

‘This Ain’t Hollywood’: Identity, Nostalgia and the Role of Culture Industries in the Hamilton Music Scene

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In the past two decades or so there has been a great deal of scholarship focused on music scenes and the relationship between music, locality and identity. During this same era the music industry has undergone tremendous change, fuelled by what might be called the digital revolution. Two decades ago music from ‘elsewhere’ was most often brought to audiences via cultural gatekeepers – local promoters, radio hosts, journalists and so forth. Of course, now music from throughout much of the world is available to audiences much more readily and directly. Amid such intense globalization, music at the local level may seem, at first blush, to be far less relevant. With an enormity of music from all over the world only a mouse click, or tap on a touchscreen, away, how significant is local music? And, perhaps more pertinent, how is it that we now define the local?

In some recent discussions I held with musicians in St. Etienne, France, as part of a research project exploring the changing dynamics of music scenes, one of the repeated concerns to emerge was the absence of younger people within the local music scene. The sense among these musicians (many in their late 20s and early 30s) was that the access to music via the internet meant that local music had far less relevance to youth, and that the idea of (and ideals of) a local scene were something viewed as more relevant to older generations of musicians who had come of age when local cultural gatekeepers were still a significant force. Young people’s changing music tastes are equally evident in a study undertaken by Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett and Shane Homan, examining the role that music plays in youth-focused urban regeneration projects. In detailing one such project in Playford, Australia, Baker, Bennett and Homan noted that adult ideals of rock culture, including a museum that would have celebrated local musicians such as Glenn Shorrock of Little River Band fame, clashed with the hip hop and dance interests of youth, who, as these researchers noted, found the museum concept “too old school”.¹ Such differences underline some of the complexity involved in ‘naming’ the local.

While there is no doubt that the impact of the emerging digital music culture is significant, researchers such as Holly Kruse have stressed that aspects of the local do retain importance even with a shift towards more internet based forms of production

and distribution. The local provides the infrastructure needed for music scenes to emerge and thrive. Venues, recording and rehearsal spaces, music shops and other physical components still retain significance. Such infrastructure is evident in an examination of the Hamilton, Ontario scene², but it is also notable that this music infrastructure itself is often a contested space, particularly in relation to the economic exploitation of what Richard Florida has notably termed the “creative classes”, and more specifically to what have been termed “music economies” or “music clusters”. This idealization of “creative industries” proves to be highly problematic, particularly given its focus on gentrification at the expense of current residents, including musicians themselves. The Hamilton music scene demonstrates the important role played by a vibrant music and arts scene in terms of community building and reaffirmation, as well as exposing the risks inherent in the sorts of gentrification projects envisioned by Florida and his acolytes.

In terms of the question of defining the local, there are the absolutes of physical geography. But the act of locating Hamilton on a map, or identifying specific venues, does not fully indicate the boundaries of a local scene, nor contribute to an understanding of it. Scenes are by nature fluid. Part of this fluidity is the ever-shifting role played by those involved in a scene who can shift from roles such as artist to audience member, and in many cases be both simultaneously. Additionally there are other factors that underscore the fluid, shifting nature of scenes, such as the already-noted generational perceptions, but also those constructed by aspects such as genre. While it is evident that many musicians themselves are willing to cross genre boundaries, and that this is often a necessity in terms of gaining any form of steady or semi-steady employment, that is not always the same for audiences (and even this can vary by genre). The primary focus of this study on Hamilton is the punk and post-punk/indie rock scenes, yet it is evident that there is some admiration within these scenes for Hamilton’s broader musical heritage. At a 2009 Christmas Party, held by Sonic Unyon Records, the band Tristan Psionic performed with blues legend and current Hamilton resident John Ellison, the writer of the song “Some Kind of Wonderful”. Their collaboration included a version of this song, with

Tristan Psionic lead singer Sandy McIntosh noting its significance, along with his noting of Ellison's wider importance within the Hamilton scene. Despite the genre disparity between Tristan Psionic's brand of noise pop and Ellison's blues, the combination was well-received by the audience and offered a shared local moment and with overt recognition of Hamilton's music history.

Such diversity may not always be apparent, and there are undoubtedly many Hamiltonians completely unfamiliar with the 'scene' that I would describe. When scholars write about, or discuss a 'scene', it is more often a coming together of many intertwined scenes, and these sorts of definitional problems have been at the heart of much of the debate around this topic. As Ola Johansson and Thomas Bell have noted in seeking out the 'new US scenes', "the ideal of a scene is represented by the tight knit scenario, but in reality, most scenes, when scrutinized more closely, do not exhibit, at least in the artistic sense, such cohesiveness".³ In fact, such specific naming is often done for more ideological or commercial purposes, as evidenced in the Richard Florida inspired approaches. Cultural geographer Doreen Massey has identified efforts since the late '80s to "fix the meanings of particular places" for reasons including the political, ideological and commercial.⁴ Fixing space with a given meaning is, according to Massey, problematic, one where 'places' become "sites of nostalgia" incorporating "a view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity".⁵ Nostalgia is a particularly resonant term in relation to music. On one hand, particularly in relation to music history, nostalgia is very marketable, with reunion tours, re-releases, merchandise and so forth tapping into idealized recollections of music's past. At the same time, while such nostalgia remains marketable based on its fixity, as I want to suggest that for Hamilton, nostalgia also performs other social functions related to local identities and relationships that can be more about resistance.

It is this interplay between the fixed aspects of local scenes and the more fluid nature of the scenes themselves that opens up a space in need of examination. It is in this space where meaning is negotiated, and where the sorts of concerns raised by Massey become most relevant. Not all aspects of scenes are fluid. There are, of course, fixed locales for aspects such as venues, studios, or label offices, and as already noted, the specific delineation, or mapping, of the geographic space itself. What takes place within and in relation to these fixed spaces is where there is a degree of fluidity. In borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, these more fluid aspects of scenes resemble the spreading roots

of a rhizomatic model. Such connectedness is evident in the Tristan Psionic/John Ellison collaboration, where the bounded aspects of distinct genres reveal their more rhizomatic connection, particularly in consideration of the broader Hamilton music scene.

While these rhizomatic aspects become significant, there is still simultaneously validity in considering the fixed aspects of a scene. This more bounded side of the ledger is nicely spelled out by John Connell and Chris Gibson, where they note that "the uniqueness of music scenes is straightforward; music is made in specific geographical, socio-economic and political contexts, and lyrics and styles are always likely to reflect the positions of writers and composers within these contexts".⁶ Here Connell and Gibson echo the more familiar understanding of scenes, both by audiences, and perhaps more prominently in journalism, where the flux evident in the rhizomatic model is harder to address due to the absence of easily defined parameters. Of course the problem with some of the earliest scene studies, and journalistic approaches to 'fix' scenes in identifying certain sounds, such as the oft-cited Seattle sound of the early 1990s, is that these specific local factors are used to determine meaning, attitude and so forth, rather than relating these to broader intersections. It would be remiss to outright dismiss this approach, as it does hold some sway over audiences, and as specifics related to space do have some influence. Hamilton scene members often extol the city's working-class ethos as an important part of the city's musical heritage, for instance. At the same time it is necessary to account for the intersection between these fixed spaces and the more global pathways in which music circulates, along with the impact of a specific local environment, such as Hamilton as a largely working-class 'steeltown', without resorting to the deterministic. Other earlier analysts, such as Larry Grossberg, have noted the sorts of networks and fluidity to be found within the fixed spaces of certain scenes. Connell and Gibson reiterate Grossberg's claims that "cultural space can be metaphorically carved out of a wider social space through musical praxis, through the 'affective alliances' constructed to support sub-cultures, scenes, performance spaces and events".⁷ Though Grossberg's focus in 1984 was on the local, this has been extended, given the ease of global networking, to a much wider space. The 'affective alliances' can reach far beyond the local. At the same time, the 'local moments' or intersections retain their own significance. Again, Connell and Gibson employ Grossberg's earlier findings to suggest that "despite operating across a number of heterogeneous geographic contexts, these nodes of cultural

production and consumption are linked within a 'network of empowerment' where 'pleasure is possible and important for its audiences; it provides the strategies through which the audience is empowered by and empowers the musical apparatus'".⁸ Baker, Bennett and Homan come up with very similar suggestions in their study of youth at risk's employment of music, noting that "such young people have often clearly developed informal music-related strategies, networks and opportunities; and that these youth usually draw on particular places and expertise in their local communities to develop these skills".⁹

This has echoes of the laments noted among some St. Etienne musicians, where they see the musical apparatus becoming less empowered as young people potentially turn to other, non-local resources. Empowerment is evident in the case of the Hamilton scene, where music activity and promotion provides significant links, or networks, to concerns related to civic rejuvenation, including both bricks and mortar as well as reputational rejuvenation. Notions of local empowerment and pride in Hamilton have been evident in many of the initial interviews undertaken for this project.

Hamilton, Ontario, is a second city, geographically and economically, in relation to nearby Toronto. Hamilton has endured economic woes and struggled to reinvent itself, particularly in the face of a declining steel industry and a loss of manufacturing jobs. Efforts to develop a knowledge-based economy around the city's McMaster University have thus far not borne significant fruit, although the one boom is perhaps in health care, as the Hamilton Health Sciences group of hospitals has made use of its relationship with McMaster's medical program to build itself up as a significant research and health care organization. Nonetheless, this has had little visual or cultural impact on a city that features a declining infrastructure, an absence of any sustained inner city or downtown rejuvenation, and quite high rates, and possibly an even worse reputation, for crime, drug use and other social problems.

Amid this, then, these concepts of empowerment and pleasure being important for audiences are resonant here in relation to some specific aspects of geography. For Hamilton, given its downtrodden status, and an oft-noted working class sensibility, there is an empowerment in having a notable music scene and in being able to celebrate its legacy. It is clear from events such as the Hamilton Music Awards, and writing in the local press, particularly local weekly *The View*, that music is a valued part of Hamilton's civic identity. One well-remembered site of musical community gathering has been Sonic Unyon Records. Numerous interviewees have spo-

ken fondly of the many concerts that were held in the loft space of the record label, concerts that drew large crowds of primarily young people from within Hamilton and the surrounding region, particularly in the mid to late 1990s and into the early years of the new century. In December 2009, the label attempted to recreate some of this atmosphere through their aforementioned Christmas party, held at a bar named This Ain't Hollywood, located in the James Street North area of the city. This particular neighbourhood has been hit hard by economic woes; many of its businesses are shuttered, and the area is noted for problems of crime, drug abuse, homelessness and other very visible evidence of Hamilton's struggles. At the same time, the street is home to a monthly event known as the James Street North Art Crawl. Starting just outside Sonic Unyon's headquarters at the top of this stretch, the 'crawl' visits a number of recently opened artists' studios and shops, and incorporates aspects of local music, wine and cheese offerings and other cultural benefits. The low rents in the area have attracted artists, not only from Hamilton, but from Toronto, who have relocated to the area, and there is clearly a concerted effort to create some notion of a 'scene'. Among the initiatives is a slogan, adopted in the area, and adorning various t-shirts and posters, proclaiming that 'Art is the New Steel', an overt nod to Hamilton's primary industry as well as an indication that events such as the Art Crawl represent a concerted effort at community building. The Art Crawl has even spawned a larger, day-long event called Super Crawl, an arts and music festival held in September, and in 2011 celebrating its third year.

This reimagining of James Street North is evidence of what Massey refers to as the nostalgic labelling of space. Notably, This Ain't Hollywood is very clearly an attempt to recreate a fabled music space in Hamilton, the Corktown Tavern. The latter bar has now attempted to move more upmarket, but was formerly the rough and tumble home of many live music acts and genres throughout the 1970s, '80s and into the '90s, particularly Hamilton's quite prolific punk scene. This Ain't Hollywood provides a direct legacy to Hamilton's musical past in its appropriating its name from the title of an album from one of the most notable bands to emerge from that '70s scene, The Forgotten Rebels. The bar's website claims, with tongue very much in cheek, that protracted efforts were required to gain the rights to the name through negotiations with Forgotten Rebels band member Mickey DeSadist. Clearly the name, and the era and ideals it invokes, were important in establishing the bar's identity. The bar's décor itself includes posters, fliers, and album covers referencing aspects of Hamilton's musical past, in addition to

incorporating present-day reference points. The bar serves as a venue that hosts a wide variety of musical acts. While the aesthetic suggests a leaning towards a punk and post-punk clientele, the bar has featured acts drawn from blues, hip-hop, punk, classic rock, folk, country, and numerous other genres as it establishes itself as a significant live venue in Hamilton. One key link to the past has been the bar's promotion of an event called The Gord Lewis Songbook. Initially a weekly event, the Songbook events are now held monthly in conjunction with the Art Crawl. Gord Lewis is co-founder, and guitarist, in one of Hamilton's most successful bands, the garage rock/punk act Teenage Head. The Songbook events feature open mic renditions of Teenage Head classics alongside other songs in similar styles, many from bands that had influenced Lewis and his bandmates in the 1970s. The event provides a link to Hamilton's past, while, in overtly referencing Teenage Head's influences, it underscores the way in which local scenes are always engaged with the global pathways of music.

It is possible to suggest that Sonic Unyon as a label has been actively attempting to create nostalgia for older ideals of a scene. The Christmas party featured reunited versions of many of the label's older acts, alongside one of their current acts, Young Rival, while the label's current lineup is largely populated with with aging Canadian rock and punk acts, including reissued and remastered works from Teenage Head, a formerly unreleased work from a 'legendary', critically acclaimed, but short-lived Hamilton band of the 1970s, Simply Saucer, as well as work from non-local acts such as Quebec metal band Voivod. It is notable that even newer signing Young Rival has a sound that is more a throwback to early '90s alt or indie rock, an era and style in which Sonic Unyon enjoyed its greatest success.

So amid theoretical concerns with the shifting realities of scenes, there is the need to address the manner in which the notion of scene, and the conscious creation, or recreation, of a scene, is part of this process. It aligns with notions of immediacy and identity that have been addressed by Craig Ireland in *The Subaltern Appeal to Experience*. A sense of place and belonging, an immediacy, still retains potency, perhaps as it is being challenged by the digital exchange of information, it has become an even more potent marker of identity. So that while on the one hand we can argue that scenes are not static, and must be considered in relation to fluid practices, their importance for those who are part of them, or identify with them, is very much about establishing a fixity of identity that may provide an affirmation of self through elements of history and nostalgia.

At the same time as this nostalgic establishing of

place or scene may be important for certain individuals or social groups, there are also significant pitfalls associated with such fixity. One of these may be connected to the renewed economic interest in the culture industries. Within the University of Toronto's School of Management is the 'Martin Prosperity Institute', headed by renowned new urbanism guru Richard Florida. The Institute has generated a number of reports as part of a larger examination of the economic benefit of "music economies" or "music clusters" as part of the emphasis being placed on the cultural industries as key to developing new economies. Much of what these reports have determined as important relates to the notion of being able to fix space, in the sense that Massey has critiqued. One report, from Brian Hracz, opens with the stated intention that "this report is to demonstrate the opportunity cities in Ontario have to attract, incubate and retain musical talent at a time when the structural and spatial landscape of the global music industry is in flux."¹⁰ While the reports, and others from the Institute, have recognized elements of the rhizomatic and fluid connections within the arts, the economic intentions are clearly spelled out. Hracz stresses that "entire fashion lines from global fashion houses such as H&M to local indie producers have been designed and marketed based on music scenes, subcultures and specific musicians, such as punk, reggae, metal, goth, grunge (Neil Young, Pearl Jam) and teen-pop (Avril Lavigne)." The concern being raised here is not necessarily with recognizing how scenes work, but rather how they can be fixed for easier economic exploitation. Hracz' own examples are expressly global in nature.

Such approaches make evident precisely what may be at stake as we attempt to understand more fully how scenes are presently functioning. These aspects of economic determinism overlook how local music may function, as well as how any ideals related to local identity may be negotiated in the current global climate. Such concerns are evident in Ruth Finnegan's writing, where she introduces the concept of social pathways which "avoid the misleading overtones of concreteness, stability, boundedness and comprehensiveness associated with the term 'world'. 'Pathways' also reminds us of the part-time nature of much local music-making (people follow many pathways concurrently, and leave or return as they choose throughout their lives), of the overlapping and intersecting nature of different musical traditions, and of the purposive and dynamic nature of established musical practices."¹¹

A focus on more fluid or dynamic understandings of music scenes is also reminiscent of Beverly Diamond's more recent ethnomusicological considerations of the role of alliances in the under-

standing of music and identity negotiation. Diamond identifies the problems inherent in any fixed notions of identity. As Diamond says of alliance studies, it is her perception that “studying music’s capacity for defining relationships may well be more significant in the 21st century as studying music’s role in defining identities has been for the past few decades. Indeed, our alliances produce our identities.”¹² Diamond suggests that such an approach needs to examine or track “connections to places, or networks of people” and that, in doing so, attention needs to be given to “such things as genre formations, technological mediations, language and dialect choices, citational practices, and issues of access and ownership”.¹³ This is very much akin with Finnegan’s point that “These pathways included both personal networks and established groups, and were another way in which local musical ‘worlds’ were realised in practice.”¹⁴

The need to continue addressing the nature of scene development has become more resonant as the focus on the creative industries has heated up and as the music industry itself continues to transform. For a label such as Sonic Unyon, a great deal has changed since its founding in the early 1990s. The cultural role as part of a music scene may be in conflict with the economic realities of running a business. Sonic Unyon’s original indie ideals, evident in terms of content, or in examples such as their ties to Hamilton’s musical past as a ‘site of nostalgia’, clash with business necessity. For Sonic Unyon, much of their business has been related to distribution as opposed to production or promotion. When Canada’s primary indie music distributor, Cargo, collapsed in the late 1990s, Sonic Unyon took over much of this business, and began to employ a significant warehouse staff, in addition to their label staff. The arrival of digital modes of distribution and the concurrent rapid decline of record and CD sales meant having to let go many of these staff members, themselves largely younger members of the music scene. While David Hesmondhalgh, in his examination of British labels Creation Records and One Little Indian, points out that the distinction between indie ideals and business decisions is not always so clear-cut, it is evident with Sonic Unyon that there are some key distinctions being employed. Business practicalities have reduced Sonic Unyon’s role in the local music industry, both as an employer, and as a label signing and promoting local acts. The cultural practices remain separate. The label’s office building is home not only to the label and its distribution arm, but also a local record shop, and artists’ studios. It is also the origin point for the monthly James Street North art crawl, giving the label a prominent link with the local arts community. At this stage, it is possible to suggest

that there remains a divide of sorts between the label’s cultural and business practices, and that divide is in part what fuels some of this distinction between the fixity and fluidity of scenes. Fluidity in their cultural practices, alongside a more fixed practicality in business matters, permits Sonic Unyon to aid in reaffirming the value of local identity for those who are part of the Hamilton music scene, including reclaiming some of its past. While there is nostalgia involved, and therefore an element of fixing meaning for the local scene, its employment is fluid, and the purpose is more about serving a defined sense of community as opposed to selling any notions of ‘creative class’ to external markets. Fixity for economic purposes may have short-term benefits to stakeholders, but denies the realities of cultural process, which is more organic and fluid.

Yet despite the potential for fixed notions of a scene to be exploited, there does need to be retained a respect for the fixity related to efforts at community building and cultural identity affirmation surrounding scenes, something particularly evident in the post-industrial economic landscape of a city such as Hamilton. The Martin Prosperity Institute model is not about the benefits of music clusters to those who live in these places, but rather about what economic value can be extracted from such fixed spaces through forms of gentrification, without regard to the needs of those living there. In recognizing that in dealing with scenes, they represent a constantly moving target, and what needs to be examined is process, not fixed meaning, it may be possible to avoid these problematic outcomes (or intentions) and in doing so, further our understanding of how scenes function and the significant role they continue to play within popular music.

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- ¹⁰ Hracs, p.1.
¹¹ Finnegan, p. 306.
¹² Diamond, p. 2.
¹³ Diamond, p. 3.
¹⁴ Finnegan, p. 307.

The image shows the cover of the magazine 'Penguin Eggs'. At the top, the title 'penguin eggs' is written in a red, lowercase, serif font. Below the title, it says 'Canada's Folk, Roots and World Music Magazine'. The central graphic is a stylized black and white illustration of a penguin, where its body and wings are formed by musical notes and symbols, including a treble clef and a double bar line. Below the illustration, the text 'Subscribe Now!' is written. Underneath that is a table of subscription rates:

Canada	2 years -	\$46.50 CDN	1 year - \$23.50 CDN
USA	2 years -	\$62 CDN	1 year - \$31 CDN
UK & EU (air)	2 years -	\$126 CDN	1 year - \$63.25 CDN
UK & EU (regular)	2 years -	\$86.50 CDN	1 year - \$43.25 CDN

At the bottom of the cover, it provides contact information: 'Penguin Eggs, 109+2.80 Avenue, Edmonton, AB T6G 0R1', 'Telephone: 780.433.8287', 'email: penguineggs@hotmail.com', and 'Subscribe online: www.penguineggs.ab.ca'.

Notes

¹ Baker, Bennett and Homan, p. 158.

² This article represents some initial findings that are to be part of a larger project being undertaken by myself and Dr. Mark Percival of Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, comparing the music scenes of Glasgow, Scotland, and Hamilton, Ontario, and their relationship to civic rejuvenation and identity.

³ Bell and Johanson, p. 220.

⁴ Massey, p. 4.

⁵ Massey, p. 5.

⁶ Connell and Gibson, p. 90.

⁷ Connell and Gibson, p. 109.

⁸ Connell and Gibson p. 109, themselves citing Grossberg's p. 228.

⁹ Baker, Bennett and Homan, p. 149.