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Distant together: creative community in UK DIY music during Covid-19

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Those participating in DIY cultural communities (including zine makers, musicians, artists and activists) have traditionally been reliant on physical spaces to gather, perform, build connections and mobilise community. With the rapid closure of music venues, galleries, community centres and other public spaces, these already dispersed communities have been mobilised into seeking and creating alternatives. These alternatives include novel utilisation of existing digital platforms (Zoom, Houseparty and Instagram, for example) to forge temporary virtual spaces for cultural communities. Such spaces have been used to host everything from house parties, gigs and zine fairs to writing circles, enabling cultural organisers to raise money, connect isolated individuals and nurture creative practice in new and innovative ways. This article explores the motivations and politics of those creating these spaces, arguing that these virtual alternatives are significant (albeit temporary) in connecting communities in an otherwise distant time.

The outbreak and subsequent escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound and devastating impact on those working in creative and cultural industries, both within the UK and internationally.[1] The already fragile infrastructure nurturing grassroots cultural creativity remains under threat due to a lack of support and long-term resource. As Music Venues Trust CEO Mark Davyd said in an open blog post,

the decision by the UK government to enforce social distancing through a 'lockdown' policy while fully understandable has been catastrophic for the live music sector, and hardest hit have been those grassroots venues already operating on thin margins.[2]

As well as the impact on spaces, the Arts Council has acknowledged the 'significant impact [of Covid-19] on the freelance creative practitioners on whom our sector depends, with many experiencing lost income and additional costs from cancelled and curtailed work'.[3] Not only have those earning their primary income from creative work been directly affected, but those working in hospitality industries to support creative practice have also been hit by the loss of precarious incomes. This is especially so for migrants and others without access to government support schemes.

This short essay considers the impact of the pandemic on UK DIY music communities. I begin by clarifying the cultural context I refer to as 'UK DIY music' and its connection to grassroots activism and far-left politics. Following this, I describe how DIY music spaces have developed over the last decade, focusing on the opening of a cluster of new spaces in the mid-2010s. The rest of the essay is devoted to providing an account of the impact of the pandemic on DIY music spaces, focusing on the threat of closure that many currently face without long-term government support. I then go on to reflect on the ways in which UK DIY music communities responded to the lack of access to traditional physical spaces (e.g. music venues, rehearsal rooms and autonomous spaces) and to social gatherings in person. I do this by exploring the use of livestreaming technologies and social media for performance and socialising in the early months of the lockdown. Finally, I consider what the future climate for grassroots creativity could look like over the coming years.

The term 'UK DIY music' refers to local and national communities of musicians who engage with 'do-it-yourself' as a model of praxis and political ethos within a UK geographical context. The intersection between the 'do-it-yourself' ethos and music is one that stretches over generations of music subcultures, including punk, indie, hip hop and electronic dance music.[4] 'DIY' music no longer strictly connotes a genre of music but instead refers to scenes with overlapping commitments to autonomy, mutual aid, anti-capitalist politics and learning through doing. As George McKay writes, 'even if it doesn't overtly espouse it, DiY [*sic*] Culture practises an intuitive liberal anarchism'.[5] Though there are no longer strict limitations to genres, those in DIY music are expected to contribute to central underpinning community networks – as Roued-Cunlife writes, 'although there are no spatial, territorial, formal or

membership boundaries of DIY culture, it exists through interaction and communication'.[6] Thus, we can typify DIY music through a combination of creativity, activist/grassroots/left-wing politics and collaboration through networked cultures and spaces.

Recent music journalism has focused on the opening of UK-based DIY music spaces including DIY Space for London, Glasgow Autonomous Space, Partisan (based in Manchester) and others.[7] The development of these new spaces (in addition to well-established autonomous spaces and social centres including the 1 in 12 Club in Bradford, Wharf Chambers in Leeds and the Cowley Club in Brighton) was viewed as a sign of the health of DIY music networks in the 2010s. Of Leeds' DIY spaces, Isobel Moloney writes:

> At the heart of the movement is a string of promoters and venues whose values sit at the opposite end of the spectrum to the gentrifying developers. Rather than sterilise the city in the hunt for financial profit, the DIY scene seeks to enrich the community through cultural stimulation.[8]

Similarly, Amin refers to how such spaces display 'a DIY attitude that prioritises communal support, autonomy and self-sufficiency over metrics such as popularity and capital'.[9] The development of new spaces was seen as a form of resistance against precarious living, gentrification and austerity, all of which have a negative impact on the capacity to nurture creativity and collaboration within communities. The flourishing of UK DIY music spaces seemed to be a sign that we could create the alternative that had been collectively imagined over the preceding decades.

Although UK DIY music spaces were used to resisting and surviving against the odds, the onset of a global pandemic was a threat no one had been prepared to encounter. Within months of the announcement of the UK's lockdown period, music spaces of all sizes began to permanently close. This included larger venues including Gorilla and the Deaf Institute in Manchester (which were subsequently saved through acquisition by Tokyo Industries).[10] However, grassroots and DIY music spaces are less profitable and, therefore, less appealing to investors, and without a clear way forward or government support many have already collapsed. These include DIY Space for London, which cited the instability caused by Covid-19 as their reason for closure, and CHUNK (based in Leeds).[11] As well as venues, many festivals and cultural events have had no choice but to cancel and postpone events globally. In reference to music festivals, Karen Davies writes that 'no risk assessment in the world could have

prepared the industry for the lock-downs and social distancing measures that we are currently experiencing'.[12]

The drastic impact of the pandemic was heightened by the socio-economic and political climate in which culture is currently produced. Theorists in other geographic contexts have highlighted how a lack of government support for the arts preceded and was exacerbated during the pandemic.[13] Music industry bodies have campaigned for more public support for music venues throughout the pandemic, utilising social media campaigns including the hashtags #letthemusicplay and #saveourvenues to raise awareness of the impact of the pandemic on music venues of all sizes. In September 2020, Music Venue Trust wrote that 'the whole grassroots music venue sector is now at critical, red alert status' due to inadequate support through the Cultural Recovery Fund, the winding down of furlough, the application of a 10pm curfew for all venues, social distancing laws and other measures.[14] As the world continues to open up again, crowds may begin to return to spaces but at a gradual pace that may not enable economic recovery as desperately needed by small venues.

The impact of job losses on musicians and music industry workers is also critical. In the lead up to the pandemic's outbreak, grassroots music spaces had already been closing rapidly under conditions of austerity.[15] As a result, work in live music was increasingly precarious, with many workers subsisting on minimum wage, seasonal work and/or irregular hours. In reference to music festivals, Davies writes that

> their success relies on the exchange value of the commodity of entertainment, as well as on the use of gig-workers and zero-hour contracted staff who have no job protection.[16]

Musicians also found a significant income stream removed by the impossibility of touring in a pandemic. As music blog *For the Rabbits* wrote, for many this touring income (and merchandise sales) had been the only remaining way to make money from music:

> A combination of minimal streaming royalties, dwindling physical sales and the increasing popularity of a wide variety of other media options have left music, and musicians, highly reliant on touring as a source of income.[17]

As such, the immediate halt of live performance, closure of music spaces and termination of festival and venue work that provided other sources

of income jeopardised the livelihoods of many involved in music communities. Researchers Shelley Brunt and Kat Nelligan, who explored the impact of the pandemic on the Australian music industry, highlighted experiences of grief, loss, anxiety and instability reported in the media through the early months of the pandemic, emphasising the impact on the mental as well as physical health of individuals in these communities.[18]

UK DIY music communities reacted to the UK's initial lockdown period by exploring alternative and virtual spaces in which to programme gigs and performances. Instagram, Facebook and Twitch figured highly within a UK context in particular, with DIY music labels and/or promoters including Music for the Isolated Generation, Specialist Subject, Divine Schism and Girl Gang Leeds programming regular curated livestreams featuring acts performing from within bedrooms and living rooms across the world. The utilisation of digital technologies for livestreaming was common across musical communities, with initial analyses conducted in the contexts of classical music and opera, dance and popular music.[19]

The title of this piece refers to one such initiative – Distant Together – which was a weekly livestreamed gig that platformed a total of 65 artists over 10 weekly shows. Reflecting on the shows, Specialist Subject wrote that 'it felt really important to have weekly connection through live music during physical distancing'.[20] Also in reference to these events, music blog *For the Rabbits* wrote:

> While these 'shows' are not quite the same as the real thing, they are a chance for people, some isolated and alone, to remember that there are people out there who care, there is a community, no matter how distant and disparate, who appreciate the same things you do. We are distant, and we are together, and we will get through this.[21]

These livestreaming initiatives happened at a national level within the community context of UK DIY music, and within many other geographical and subcultural contexts.[22] Small-scale projects sprang up alongside these: for instance, punk band Witching Waves committed to a series of regular weekend livestreams in which they played songs and communicated with peers via text chat. The embracing of livestream technologies created new opportunities, for example, line-ups that would not otherwise have happened without funding for international touring were much more commonplace. Livestreaming was also used as an opportunity to raise money to pay musicians, and to maintain interest in music projects in the absence of live performance or the traditions of UK DIY music.

Each of these projects enabled online community to develop in the absence of physical communities. The use of social media to develop online community existed prior to the pandemic: as Janice L. Waldron writes:

> Online music communities as spaces of community music manifest as either 'self-contained' online communities in and of themselves (i.e., they exist only in virtual space with no overlap with a correlating offline community), or as an active online 'place', which exists in addition to an already established offline music community.[23]

To connect to Waldron's ideas, these livestreamed gigs form alternatives to the physical 'places' we can no longer access with current social distancing measures. Vandenberg et al. propose that whilst livestreaming removes music from the embodied experience of attending a gig (closeness to others, dancing, the smell of a punk venue etc.) in a physical space, the 'liveness' of an event is instead determined by time. By aping the signifiers of a 'real life' gig (including interactions between users on chat, the utilisation of the applause emoji and live performance), these events provide users with connections to familiar and reassuring environments and social groups during this period, in which nothing otherwise felt normal or reassuring. This means that users are comforted by the replication of the 'rituals' of gig going, which recall the collective memory of preceding membership of subcultural spaces.[24]

The jump to embrace new media technologies and utilise them for creative purposes and community building is nothing new in the context of cultural activism. Researchers have identified close links between media technologies and activist movements dating back at least a hundred years. Kate Eichhorn refers to connections between feminist activists and broadcasting technologies in the 1930s.[25] The connections between video technologies and activists are explored by social movement researchers.[26] The DIY music community's use of social media is explored by Ellis Jones, and Christopher Cayari identifies connections between participatory cultural theory and DIY online music-making practices.[27] The application of social media in creative communities in the decade preceding the pandemic had, in many ways, prepared us with the tools we would need to navigate isolation in lockdown.

At the point of writing the abstract for this essay, I was excited and proud about the ways in which communities adapted: our rapid response and creative re-envisioning of what a community space was and could be

in a period of virtual networks and screen interactions. This was yet another challenge that we could overcome with creativity and community. However, as the months passed and we slowly came to realise that the pandemic was (and is) here to stay, the hope and togetherness that typified the first few months dwindled. Few DIY collectives were still regularly livestreaming, after interest dwindled and peers tired of spending their lives in front of computer screens in lieu of personal contact. The UK is, as I write this, midway through autumn 2020 and undergoing a series of tiered restrictions and local lockdowns which are primarily affecting the North of England (in which I am based, as is my local DIY music community). Nationally, there is still no advice that suggests when it will be safe for small music venues to reopen, and we face the next few months without these spaces *or* the community momentum that connected us through the national lockdown period.

What comes next for UK DIY music? In *DiY Culture: Party and protest in Nineties Britain*, George McKay writes that 'short or long term, space is a prerequisite for community'.[28] The rapid closure of grassroots cultural venues to date is no doubt an indicator of things to come: there will be more spaces that will not survive the combination of the pandemic and the climate of austerity that had rendered them precarious in the preceding years. This combination of factors has made community members aware of the fragility of the infrastructure of UK DIY music: when spaces and communities form outside of the sturdier but more confining structures of the mainstream music industry, they also form outside of support structures that can ensure financial sustainability in the longer term. What took decades to build can crumble at a moment's notice. Our creative thinking and collective working cannot hold us afloat through a global pandemic, and although many of our networks remain, we do not yet know whether the spaces that nurtured them will continue to exist.

Notes

1   See Botstein, 'The future of music'.
2   Davyd, cited in Music Business Worldwide, 'Two years ago'.
3   Arts Council, 'Arts Council England emergency response fund'.
4   See Harrison, 'Cheaper than a CD'; Jones, 'Platform DIY'; Chrysagis, *Becoming Ethical Subjects*; Griffin, 'Understanding DIY punk as activism'; Moloney, 'Community spirit'.
5   McKay, 'DiY culture', 3.
6   See Roued-Cunlife, 'The digital future of humanities'.
7   See Amin, 'DIY in 2017'; Welsh, 'How DIY culture is thriving in the U.K.'; Phillips and Mokoena, 'All the places musicians move'; Moloney, 'Community spirit'.
8   See Moloney, 'Community spirit'.
9   See Amin, 'DIY in 2017'.

10   See Beaumont-Thomas, ' Manchester music venues'; Heward, 'The Deaf Institute and Gorilla'.
11   See DIY Space for London, ' Goodbye Ormside Street'.
12   Davies, 'Festivals post covid-19', 3.
13   Botstein, 'The future of music', 353.
14   See Music Venue Trust, 'The whole grassroots music venue sector'.
15   See The Mayor of London's Music Venues Taskforce, 'London grassroots venues rescue plan'.
16   Davies, 'Festivals post covid-19', 2020, 3.
17   See *For the Rabbits*, 'Distant together'.
18   Brunt and Nelligan, 'The Australian music industry's mental health crisis', 2.
19   See Botstein, 'The future of music'; Parsons, 'Music and the internet'; Vandenberg et al., 'The "lonely raver"'; Parivudhiphongs, 'Covid-19 – You can't stop the beat'; Howard et al., 'It's turned me from a professional'.
20   See Specialist Subject, 'DISTANT TOGETHER'.
21   See *For the Rabbits*, 'Distant together'.
22   See Brunt and Nelligan, 'The Australian music industry's mental health crisis'.
23   Waldron, 'Online music', 110
24   Vandenberg et al., 'The 'lonely raver'', 5144.
25   Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn*, 41–2.
26   See Harding, 'Viva camcordistas!'.
27   See Jones, 'Platform DIY'; Cayari, 'Expanding online popular music education research', 5.
28   McKay, 'DiY Culture', 28.

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