Digital Underground: Musical Spaces and Microscenes in the Postindustrial City

David Grazian, University of Pennsylvania
Musical Performance and the Changing City
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David Grazian

INTRODUCTION

The last decades of the twentieth century mark a colossal shift in the organization of metropolitan life, particularly as cities formerly known for industrial manufacturing have transformed into centers of entertainment and cultural production. Downtown areas and their renewed public spaces strongly reflect the urban renaissance experienced by many cities during the 1990s, as illustrated by the rise of shopping malls, flagship stores, branded tourist attractions, and the spectacular excess represented by the new urban nightlife: gilded performing arts centers, themed restaurants, velvet-roped nightclubs, spectator-sports bars, gaming arcades, multiplex theaters, and branded live concert venues from the House of Blues to the Hard Rock Café (Hannigan 1998; Klein 1999; Grazian 2008).

Philadelphia’s downtown district (commonly referred to by locals as Center City) provides a fitting example of this shift in urban culture and public life. A metropolitan world of nonstop entertainment catering to crowds of affluent professionals, business travelers, and international tourists, Center City boasts 713 restaurants, 273 outdoor cafes, and 3,200 retail shops. The number of fine-dining restaurants alone has more than tripled since 1992. Second only to New York among peer cities, Center City also supports nearly 400 arts and cultural organizations, more than the downtowns of Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, or Washington, D.C. In 2011, the city’s downtown nonprofit arts and cultural institutions presented 26,000 performances, classes, and exhibitions to local audiences, including such musical powerhouses as the Opera Company of Philadelphia, the Curtis Institute of Music, and the Pennsylvania Ballet (Center City District and Central Philadelphia Development Corporation 2012).

But while Philadelphia boasts a world-class orchestra, chamber music society, and the longest-running opera house in the United States, a closer look also reveals a host of significantly smaller-bore musical offerings, each buzzing with the sounds of the city’s vibrant youth culture. In the basement and side chapel of a Unitarian church in Center City, a local promoter presents live music by punk rock bands, singer-songwriters, electronic
music composers, and experimental musicians. In the headquarters of a
Ukrainian social club, a local indie rock band performs at its own record-
release party for an audience of fans and friends. In a South Street hipster
dive bar decorated with Pabst Blue Ribbon beer posters, camp and drag
dances performed by a local fringe collective known as the Dumpster Players
feature amateur entertainers in wigs lip-synching to 1980s pop hits by Rick
Springfield, Wham!, A-ha, Berlin, and Tears for Fears.

If today’s postindustrial cities dispense high doses of branded pop
entertainment and elite cultural attractions, they also generate what I call
microscenes: locally bounded yet decentralized do-it-yourself (or DIY)
music scenes where participants gather in repurposed urban spaces to per-
form and enjoy alternative popular music genres such as indie rock, expe-
imental jazz, and underground hip-hop, all while relying on digital media
tools to build a networked community and sustain participation. In
this chapter, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Philadelphia to
document and explain the emergence of a set of indie-rock microscenes
that have developed in recent years alongside more conventional worlds
of musical performance in this and other postindustrial cities.1

STUDYING LOCAL MUSIC SCENES IN THE CITY

Local music scenes are spatial and temporal sites of music performance and
consumption where participants create shared cultural meanings through
sociable face-to-face interaction. Often concentrated in downtown and
neighborhood districts within cities, the continued public vitality of local
scenes in the urban environment highlights how the spatially situated char-
acter of art, culture, and entertainment as focused collective activity
conducted in real time and place has persisted, even in the digital age (Becker
1982; Silver, Clark, and Yanez 2011).

Sociologists and other scholars have long shared an interest in under-
standing the spatial and social worlds of musical performance in the urban
milieu, particularly by exploiting the methodological rewards of ethnog-
raphy (Grazian 2004). During the height of what would become known as
the Chicago School of urban sociology, ethnographic researchers in the
1920s and 1930s delved into the entertainment districts of the city to
uncover their intimate music scenes. Harvey W. Zorbaugh fills The Gold
Coast and the Slum (1929) with firsthand accounts of the social impor-
tance of live musical performance for the diverse residential communities
of Chicago’s Near North Side. In a chapter on the comings and goings of
high society, status-seekers measure their social worth in “invitations to
certain box parties at the opera,” exclusive balls and benefit concerts held
for charity (1929, 50–51), while during his research on Towertown, the
city’s bohemian enclave, Zorbaugh (1929, 102) discovers the jazz musi-
cians and “singing waiters” employed within its commercialized world
of nightclubs and “Paris revues.” Paul G. Cressey (1932) examines the
underworld of the taxi-dance hall, a type of music club popular during the
1920s where men could purchase three-minute dances (and sometimes
more) with attractive female companions at ten cents per song. In Vice
in Chicago, Walter C. Reckless (1933) provides an elaborate mapping of
the city’s Prohibition-era saloons, dance halls, and vaudeville theaters. In
his analysis of the black-and-tan cabarets located in Chicago’s segregated
black neighborhoods, Reckless (1933, 102–103) illustrates how consumers
attach symbolic meaning to the local urban ecology in which they experi-
en live blues and jazz music: “To slumming white patronage the Black
Belt location of cabarets offered atmosphere and the colored man’s music
and patronage added thrill.”

One of the first colloquial uses of the term scene emerged out of the
New York jazz world of the 1940s and 1950s (Bennett and Peterson 2004,
2; Holt 2007, 116), when the city’s celebrated music scenes included the
dense network concentrations of bebop musicians, nightclubs, and after-
hours jam sessions clustered around distinctive midtown blocks along 52nd
Street, uptown streets in Harlem, and downtown places in the West Village
(DeVeaux 1997). Among academic scholars, Ned Polsky (1961) was among
the first sociologists to make use of the concept of “scene” in an ethno-
graphic report for Dissent on the 1960 Beat scene in Greenwich Village.
In later decades the concept of scene gained traction in both sociology and
cultural studies, especially among those exploring the role of geographical
space and place in the production and consumption of popular music. Much
of this work emphasizes how creators and audiences not only produce music
collaboratively in networked art worlds (Becker 1982), but also engage in
sociable collective practices such as boundary work, identity formation,
community building, and meaning making through face-to-face interaction
(Straw 1991; Bennett and Peterson 2004; Hesmondhalgh 2005).

MUSIC SCENES IN THE POSTINDUSTRIAL CITY

Today, researchers working in sociology, ethnomusicology, cultural studies
and related fields emphasize the distinctiveness of contemporary scenes in
the changing postindustrial metropolis. First, while music scenes continue
to be defined by a spatially concentrated infrastructure made up of clusters
of venues and other performance spaces along with supportive industry
links such as record labels and music shops (Lena 2012), in postindustrial
cities scenes often emerge in spatially peripheral neighborhoods undergoing
early stages of gentrification, and serve as sites for artistic risk-taking, lifestyle
experimentation, and the performance of niche subgenres of alternative
popular music from free jazz to indie rock. Often hotspots of rebellious
youth culture, these music scenes include the new wave and punk under-
ground of New York City’s Lower East Side during the late 1970s (Hoban
a result, music scenes in the postindustrial city have needed to rely on the
tools of the digital age from blogs to smartphone texting as a means of
mediating social relations and coordinating participation among musicians
and audiences alike.

FROM MUSIC SCENES TO MICROSCENES

In the postindustrial city, music scenes are distinctive for their development
in peripheral neighborhoods undergoing early stages of gentrification;
relationship to global and translocal cultural and economic flows; and reliance
on digital technologies as a tool for coordinating collaborative participation.
Yet while music scenes are obviously crucial fixures of urban culture
in the contemporary metropolis, the last several years have also given rise
to the emergence of what I call microscenes in the postindustrial urban
milieu. Like other postindustrial music scenes, they involve small groups
of digitally networked participants of young adults that perform and consume
niche subgenres of alternative popular music, particularly variants of indie
rock, experimental jazz, and underground hip-hop. But microscenes are
distinctive for three reasons. First, while scenes cluster around sets of music
venues, record labels, and other infrastructural elements of musical produc-
tion and consumption in neighborhood entertainment zones, microscenes
tend toward spatial decentralization within cities, appearing sporadically
in repurposed venues among a variety of different gentrifying neighborhoods.
For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, New York’s “loft jazz”
scene brought avant-garde musicians and die-hard fans together for spir-
ited small-scale concerts and experimental recording sessions held in gritty
storefronts, seedy basements, and most famously in converted industrial
lofts in downtown neighborhoods spread throughout Lower Manhattan—
the East Village, SoHo, the Bowery, and the Lower East Side (Zukin 1982,
118; Gendron 2006, 48–51). Second, microscenes tend to be DIY-based
and created almost entirely outside the context of (and often in defiance
opposition to) the dominant music industry, much in the same way that
experimental loft jazz evolved outside of the context of the mainstream
commercial market (Anderson 2002), and hip-hop developed in poor black
neighborhoods in the Bronx in the late 1970s (Chang 2005). Finally, unlike
the international rave scene, with its networked circuits of global connectivity,
microscenes are more oriented toward local cultural dynamics and pro-
cesses, attuned to issues specific to their own provincial social worlds.

To illustrate the inner workings of microscenes in the postindustrial city,
I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among a set of indie rock
microscenes that emerged in Philadelphia during the late 1990s and 2000s,
many of which continue to thrive years later with the help of social media
platforms, online blogs, and related digital technologies. During 2001–2005,
I conducted participant observation in several of Philadelphia’s nightlife
districts, paying visits to over 175 downtown entertainment spots, including nightclubs, rock and jazz venues, and private social clubs. Throughout this research, I was able to conduct both formal interviews and casual conversations with a variety of stakeholders and participants in the city’s nightlife landscape, including musicians, promoters, DJs, entertainment journalists, and audience members. For the four-year duration of this intensive fieldwork, I resided in the city’s central downtown district, where I had convenient access to many of the gentrifying neighborhoods where microscenes emerge in Philadelphia. (For additional details on this research, see Grazian 2008, 237–242.) For a subsequent stage of fieldwork, from 2005–2007 I lived in a loft in a converted textile factory amid a number of surrounding deindustrialized areas undergoing varying stages of rehabilitation, including Callowhill, Spring Garden, Poplar, and Northern Liberties, from which I was able to conduct follow-up research on an ongoing basis.

MAKING THE MICROSCENE

Cities make ideal incubators for the generation of microscenes and other outposts of alternative art, culture, and entertainment. The massive and anonymous crowds of residents, commuters, and visitors that flood high-density urban downtowns give city dwellers the incentive to pull together into a multiplicity of microsocial groups that serve as protective pockets of intimacy and camaraderie (Wirth 1938; Fischer 1975). The racial, ethnic, and lifestyle diversity of urban populations also ensures variety among microscenes, while the human density of heterogeneous residents tightly sequestered in local mixed-income neighborhoods bolsters the intensity of such small-bore social worlds. The large populations of cities also supply urban microscenes with a critical mass of participants necessary for their vitality and longevity over time (Fischer 1975).

Cities also attract an increasing number of young singles, and many of them live alone and thus seek out intimacy and sociability in public spaces in the city, such as that afforded by urban microscenes (Watters 2003; Klinenberg 2012). These young people include musicians, artists, writers, and other freelance creative workers working in mercurial fields within the postindustrial symbolic economy, such as graphic design, software and website development, digital journalism, and mass-media production (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). These artistic and cultural workers possess high levels of both subcultural taste and nocturnal capital (Thornton 1996; Grazian 2003) and therefore value nonconventional art and entertainment, including the eclectic indie rock music performed in local microscenes.

In addition to their subaltern tastes, these young, unmarried city dwellers often draw on their active participation in urban cultural settings as opportunities to experiment with various lifestyle behaviors and modes of public expressiveness (Grazian 2008). The defining feature of contemporary youth and adolescence is the postponement of numerous life-course events marking the transition to adulthood as young people complete their educations later; take longer to achieve stable and permanent employment; and marry and bear children at later ages (Cherlin 1992; Furstenberg 2000; Rosenfeld 2009). This suggests a lengthening of the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood in recent decades, one which developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (1994; 2000; Arnett and Taber 1994) characterizes as a stage of emerging adulthood, an elongated period of gradual human development in which young people spend their late teens and twenties exploring life’s possibilities through role experimentation and an increased exploration of one’s cultural proclivities, sexual preferences, and other lifestyle choices. In particular, young people gravitate toward local scenes of urban nightlife (micro- or otherwise) where they can engage in such explorations by not only consuming edgy styles of music, art and entertainment, but also by drafting and inhabiting nocturnal selves, or sets of public identities and personalities employed while negotiating the city at night (Grazian 2003, 21; Grazian 2008, 24).

This makes Philadelphia an ideal city in which to observe the cultural emergence of microscenes in the postindustrial age. The fifth-largest city in the United States, Philadelphia has a racially and ethnically diverse population of over 1.5 million people. Recently Forbes magazine named Philadelphia the tenth-best U.S. city for singles (Sherman 2009), in part because its Center City boasts a young and educated population, with over a third (33 percent) of its residents between 25 and 34 years old, 86 percent of whom are college graduates (Center City District and Central Philadelphia Development Corporation 2011, 5). Many of these young people intern or work in entry-level jobs in the city’s growing media-intensive creative sector. (In fact, some of the most active participants in Philadelphia’s microscenes also work for a variety of media organizations in the city, including local radio stations, alternative weekly newspapers, and online blogs.) They make for a ripe audience for Philadelphia’s eclectic indie culture and entertainment offerings, especially given the city’s abundance of funky gallery spaces, tiny music venues, BYOB restaurants, arthouse movie theaters, speakeasies and dive bars, and alternative performing arts festivals. They share their zeal with over 118,000 college and university students who attend school in and around Center City, including students enrolled in local art colleges (Art Institute of Philadelphia, Moore College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) and music conservatories (Academy of Vocal Arts, Curtis Institute of Music), all of whom make up a sizable proportion of the potential audience for the city’s microscenes, and some of its creators as well (Center City District and Central Philadelphia Development Corporation 2012, 15 and 18).

Of course, many of the city’s microscene participants are also financially strapped musicians and artists priced out of more opulent and prohibitively expensive cultural hotspots like San Francisco and New York City, and thus
attracted to Philadelphia’s relative affordability (Currid 2007). In fact, indie rock musicians commonly migrate from New York to Philadelphia not only to partake in its flourishing worlds of quirky artistic experimentation, but also to take advantage of its less expensive rents; available studio space in defunct industrial buildings in derelict neighborhoods; and a cost of living that is 37 percent lower than in New York (Pressler 2005; 2006). For this reason, Philadelphia has been described as New York’s “sixth borough”; according to Daniel Matz, a member of the indie rock band Windsor for the Derby:

“New York is mythologically all about vibrancy and creativity, but it’s hard to work a 40-hour week and come home and be Jackson Pollock,” said Mr. Matz, 32, a guitarist. He said that by living in Philadelphia he could support himself teaching public school and devote the rest of his time to his band. (Pressler 2005)

The affordability of “second cities” (Hodos 2007) like Philadelphia gives musicians the freedom to explore avant-garde and other non-mainstream styles of music performance despite their less-than-remunerative possibilities. Given the attractiveness of low-rent apartments and studios spaces in Philadelphia among young musicians and artists, microscenes tend to develop in a scattered pattern among burgeoning bohemian districts spread throughout the city, such as Northern Liberties, Poplar, Fishtown, Callowhill, Spring Garden, West Philadelphia, and other grungy pockets of the city undergoing varying stages of gentrification. The affordability of these neighborhoods is matched by the glamour that artistic scenemakers and their hipster fans attach to the grittiness of urban dilapidation and decaying fringe in the postindustrial city (Grazian 2003; Lloyd 2005; Zukin 2010). In fact, local music scenes often develop in mixed-income areas in transition featuring a tolerance for unconventional behavior, racial and sexual diversity, and late-night noise (Lena 2012, 36).

MUSICAL NICHES AND MICROTASTES

Microscenes often develop around diverse sets of obscure musical niches within the larger popular music soundscape. In Philadelphia, DIY microscene promoters themselves categorize the music they support as “indie,” “alternative,” and “underground,” with all the ideological and stylistic overtones such labels suggest, including a value placed on the presumed “authenticity” and integrity of the artist and their music (Peterson 1997; McLeod 1999; Roy 2002; Grazian 2003); a fondness for arcane records, B-sides, and other cultural rarities; and a rejection of much mainstream “pop” music and the commercial market contexts in which pop is conventionally produced and disseminated, from corporate-sponsored concerts to slickly produced television ads (Thornton 1996; Sharlet 2003; Klein 2009). At the Northern Liberties nightclub Silk

City, a DJ collective promises audiences in its promotional materials that they “can expect to hear a variety of stuff we’ve salvaged from the dregs of obscurity, from new wave schlock to girls who rock, electro-junk to gypsy punk, and just about everything else in between.”

At the same time, musical performances often reveal wildly idiosyncratic tastes among the participants of local microscenes. On another night at Silk City, a local band covers the 1970 Velvet Underground album Loaded in its entirety. At the 700 Club in the same neighborhood, a local DJ annually plays recordings exclusively by the 1980s British band the Smiths and its lead singer, Morrissey, in honor of his birthday (Morrissey’s, that is—not the DJs) every May 22nd. At a revolving set of nightspots around the city, Sugar Town events feature exclusively women-led or else transgender indie rock bands. On one occasion featuring performances by Philadelphia drag queens, local rock singer Helen Back (née Jimi Mooney) performs covers of punk and glam-rock hits by the New York Dolls, the Clash, T. Rex, and the Modern Lovers in a black wig, mini-dress, and torn stockings.

In addition, the intense subgenre differentiation within indie rock music itself encourages the proliferation of microscenes in Philadelphia. Fragmentary and eclectic in nature, indie rock captures an extraordinarily wide sonic terrain, from hardcore punk to experimental psychedelic music to alternative country-rock. As in the rock world more generally, local indie rock performers and consumers often embrace this dizzyingly eclecticism (Regev 1994). At Silk City, the promoters of a “Death Disco” show advertise their DJ event as one offering “an alternative side...postpunk, no wave, psych, acid house, industrial, new beat, experimental electronic & stuff in-between...” As local indie rock promoter Sara Sherr observes of the diversity and niche quality of microscenes in the city, “There are so many different kinds of audiences for rock, and there are so many different genres within rock.”

Moreover, many of Philadelphia’s microscenes developed out of a perceived need to cater to audiences alienated by live music offerings promoted at for-profit downtown venues in the city, particularly those considered too “mainstream” or “commercial.” According to Maria Tessa Sciarro, another local indie rock promoter, “We saw that there was this need for something else in the city, another place for bands to play and perhaps to develop some of those bands that we really liked.” Ben Morgan, a one-time music promoter of mostly punk and heavy metal bands at the Mill Creek Tavern in West Philadelphia, agrees: “I think all of us...are dealing with a particular niche of music that’s focused on young people and being creative.”

THE TRANSFORMATION OF URBAN SPACES

Postindustrial cities commonly experience the process of urban gentrification through transformations in land and property use, particularly as decommissioned industrial spaces such as manufacturing plants, small factories,
waterfront ports, and warehouses are repurposed as middle- and upper-income housing and entertainment spaces. As noted previously, during the 1960s and 1970s New York artists associated with the experimental loft jazz movement performed in former industrial spaces in Lower Manhattan instead of more traditional nightclubs or concert venues (Zukin 1982, 118; Gendron 2006, 51–55), and during the 1980s and 1990s rave promoters held underground dance parties in abandoned factories and warehouses in dilapidated neighborhoods in former industrial metropolitan areas (Reynolds 1999). In the 1990s and 2000s, event promoters hosted rock concerts in old factory buildings and drained-out public pools in the gentrifying New York City neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn (Zukin 2010). Similarly, a surplus of decaying buildings ripe for conversion has helped fuel an artistic renaissance in Philadelphia (Pressler 2006), where musicians and microscene promoters can inexpensively repurpose blighted properties as studios and live exhibition spaces.

Just as once-debilitated lofts can be repurposed for music performances, so too can ethnic institutions such as union halls and social clubs once strongly identified with the traditional cultures of their surrounding immigrant communities be repurposed for more contemporary indie rock concerts and other live performances. In Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood, Phyllis' Musical Inn, a Polish tavern dating back to its 1950s-era polka parties, has featured a roster of punk and indie rock artists since the 1980s (Lloyd 2005). In Philadelphia, indie rock bands perform at the club headquarters of the Ukrainian American Citizens Association in the Poplar neighborhood of North Philadelphia. In nearby Northern Liberties, the Russian-Ukrainian Boating Association, or RUBA Club, similarly hosts concerts, cabarets, karaoke parties, and young bohemian crowds of late-night indie rock fans.

The attractiveness of the RUBA Club lies in its inexpensive rental fees for ad-hoc parties and music performances. In an age where success in the creative industries requires artists to engage in "entrepreneurial labor" by investing capital in the management of their own careers (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005), indie rock musicians increasingly bear responsibility to book, bankroll, and promote their own shows. The appropriation and repurposing of devalued (and thus inexpensive) spaces for performances makes such risky entrepreneurial efforts possible, and the availability of such makeshift venues allows otherwise amateur microscene participants to try their hand at promoting DIY indie rock shows. For instance, although today he is a successful Philadelphia indie rock impresario who presents concerts in a hall that accommodates a thousand people, for years college dropout Sean Agnew booked his concerts in small, repurposed industrial spaces. "I never intended to make this a career or a job or even anything more than a very, very, very part-time hobby. I just started doing shows for friends' bands and bands that I wanted to see playing in Philadelphia, in a small warehouse in Philadelphia—it was basically a garage. You know, it was at the bare-bottom-bones level, friends playing in a garage" (Sean Agnew, fieldnotes 2005).

Eventually, Agnew switched his operation, R5 Productions (named for a former commuter rail line connecting the city's wealthy Main Line suburbs to Center City), to a more stable although no less repurposed music venue: the basement and side chapel of Philadelphia's First Unitarian Church. Like ethnic social clubs and union halls, churches and other community centers provide inexpensive rental locations for one-off indie rock performances, and unlike warehouses and garages they are typically designed for hosting large public gatherings. Still, this hardly makes such repurposed spaces ideal rock venues. As Agnew says of his church basement events: "Our shows take place in a room where it's just the stage—nothing else. We have to bring in a PA [sound system], we have to bring in staff, we have to bring in drinks, beer, catering. Every single day it's the whole entire process of carrying this huge sound system up and down stairs" (Sean Agnew, fieldnotes 2005).

However, one obvious benefit of relying on repurposed spaces for live music performances is that they often welcome young listeners who may not have access to more conventional for-profit rock clubs with liquor licenses that prohibit entry to minors under 18 or 21 years of age, at least in the United States. Agnew's shows at the First Unitarian Church generally admit all-ages audiences, as do a circuit of residential addresses in West Philadelphia that host the city's vibrant "house show" microscene. An illustration of the city's DIY urban culture, young people transform their shared residences into underground performance spaces for local and regional indie rock bands and their fans. According to Johann Diedrick, a student journalist writing in 2007 for 34th Street, the arts and culture magazine of The Daily Pennsylvanian, a local college newspaper:

Located in a quaint residential area, the Danger! Danger! house seems unremarkable on the corner of 47th Street and Warrington Avenue. But behind the unassuming facade is one of the most popular venues of West Philly's burgeoning house show scene. The seven residents, whose history together stretches as far back as middle school, have become seasoned concert promoters. On February 16 and 17, after months of meticulous planning, coordination and preparation, they hosted the two-day Aquarius Fest. For the second year in a row, the festival brings over 20 bands to their living room and basement... Russell Brodie, unofficial house spokesman and member of in-house band Grandchildren, spearheaded this ambitious project. "I just started inviting bands that I had been hearing a lot about," Brodie said. "It was like trying to put together a regional showcase..."

On Friday night, Danger! Danger! housemates welcome anyone wandering in with warm smiles. "All donations go to touring bands, so please give as much as you can. Take stickers, take buttons, and take some of these bagels."... Long time regulars arrive to find a completely renovated basement. Lime green now clashes with lavender
and violet on the freshly painted walls. A mosaic-like fence, painted in the same colors, protects the PVC pipes from the often raucous crowds. Stickers from local promoter Badmaster are posted alongside random graffiti tags and scribbles on vents and ceilings.” (Diedrick 2007)

This and other West Philadelphia microscenes illustrate how urban spaces like residential basements and living rooms can become repurposed as entertainment venues in the postindustrial city. Similarly, from Minneapolis to Oakland “punk houses” serve as shared habitats for collaborative living and hosting do-it-yourself music performances. Sporting names such as Scribble Squat, Collective A Go-Go, and Firebreathing Kangaroo, punk houses allow musicians to live cheaply while making experimental music alongside like-minded artists, political activists, and hipsters (Green 2008; Hix 2008).

The transformation of urban spaces into microscenes also extends to more established performance settings. As noted above, unlike more canonical popular musical styles like Chicago’s postwar urban blues (Grazian 2003), indie rock represents an amorphous mix of subgenres and stylistic varieties. Since the taste communities associated with these musical styles may lack the critical mass of consumers necessary to fill the city’s more cavernous venues, local promoters often acquire low-capacity bars, taverns and other compact nightlife spaces for weekly or monthly performances, while others may secure small microspaces within larger nightlife establishments. In Philadelphia, these spaces include the Balcony, the decrepit second-floor club of Chinatown’s Trocadero Theater (a former 1870s opera house), and once included the third floor of Doc Watson’s, a currently defunct downtown pub. As Sherr explains: “In Philadelphia there are just not that many clubs, especially when you look at towns like Austin or places like that, so there are really a limited amount of spaces to do things. So, as an independent person you have to go into these different spaces and see if you can work there, because it’s hard to open up your own club in Philadelphia. You have to rely on spaces that are willing to work with you.”

THE RISE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Microscenes in Philadelphia owe their success and (albeit limited) popularity to the technological advances in digital media over the last two decades, including the spread of Internet access and usage; the democratization of webpage design software; the online distribution of streaming audio and video; and the proliferation of music blogs, webzines, discussion boards, and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr (Holt 2011).

First, microscene promoters regularly rely on locally-based online networks to publicize and generate audience support for their shows. In Philadelphia, the earliest of these lists began as a set of friendship circles that organically developed around the growth of the microscene. In June 1999, Sherr (along with Megan Geckler) started Dummysown, a local email listserv designed, according to its Facebook and Yahoo! Groups profiles, to “promote conversation among a group of people and friends living in Dummysown AKA Philadelphia.” They invited participants to “feel free to talk about upcoming music concerts/shows, art openings/shows, films or gossip,” provided such topics be “Philadelphia-related or on-topic with current group discussions.” According to one early participant, “By today’s standards, it was essentially a primitive hyperlocal social networking experiment—like Facebook strung together with two tin cans and twine. Philly’s hipsterati (we still considered ourselves scenesters back then) exchanged idle chatter, fought, ragged, fawned and made fools of themselves from the safety of a dial-up connection” (Keefe 2008).

During the early to mid-2000s, local email listservs like Dummysown served as efficient online tools for Sherr and other promoters to publicize small concerts and other indie-rock performances to networks of microscene participants living in the city, especially early in the decade. More recently, social media sites, video blogs, and webzines embedded within the indie rock cybersphere have been far more influential as online promotional tools for contemporary microscenes (Holt 2011). Again, according to student journalist Johann Diedrick (2007):

Along with posters and flyers, the West Philadelphia Do-It-Yourself (DIY) scene owes a lot of its success to online networking. MySpace has been the obvious medium, with its ease of use, bulletin board system, and essential music pages. It has become an amazing tool, connecting venues to bands to fans. Quick previews of the bands that will be performing on a given night make or break attendance, and bands show little restraint in spamming comment-walls with digital advertisements for upcoming shows that link to their own page. The Internet has brought in bigger crowds, and it's also helped make a cohesive community out of a number of scattered, informal venues.

The best example may be Chris Conaway’s DIY Philly MySpace page, which pools information about house shows onto a single page. At first, he saw the site as a useful way to plan his evenings. “I was tired of deciding against conflicting shows on either side of West Philly. This would help me and others know what houses would be having shows and events on a given night.” This West Philly “community calendar” has allowed other houses to coordinate performances by avoiding overlap. His site is a modern day kitchen refrigerator, where bands and promoters can tack electronic Post-it notes by way of MySpace comments and Photoshopped flyers.

Notably, since the late 2000s MySpace usage has sharply declined, and today microscene promoters are far more likely to rely on contemporary social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to publicize local music
performances, as well as more Philadelphia-focused online sites. Moreover, music artists promote themselves directly to their fans through platforms such as Facebook, Bandcamp, and Tumblr, as well as crowdfunding sites such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo. According to Sciarrino, “Many bands have stopped using traditional methods of publicizing their shows (e.g. posters or handbills), relying on Facebook event invites and using the RSVP numbers to gauge the potential success or failure of an event” (Maria Tessa Sciarrino, personal communication with author 2012).

Perhaps not surprisingly, indie rock promoters increasingly use digital tools not merely to publicize their events, but also to recruit and appraise promising bands and other musical acts. Whereas a generation ago booking agents would have relied on demo cassettes and compact discs or else in-person auditions, today music gatekeepers depend almost entirely on a combination of electronic press kits, social media profiles, dedicated band websites, video blogs, and downloadable digital music files. In addition to their technological efficiency and convenience, the promoters of small-bore microscenes appreciate the rising popularity of digital media since their operations often lack the organizational infrastructure common among more established for-profit culture-industry firms, which may include resources as simple as office space equipped with dedicated phone lines. As Ben Morgan admits, “I have no office; I book on my computer at home. So I like links to websites, MP3s; that’s what I prefer.” One might argue that increased access to digital technologies from live music blogs to social media platforms has democratized the industry of music promotions as a whole, thus allowing even more microscenes to flourish in the postindustrial city.

COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH MICROSCENES

Microscene promoters in Philadelphia emphasize a need to build collective solidarity around their DIY events, as illustrated by the lengths they will go to prioritize booking musicians who demonstrate their commitment to the vitality of the scene. According to Sean Agnew:

If it’s someone I recognize coming to the shows, someone that’s a frequent customer or guest, or show attendee, then I am much more willing to try to go out of my way and help them, knowing that they are there to support it, and that their intentions are really genuine. It is something that they actually like and enjoy. I am much more willing to help them out. (Sean Agnew, fieldnotes 2005)

Other local promoters agree. According to Ben Morgan, “I want to help people that are supporting me, and the people that come to my club are the people who get booked the quickest, ultimately.” Forswearing the kind of instrumentalist orientation one might commonly associate with industry-based music promotion, Morgan insists that his eagerness to reward loyal

scene followers derives from his own aspirations to build a viable sense of community among young local music fans:

I am not the ambitious guy, that’s not me. I am more into building up from the grassroots. I’m definitely booking shows to help. Ultimately my bands might hopefully help me to create a more positive scene. I come from Portland, Oregon, and when I was growing up in high school the places I felt accepted and really happy for the first time were in the local music scene, all-ages and stuff going on in the early ‘90s there. So it always kind of stuck with me. I’ve always thought that was very important for a city. It’s always been a big part of my life to be involved in the community of bands and shows. So that’s basically why I am doing it. (Ben Morgan, fieldnotes 2005)

This appetite for generating group solidarity from the ground up can be infectious, and often local artists and musicians volunteer their own time and labor to contribute to microscenes in which they enjoy some level of participation. According to Sara Sherr:

We’ve had this local artist who would make these amazing, just really eye-catching, beautiful fliers for us, and I think he didn’t want to be paid. Well, a couple of times I think we did pay him, other times we were just, like, you can get into the show for free. And he was just just into doing it. (Sara Sherr, conversation with author, fieldnotes 2005)

Microscene promoters are also motivated to create a safe space where ornately tattooed and pierced indie-rock musicians and fans representing various lifestyles and sexual persuasions will feel welcome rather than ostracized or out of place, as they might in more normative entertainment spaces in Philadelphia’s Center City, such as the high-end martini bars and cocktail lounges frequented by business travelers and affluent tourists in ritzy downtown districts like Rittenhouse Square (Grazian 2008). Again, according to Sherr:

We are doing this for the love of the music, the love of the bands. We want to make people comfortable when they come in and out. A big issue at a lot of places has to do with how their staff treats people. People who are not part of mainstream culture... they are treated hostilely in different bars... Indie rock bands go into other bars and they don’t feel comfortable. They feel like because they are different from whatever is going on there that they are treated hostilely. So it’s important for us to set up a safe space for them. (Sara Sherr, conversation with author, fieldnotes 2005)

However, microscenes not only depend on the loyalty, devotion, and camaraderie offered by local musicians, but their social capital as well, as measured by the sheer numbers of fans, friends, and acquaintances that they
can draw to their performances to keep the microscene financially afloat as well as culturally relevant. According to Maria Tessa Sciarrino, this may impact whom she ultimately hires for local gigs:

As far as what makes us book one band over the other when we have a show? For us, because we are small and we don't have a set venue or anything, we really depend on the band to help bring out the audience. So if you can't bring about twenty people for us, it's really not going to be any benefit to put you on a bill... [My partner] and I both have day jobs and when we lose money on a show, it comes right out of our pockets. We don't have a fund, we do this as a hobby—but we still take it seriously. (Maria Tessa Sciarrino, fieldnotes 2005)

The hard truth is that microscenes are generally shoestring operations that can only be sustained by the kindness and enthusiasm of participants willing to attend events on a regular basis, and in doing so financially contribute to the overhead costs of renting performance space, paying for a website or other promotional tools, and covering performers' expenses.

MICROSCENES AND META-EVENTS

Despite the community-building ethos shared among these microscene promoters, Philadelphia’s indie-rock landscape as a whole, with its numerous and varied microscenes, is a far more complicated affair. Like all art worlds and cultural fields, it is finely differentiated on the basis of taste, cultural capital, symbolic status, and division of labor (Becker 1982; Bourdieu 1993; Thornton 1996). Consequently, a number of well-intentioned musical events have emerged as self-conscious interventions aimed at mending community within the fragmented local indie-rock world by bringing microscenes together; channeling competitiveness among microscene participants toward prosocial ends; and augmenting the status of women in the city’s many microscenes. Organized in the same fashion as microscenes—as intensely hyperlocal, spatially decentralized, and unabashedly do-it-yourself—these events additionally present to participants a kind of commentary on the nature of social relations within the local indie-music scene as a whole. I therefore refer to them as not merely microscenes, but **meta-events**.

ROCK LOTTO AND POP QUIZ

One year in late December, 30 indie-rock musicians convened on the second floor of the Khyber, a local music venue, where Rock Lotto organizers randomly arranged these relative strangers into groups from which they would create new rock bands from scratch. Over the next six weeks they each did all the things newly formed garage bands do: they thought up a name, developed a specific style and sound, wrote and rehearsed songs, invented themselves anew. By the end of January, these bands reconvened and proved their mettle in a head-to-head competition where they each performed 15 minutes-worth of material for a chance to win prize money and studio recording time. They had funny names—Buddy, the Camp Davids, Billy D & the Colt 45s, Deep Chester—but by night’s end they had sufficiently impressed the judges and the audience with their enthusiastic performances (Deep Chester had t-shirts printed up for the occasion), and in the ensuing months the winning band—Buddy—would even continue to perform under their Rock Lotto name.

Rock Lotto is an event designed specifically to bring together participants from the city’s many microscenes that might otherwise never attend the same concerts as spectators, much less perform onstage with one another. According to Maria Tessa Sciarrino, one of Rock Lotto’s chief organizers, Philadelphia’s indie rock world is strikingly fragmented on the basis of sub-genre and musical taste, and Rock Lotto provides a context where the city’s musicians might intermingle:

You can consider indie rock this big circle, but then there are smaller circles within it that will overlap, but sometimes those people really don’t... And there are certain kinds of things, like the people who are really into folk and psychedelic, that sort of scene: They kind of hang out with each other, and then there are the more traditional indie-rock kids who like Pavement or Superchunk or Spoon—they kind of stick together. And then you’ve got the hardcore scene happening... If you sat down and thought about it, you could separate these kids out into specific groups.

One of the big problems about the scene here is that it’s very cliquish and divided, and it just doesn’t really intersect. And I found that maybe a way to make them intersect was to just force them together, you know... It’s a way to put them together in ways they wouldn’t expect. (Maria Tessa Sciarrino, conversation with author, fieldnotes 2005)

Sciarrino therefore hopes that Rock Lotto might succeed in generating solidarity and camaraderie among the city’s indie-rock microscenes:

I do consider it community building... There are these groups of people that don’t really hang out with each other, but are all really interested in the same thing, so why can’t they all be together?... And I guess it does build community, because I know that with some of the bands it’s forged relationships that probably would not have existed before. (Maria Tessa Sciarrino, conversation with author, fieldnotes 2005)

As an accelerated exercise in the collective enterprise of music making through the imagination of artistic identity, Rock Lotto is not only a successful community-building exercise: it is a **meta-event**, a ritualistic
mediation on the performance of rock as reinvention. It packages the conventional narrative of an indie rock band’s genesis and path to stardom (or oblivion), all in an abbreviated manner that can be observed in real time. As Sciarrino observes, "I think it’s a really good commentary on the life of a band... The neat thing about Rock Lotto is that it compresses all of that into six weeks. I think it is sort of a commentary on the state of a band." (Ibid.)

Of course, Rock Lotto is not merely a showcase for freshly formed bands, but a contest as well; it takes the competitive and status-conscious nature of the indie-rock scene in Philadelphia and ritualizes it through its own Battle of the Bands. Like reality-television shows like American Idol, Rock Lotto turns musical performance into dramatic sport, a game with one winner and many losers (Grazian 2010). But another way to think about Rock Lotto is that it channels the latent competitiveness that already exists within the local indie-rock world into a sociable occasion, an act of communion—as does a similarly self-conscious meta-event held at the Khyber, Pop Quiz. A wagered competition hosted by local music guru Bethany Klein and Butch Sweaters and modeled after the trivia quizzes regularly held at pubs throughout the city, Pop Quiz pits teams of music journalists and critics, disc jockeys, musicians, and die-hard fans against one another as they test their geek-chic knowledge of pop culture arcana, such as the eventual name chosen by the 1960s British band Johnny and the Moondogs (the Beatles); what CBGB stands for (Country Bluegrass Blues); the boxer celebrated in the 1975 Bob Dylan song “Hurricane” (Rubin “Hurricane” Carter); and the exact “day the music died,” as referenced in the 1971 hit “American Pie” by Don McLean (February 3, 1959, when early-rock pioneers Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson, Jr., perished together in a fatal plane crash over Iowa). Pop Quiz cleverly ritualizes the barroom chatter common among rock fanatics who compete for bragging rights over the slightest bits of trivia knowledge, and elevates those interactions to the level of organized play for high stakes. At the same time, it manages to direct such public combativeness toward prosocial ends: like Rock Lotto, Pop Quiz provides an environment where a diverse array of microscene participants can socialize while sharing their musical obsessions.

SUGAR TOWN

Yet a sad irony remains: although women serve as organizers for both Rock Lotto and Pop Quiz, neither female musicians nor fans tend to participate much in these events, as is in keeping with the city’s gender-segregated indie-rock microscenes more generally. According to Sciarrino, "I would say that fewer women are likely to go out to see a show than guys... even though I think there are a lot of women who are really interested in music." According to Wendy Fonorow’s (1996: 37) research in Great Britain during the mid-1990s and verified by my own fieldwork in Philadelphia, women consistently make up 35 percent of the audience or less at indie-rock shows, and it is not uncommon to see women standing off to the periphery of the viewing area, avoiding the thrashing and slam dancing often displayed in male-dominated concert settings. Female indie-rock band members commonly find themselves pigeonholed in feminized supporting roles, whether by playing bass guitar or keyboards, or singing backing vocals (Clawson 1999), and even female promoters and club booking agents complain that male rock musicians often denigrate them as either know-nothings or sex objects (Grazian 2008, 178–180). The poor treatment of women in the local indie-rock world and frequent exclusion from its microscenes challenge the extent to which such social groupings can truly be considered communities of shared common concern among a diverse yet unified collective of individuals (Grazian 2009).

To combat the alienation that young women often experience in the city’s indie-rock world, in 2002 Sherr and Sciarrino (along with MJ Fine) began the aforementioned Sugar Town, a rotating monthly event explicitly designed to counter sexism in the scene by promoting women in rock bands while creating a sanctuary for female music fans. As noted above, Sugar Town hosts women-led and transgender rock and pop bands who perform at Philadelphia clubs from Chinatown to Fishtown to South Street. At any given performance Sugar Town features local and national female acts that challenge normative gender stereotypes borne out of traditionally masculine rock genres (Gottlieb and Wald 1994; Reynolds and Press 1995; Bayton 1998). In between sets, feminist activists pass out anti-rape literature to a predominantly female crowd, and DJs spin records by women artists.

While emphasizing community building among local women in rock, as a meta-event Sugar Town simultaneously provides a not-so-subtle commentary on the second-class status of women in the rock world more generally, and in Philadelphia in particular. As Sciarrino explains, Sugar Town contributes to “making women a priority when it comes to music in this city... part of this whole pro-woman movement in Philadelphia.” Sherr agrees that Sugar Town—a name borrowed from the title of a 1966 Nancy Sinatra record about a heavenly place where one can “lay right down here in the grass, and pretty soon all troubles will pass”—continues to serve as a necessary refuge for female musicians and audiences alike, to promising effect (Grazian 2008, 188). In fact, since Sugar Town’s founding in the early 2000s, Philadelphia has seen the emergence of several other rock-oriented feminist organizations such as Girls Rock Philly, Permanent Wave Philly, and Riot Grrrl Philadelphia, as well as a dramatic increase in female participation (if not parity relative to men) in local indie-rock bands (Sara Sherr,
personal communication with author 2012). By creating a place for community building and consciousness-raising among women in the city's rock world while explicitly critiquing the gender dynamics still at play within Philadelphia's local microscenes, Sugar Town continues to illustrate how meta-events serve both expressive and sociable ends for their participants.

CONCLUSION

In recent decades, cities have seen a fundamental shift in the organization of urban culture and public life, particularly as former manufacturing centers have transitioned into capitals of cultural production. With its booming restaurant scene and world-class performing arts corridor, Philadelphia's downtown core provides a fitting example of these changes in the essence of city life. But if the contemporary postindustrial metropolis emphasizes branded entertainment and elite arts attractions, they also generate a wealth of scattered microscenes where much of the cultural vitality of the city lives and breathes.

Like other postindustrial music scenes, microscenes involve small groups of digitally networked participants of young people who perform and enjoy subgenres of alternative popular music, particularly variants of indie rock, experimental jazz, and underground hip-hop. Yet microscenes are nevertheless distinctive. While scenes cluster around sets of music venues, record labels, and other infrastructural elements of musical production and consumption in neighborhood entertainment zones, microscenes tend toward spatial decentralization within cities, appearing sporadically in repurposed venues among a variety of gentrifying neighborhoods. Microscenes tend to be DIY-based and created almost entirely outside the context of the commercial music industry. Finally, microscenes are more oriented toward local cultural dynamics, attendant to issues specific to their own provincial social worlds, as the proliferation of meta-events like Rock Lotto, Pop Quiz, and Sugar Town can surely attest. Microscenes not only generate community building and consciousness-raising while enriching the lives of the many young people who create, curate, and consume the eclectic sounds and styles of indie rock in Philadelphia, but they also provide an alternative portrait of the role that entertainment and urban culture perform in the postindustrial city, albeit off the beaten path, down in church basements, and half a world away from the branded downtown excesses of the House of Blues and the Hard Rock Café.

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NOTES

1. “Indie” rock often refers to music produced and distributed independently from the mainstream recording industry (Azerrad 2001), as defined today by the three most powerful music labels in the world (Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group, and Universal Music Group). However, this category is often extended to include obscure artists on major labels, and sometimes relatively well-known artists who nevertheless represent a kind of authenticity or artistic integrity to their most devoted acolytes.

2. For similar reasons, many experimental indie jazz musicians migrate to (or otherwise remain in) Chicago—the original “Second City”—instead of New York (Holt 2007, 112–114).

3. As in other taste affinities, indie-rock fans are often more united by their cultural dislikes than their commonalities (Bryson 1996; Lena 2012, 87–88).

4. Agnew's meteoric rise from DIY promoter to local entertainment bigwig illustrates the truly dynamic features of local music scenes, as well as how neighborhood worlds of art and music production can serve as platforms for greater financial and reputational success in the culture industries for their participants (Lloyd 2004).

5. Since the mid-2000s, user-friendly social media sites have admittedly made such email lists somewhat obsolete: for example, at the height of its popularity in November 1999 participants sent 1,457 messages to the Dummystore list, while March 2012 saw a dwindling of that monthly number to just three postings. Still, the list maintains an online presence, and its monthly policy reminders continue to reveal the lifestyles and identities of its party-hearty participants from the last decade: “Due to the heavy drinking population on this list, we're posting this every third week from now on”.

6. As of this writing, online websites catering to Philadelphia's hyperlocal indie-rock blogosphere include RocksPhilly.com, IndiePhilly.com, and Philebrity.com.

7. Of course, Rock Lotto participants would likely disdain the comparison as American Idol features mainstream pop music genres, the performance of hit singles rather than self-penned songs, and tightly networked links to the dominant music industry.

8. This sort of verbal play among rock musicians and fans is perfectly illustrated (or satirized) in Nick Hornby's (1995) observant novel High Fidelity.

9. Since Sugar Town's founding, it has presented women-led bands that have included the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Tsunami, and Demolition Dollrots.

REFERENCES