop closing schools and other public services (post offices, etc. etc.), and so on. In other words, public policies geared to the general interest can improve community life and, at the same time, help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. What's true for private cars is also true for tour buses (in rocky areas); rather than reducing the fuel consumption of tour buses, or acquiring electric vehicles (which are very costly and generate a lot of pollution and exploitation), it would undoubtedly be more effective to convince the state and regions to develop trains. Approaching the decarbonization of music from an infrastructural point of view would undoubtedly make it possible to establish alliances with other protagonists and to align one's own interests with the common good. To investigate the music industry, we need not only to document different forms of precariousness and exclusion, but also to carefully gather the point of view of people and collectives who are precarious and prejudiced by it.

### **3. Culture and connections**

Before concluding, let's pause for a moment to consider the specific nature of the cultural and musical sphere. As we have seen on several occasions, a world that infinitely multiplies connections and circulations is doomed, and feeds toxic and increasingly privatized infrastructures. Capitalism is not only based on extracting value from wage labor, but on using the Earth as a (cheap) resource, colonizing territories to enrich others and but to relocate everything.<sup>[61]</sup> This movement has been considerably amplified by recent globalization, which has made it even more opaque where things come from and how they circulate, how they are made, by whom and under what conditions, and how they are predated upon. The complexity and entanglement of value chains and logistics networks make it extremely difficult to know which networks, infrastructures, mobilities, materials and precariousness are involved for a given activity. This difficulty in breaking down activity and consequently transforming it to make it sustainable is in the very nature of the current system. For many analysts and environmental movements, we need to unravel this multiplication of connections and relocalize exchanges, increasing and consolidating the autonomy of people and individuals.

Where things get very complicated is that cultural production and consumption cannot be considered and treated in the same way as food, energy, building materials and natural resources - in short, the usual areas of concern for ecologists.<sup>[62]</sup> Indeed, any culture in the anthropological or artistic sense is fundamentally mobile and connectionist. It is the result of links between people and collectives (more or less) distant in space or time. Every culture is also a compound of other cultures, a hybrid which, whatever its appearances, cannot be reduced to the strictly local: even the most apparently isolated place is itself a compound of several localities. When we look at the provenance of plants described as indigenous to any part of the world, we soon realize that most of them come from elsewhere. In other words, and as the mixtures found in stylistic labels (hardcore pop, grunge folk etc.) remind us, cultural (and musical) productions are the result of hybridizations and mixtures. In other words, connectivity and circulation are generic components of culture, art and music, and can

even be seen as positive internalities. Even before modern (technologies, media and networks), connection, migration and circulation were consubstantial with humanity and life.<sup>[63]</sup>

So what can be done to make cultural goods and exchanges sustainable and free from social predation? How can we radically reorient artistic activities? How do we disconnect them from external infrastructures? How do we get rid of the ravages of modernity without giving up on being modern? And from such a perspective, how do we decide what should be preserved and what should disappear? To avoid authoritarian and/or technocratic modes, the answer is undoubtedly to develop tools for deliberation and to take into account . In this context, the use of surveys, designed and carried out jointly by researchers, professionals, elected representatives and users, and democratic debates can once again help to appreciate and define the type and number of connections that a social world needs, and their sustainability.

## Where to investigate and for whom?

With all this in mind, where and how can we carry out an investigation into the different forms of predation and discrimination, the practices of care and attention, the different types of knowledge and experience specific to these worlds, and the different infrastructures mobilized? Several options are possible.

We could focus on a given territory (a metropolis, a region, for example), or on a specific sector (electronic music festivals, the world of touring), or articulate territorial and stylistic dimensions (techno music in Brittany), or compare two sectors located in the same territory. The choice of territories, places and devices to be studied, and the ways of conducting (and representing) this research could be defined by a group made up of academics, professionals, elected representatives, representatives of environmental NGOs, consumer associations, amateurs / laymen, structures that would finance the research project and activists, associations or structures that have already carried out actions and reflections in the chosen territory. In this context, it would be essential for collectives, structures, groups and individuals already involved in ecological, non-discriminatory, queer or social practices (and all hybrids between these approaches), in the organization of professional or non-professional events (e.g. raves) within the territories and styles investigated, to be included in both the survey design and implementation phases.

In this way, we can take into account the experience of those who have, in a way, already conducted surveys and experimented with sustainable practices. Once the survey has been carried out, the conclusions to be drawn and the decisions to be made could be discussed by a citizens' convention, composed in a hybrid way. The latter could then formulate recommendations aimed at implementing a socio-environmental transformation in this sector. In this configuration (there are certainly others), it would be important for the conditions for implementing the convention's recommendations to be specified and guaranteed right from the start of the process.

Well, if a citizen's convention, bringing together people from all walks of life, was able to establish a diagnosis and define an agenda to get away from fossil fuels in France, why couldn't we do the same for popular music and cultural public policy? Why couldn't one of the most imaginative territories in the world, music, deploy its resources to re-imagine?

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<https://www.midilibre.fr/2022/06/18/canicule-au-hellfest-450-prises-en-charge-par-les-secours-et-15-evacuations-pour-la-premiere-journee-du-festival-10374425.php>. ↑
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<https://reporterre.net/Climat-l-action-individuelle-ne-peut-pas-tout>.  
  
<https://www.carbone4.com/> ↑
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18. <https://tyndall.ac.uk/news/massive-attack-publish-tyndall-centre-climate-change-live-music-roadmap/> [↑](#)
19. The Shift Project is a French think tank dedicated to decarbonating industry. [↑](#)
20. <https://theshiftproject.org/article/decarboner-culture-rapport-2021/> Anaïs Roesch, Fanny Valembois, et Samuel Valensi. Décarbonons la culture. The Shift Project, 2021. The Shift Project's culture team asked me to present my research and discuss their approach before writing the report. [↑](#)
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22. <https://www.fedelima.org/article482.html>. [↑](#)
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24. <https://cnm.fr/le-cnm-a-remis-pour-la-premiere-fois-le-prix-de-linnovation-dans-la-musique-a-3-structures-innovantes/> It's worth noting in passing that the CNM is simultaneously rewarding structures that are preparing the transition of music into the metaverse, a virtual world in which Facebook is investing massively, and projects designed to promote the ecological transition. [↑](#)
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29. <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/160722/le-beton-vert-arme-de-la-transition-ecologique-fait-chou-blanc> [↑](#)
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