

Dialogic Practices in Online Music Promotion

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The Internet is radically altering the relationships between musicians and listeners, and, indeed, between listeners themselves. Over the last ten years, the Internet has come to represent a driving force in the way audiences experience music and music makers. Artist websites are now among the primary means for independent musicians to disseminate biographical, visual, and audio information. Web sites empower the artist to circumvent the restrictive practices of the traditional music industry, and they fundamentally challenge our notions of how an artist's public image contributes to their success. File sharing software creates intimately connected musical communities by enabling music listeners to share efficiently their diverse music collections, ultimately destabilising the existing music industry's hierarchical business model. Furthermore, increased communication between listeners utilising online forums coupled with the opportunity to read and contribute independent (non-professional) reviews has profound ramifications. This not only influences how quickly or widespread an independent artist comes to be known but also, importantly, by promoting discourse outside the musical realm, reinforces notions of community and the role audiences play in the success of the artist.

Throughout this paper, I engage with Internet discourse as it pertains to independent music promotion through the Bakhtinian concept of dialogics. Central to Bakhtin's thought is the idea that dialogue is at the heart of human behaviour; that "self" and "other" are not mutually exclusive concepts, but relative ideas. Michael Holquist suggests:

Dialogism [a term not used by Bakhtin] argues that all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying *simultaneous but different* space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies, to political bodies and to bodies of ideas in general (ideologies).¹

The Internet embodies dialogism, as it is, at its heart, a system of simultaneous communication, albeit in a *virtual* space. The existence of an Internet is possible only through the participation of individuals (and machines, though these are ultimately programmed by individuals) in dialogue; otherwise, it is merely a bundle of connected circuits. It is useful to see the Internet not as a communications *device* (there is no one *thing* that is the Internet) but rather as a dialogic *event* (or series of events) or *relationship* (or series of relationships). Thus, the event itself is a dialogic phenomenon, the result of multiple, distinct, and simultaneous communicative happenings. Understood as such, the Internet is a dynamic process in which meaning is created through the interactions between Internet "users" and between the user and online content. This last distinction is somewhat blurry, as I shall show, because the line between user and content is precisely that which is constantly crossed as Internet users participate in the constant (re)production of Internet content.

¹ Michael Holquist, "Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World, Ch. 2" in Caryl Emerson, ed., *Critical Essays on Mikhail Bakhtin* (New York, NY: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 100.

Internet technologies facilitate multi-vocal discourse about music on a number of levels: between listeners, between the artist and the listener, and between artists. I address each of these discursive phenomena through the examination of particular conduits of communication such as web forums, online reviews, file sharing applications, artist websites, and hypertext links. Each of these represents a distinct type of interaction but all participate in the larger phenomena of online discursive formation. The opportunities for dialogue afforded by independent listener reviews on web forums and on commercial websites such as amazon.com not only provide information about artists, they also provide insight into the people who are listening to these artists. Additionally, the opportunity exists for the listener to write his or her self into the mythology of the artist by contributing his or her own commentary. I address Peer-to-Peer (P2P) file sharing software, as it is fast becoming one of the primary avenues through which music is distributed both “legally” and “illegally.”² Finally, the independent artist website is of central interest in that here we find artists creatively utilising the technology in order to challenge the hegemony of the existing music industry. Later in this paper, I will address in detail how independent women artists are using Internet technologies to “work around” gender biases in the industry. By using the technology in this manner, our understanding of women’s representation, and the value of community for furthering career goals and establishing support networks is subject to new questions. As an equally important component of the establishment of dialogue and community online, I also address here websites which are dedicated to creating virtual gathering spaces for women musicians.

² The use of “scare quotes” is intentional as these terms are at the heart of the most discussed repercussion of file sharing technologies, that of copyright. The legality of certain types of file sharing is in fact the very thing that is under question in this debate, and thus the terms are, in this case, quite open ended and warrant some questioning.

The phenomena discussed here are not necessarily unique to independent artists; many commercially successful and well-supported artists use the Internet in the same fashion, promoting the same types of discourse. In fact, the entertainment industry utilises many of the same communicative avenues in order to promote their artists. My focus is on independent artists because the discursive formations present on the Internet offer unique opportunities for these artists to circumvent the existing music industry's hierarchical infrastructure. In this sense, online communication has a positive influence on the independent artist's career development. Furthermore, the phenomena discussed here are not unique to any particular genre of music and although my focus is on popular music, the opportunities for fan and artist interaction exist in nearly every conceivable style of music that has online presence. It is my firm belief that discursive phenomena similar to the ones discussed here exist for perhaps *anything* one can conceive of constituting a discourse, but this is well beyond the scope of this paper, and, in fact, is expressed by the diversity of the Internet itself.

This paper proceeds under the following assumptions: 1) artists use Internet technologies in order to further their own opportunities for artistic and financial success and that the artist is either completely responsible for, or has a reasonable amount of input into the materials presented on the site. Generally, the Internet is a tool through which artists hope to sell recordings, spread the word about their work, and gain more opportunities for live performance. (2) Most websites currently mimic the model established by music fan magazines and public music criticism avenues that have existed for generations in that they are both biographically informative and provide criticism of the results of the artist's work. However, there are two major distinguishing factors: 1)

the ability to transmit large amounts of information (sound, video, image) in multiple simultaneous instances, (mostly) unrestricted by the bureaucracy of the publishing, recording, television, or movie industries, and 2) the almost infinite possibilities of immediate referentiality through hypertext.

In the past, aside from the concert experience, audience members understood themselves to be a part of a social group larger than that of their immediate circle through articles in music magazines, news snippets, and the general assumption that if they and a few friends liked an artist, it was likely that there were others out there who liked the same artist. The Internet allows for a much more direct connection between audience members from diverse geographical regions through the immediacy of email and chat applications and the simultaneity of the Internet experience. Mark Federman suggests “[t]he whole idea of the 'Net is that of instantaneous communication, where we literally exist everywhere at once and that we're connected, potentially, to everybody else in the world.”³ The connectivity enabling the networking technology that facilitates the Internet, is largely based around “hypertext,” the ability to link from one page on the Internet to another. Ben Agger stresses the importance of hypertext in an online publication:

Your page can connect to other pages, hypertextually, as you move beyond the constraints of the pulp publication, which may have footnotes and a bibliography, but no instantaneous access to the sources you cite.⁴

Hypertext promotes interactivity by allowing Internet users to navigate through many spaces that make up both the website (spaces defined by the web designer) and spaces outside the website (through links to other websites). The agency afforded the user is

³ CBC Newsworld's "The Hour" Website http://www.cbc.ca/thehour/thehour_player.html?20050501-Crackberries_cost. Accessed December, 2005.

⁴ Ben Agger, *The Virtual Self: A Contemporary Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 159.

limited only by those links the web designer chooses to make available. Importantly though, once away from the initial website, control over the limitations of links changes hands to the next web designer. Theoretically, that is to say, with enough linking, hypertextual “differance” is infinite.

Perceptually though, the Internet user understands a website, at least initially, to be an autonomous presentation. To borrow from Barthes, the website, as it is presented, is much like a “work” in that it has stable design elements, a name (a URL), and often a specific aim. However, as the user engages with the hypertextuality of the site, the website quickly becomes understood as a “text.”⁵ The hypertextual activities of the user perceptually redefine the website and tangibly establish it as part of a much larger and theoretically infinite network of other similarly situated texts. Stuart Moulthrop suggests:

[...] we recognize that the volume of electronic writing is infinitely expandable, though we still conceive of the text as a linear or summary form of expression, a coherent file or document. Hypertext, being "non-sequential," allows us to move from our notion of volume (however expanded) to a true textual space [...]⁶

These document[s] can thus never be "closed" against further extensions, either by the original writer or by others. They are infinite process, not definitive product. Thus they are always open to expansion and intervention, by other authors as well as by their originators. They may therefore provide (at least potentially) an opening to a "social space of writing."⁷

⁵ See Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text” in S. Heath tr., *Image-Music-Text* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977).

⁶ Stuart Moulthrop, *Polymers, Paranoia, and the Rhetorics Hypertext*, http://www.newmediareader.com/cd_samples/WOE/Moulthrop_Polymers.html. Accessed December 2005.

⁷ Ibid.

As a foundational element of Internet discourse then, hypertext promotes understanding of the relationships that exist between online texts. Through these relationships, hypertext makes possible the discursivity found in many online spaces.

The following is a brief survey of discursive practices utilised by listeners and artists. Each of these practices provides the opportunity for either one, or a combination of, the discursive levels I alluded to earlier: listener/listener, artist/listener, and artist/artist. In some, like the forum, interactivity is direct and tangible: one listener writes, another responds, etc. In others, such as the “links” section of an artist’s website, there is a more abstract type of interaction: an intertextual virtual relationship between two artists is nonetheless perceived by the user as a relationship of a sort. The online review serves an informative purpose, but importantly, is also a space where listeners can communicate, indirectly, with other listeners by engaging in critique. File sharing, while largely anonymous and utilitarian in nature, does give the perception of community and dialogue, in that users are making a decision to share music with whomever wishes to have it.

Online listener reviews found at websites like amazon.com have a primarily informative function in that listeners consult and contribute these reviews to aid in decision making. The information present in these review can range from links to biographical information, external links to concert reviews, essentially, any many aspects of the artists public life can be presented. This form of online interaction is largely listener-to-listener, but it is conceivable that artists can and do read these reviews and furthermore, that the distributor uses these reviews in order to gauge the popularity of

certain products. The general purpose of online listener reviews though is informative, meant to indicate to other potential listeners the quality of the artist's work.

Listener reviews are characteristically subjective inasmuch as they engage with the material from the users' own variety of perspectives. It is the multiplicity of subjective views, a polysemy, which is of particular interest in understanding listener reviews dialogically. The presence of multiple voices gathered in one space constitutes a heteroglossia of sorts in that "[t]he simultaneity of these dialogues is merely a particular instance of the larger polyphony of social and discursive forces [...]".⁸ In an online review, the generally heteroglottic properties of online discourse present a challenge to traditional notions of how listeners make decisions about which music to listen to. A magazine review written by a professional critic exists within the larger framework of a multi-vocal discourse on the various qualities of a given artist's work. In a sense, the online review is "word of mouth" writ large. Still other listeners may take up and comment on earlier reviews, turning the set of reviews into a diachronic and dialogic aspect of the site.

The web forum is similarly multivocal, but with less of a direct orientation toward criticism. The presence of multiple voices in a forum create an ever-changing yet constantly accessible "document" that informs the artist and the audience about the artist – it contributes to the "textuality" of the artist. For independent artists this is especially gratifying and useful as it represents the creation of a critical discourse without the restrictions of traditional music media. It is equally gratifying for the listener to have the opportunity to contribute thoughts to the growing text; in a sense, they are participating in the ever-expanding mythology of the artist.

⁸ Holquist, 104.

Francis Mulhern suggests that communities are “not places, but practices of collective identification.”⁹ The dialogue established in online forums creates a sense of community among listeners. While the focus of web forums that are part of an artist’s website is dedicated to discussion of that particular artist and creative works, most forums do not restrict what types of discourse can develop. Thus, somewhat inevitably, these forums become interactive places where members, brought together through a common identification with an artist, share their own personal experiences unrelated to the artist. In essence, they are constructing their own online personalities. As Agger suggests, “unlike pulp media, the Internet allows readers to become writers.”¹⁰ Online reviews and web forums are the spaces where the dialogic potential of the Internet is realised most obviously:

Once the writer engages the hypertextual discourse, it becomes difficult to disengage from the dialogic process which [sic] occurs as the varied voices [...] create an ongoing textual conversation. The ability to add commentary to constructive hypertexts in the form of new lexia and to expand existing hypertexts by linking them together enables the emergence of a multivocal dialogue which [sic] does not privilege a dominant discourse, but encourages hypertext readers to hear and engage all of the voices which are present.¹¹

They are interactive processes that support and enable the creation of online communities while concomitantly embodying the dynamic potential of hypertext as participants often provide links to other web spaces in their comments.

File sharing, enabled by “peer-to-peer” networks (P2P), is the most contentiously debated area of Internet communication. In my opinion, the focus on copyright is

⁹ Quoted in Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, eds. *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989), 17.

¹⁰ Agger, 154.

¹¹ Douglas Eyman, *Hypertext And/As Collaboration in the Computer-Facilitated Writing Classroom* <http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/1.2/binder.html?features/eyman/index.html>. Accessed December 2005.

overshadowing many important areas of possible research into online communicative practices. Trading music through digital means has revolutionised the way in which audiences are exposed to new music – this is largely due to the rapidity with which music files can be transferred between listeners. Consider that one could read an online review, or an entry on a web forum, and (more or less) immediately search for the music discussed by using a P2P application such as Limewire, Aries, or the more complex BitTorrent.

File sharing is an abstract dialogic practice in that it is largely anonymous, although some applications enable “chat” functions that allow users to communicate with those with whom they are sharing files. Ultimately, the dialogue is taking place through the sharing of musical tastes; there is recognition between listeners of the larger community with which they are associated through their musical tastes. This is tangibly represented in statistics fields that are part of the trading software. It is possible, in most P2P applications, to see how many people are currently sharing a file, if they have other files from a similar artist or within a similar genre, and to see what other music someone may possess. The spirit of community and sharing are widely understood as the heart of the file sharing phenomenon. No less a rock authority than *Rolling Stone* magazine, in response to the music industry’s vicious battle against file sharing, stated:

Because of you [the industry], millions of kids will stop wasting time listening to new music and seeking out new bands. No more spreading the word to complete strangers about your artists. No more harmful exposure to thousands of bands via Internet radio either. With any luck they won’t talk about music at all.¹²

¹² Reprinted in Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Anarchist in the Library: How the Clash Between Freedom and Control is Hacking the Real World and Crashing the System* (New York, NY: Basic, 2004), 46.

A drastic and obviously polemic statement, it nonetheless reflects the importance that communication among listeners has to an artist's success.

A similar valorisation of community is expressed in the recent exchange between the representatives of the Dave Matthews Band and the website etree.org. The family of etree websites promote the sharing of live concerts in digital form through an Internet protocol called BitTorrent. etree officially only allows links to *torrents* (the type of file which allows for music to be acquired over a network using BitTorrent) by “taper friendly artists,” those artists who officially allow their concerts to be recorded. Some aspects of the etree websites require free registration and offer the user advanced features: such as the ability to post lists of music for sharing and participating in etree's ever-expanding searchable database of live recordings. It is these “registration only” areas that peaked the curiosity of the Matthews' representatives, who inquired via a letter to etree's administrators: “do they require the necessary fan interaction prior to such trades to satisfy the requirements of the [band's official taping] Statement[?]”¹³ A closer reading of the band's statement indicates the importance of community in their vision and rationale for allowing recordings to be made:

In addition to helping fans recreate the live experience, we hope tape trading will foster greater interaction within the fan community. Any method of trading that does not involve personal fan interaction defeats the spirit of this goal of the taping policy and is not authorized. In particular, posting audio or video files on web sites for streaming to or downloading by the public, is not authorized.¹⁴

The band has not pursued the matter further at the time of writing.

What is interesting here is not so much the legality of compliance between etree and the band, but the similar value placed on community and interaction by both parties.

¹³ <http://bt.etree.org/pic/dmb-letter.jpg>. Accessed December 2005.

¹⁴ Dave Matthews Band website. http://www.dmband.com/legal_popup.asp. Accessed December 2005.

The Dave Matthews Band is one of many artists who promote trading of their live recordings, and this has largely become an online practice. Websites like etree are explicit in their desire to “support the discussion and trading of the highest quality recordings [...]” and furthermore:

Etree.org is a community of music fans that freely trade and distribute the music of bands that allow the audio taping of their live performances. As a community, etree.org condemns anyone that sells or attempts to sell the music available via etree.org.¹⁵

The spirit of interactivity, non-profit sharing, and dialogue are embodied in both the band’s and the etree’s statements.

Ultimately, the artist web site allows for the most direct and obviously useful means for artists to communicate with their audience online. The website is also the locus for the establishment of online discourse – all forums and reviews, and databases of links to downloadable material (or to the software required to share and download), begin with a website experience. An artist website is where a user finds, in addition to biographical and topical information about the artist, links to other artists’ sites, the opportunity to email the artist directly, and often a link to a forum. The site can be experienced as a center point or beginning of sorts in that all the links it contains both internally and externally provide access to the wider network; this is where the hypertextual adventure begins, so to speak, and thus the website is perceived as outside the structure of the network. Of course, the website itself is at once both in the center and on the periphery (a starting point and a destination) of the online experience as it is often possible to arrive at the site through a series of links, which, for the user, originated on another website. The illusion of centrality is also marked by the common practice of

¹⁵ <http://etree.org/legal.html>. Accessed December 2005.

describing the main page of a website the “homepage.” There is, in the internal construction of the website, a “home” or centralised starting place, but in the wider Internet there is no such thing, each web page acts in relation to all others. That is to say, there is no starting place; the whole Internet event, relational as it is, is thus a freeplay of structure.¹⁶

A website is also a conflation of aesthetics. It employs visual, textual, and sound elements. Each of these is semantically loaded to the extent that the viewer experiences these within the context of the artist’s desire to publicise her work, and the tacit knowledge that a website is theoretically available to anyone. It is important to note too that a website is a mediated representation of the “speaking subject.” Artists only present that which they feel is useful to the end goals of their public presentation, and that which they feel is important in giving the viewer an understanding of the artists’ own ethics, values, aesthetic ideals, etc. These last few ideas can be extended to include age, race, gender, etc. and are dependent on conventionally understood indicators of such aspects of identity. Importantly, these can be subverted as in the case of an “electronic” musician privileging visual elements that reference organic substances (such as wood). In this case, the association with “natural” substances subverts the expectations that a technologically based art form (made from plastic and steel and silicone) may conjure similar images in the viewer and would be similarly represented through a technologically focussed design aesthetic.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” in D.H. Richter, *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* (Bedford, MA: Bedford Books, 1998), 878.

¹⁷ This description is inspired by a late 1990s incarnation of woodworkrecordings.com, an independent record label that is now inactive.

Consider too that the visual nature of the website also relies on the presentation of effective imagery. In the area of image politics, or representation, we find many interesting challenges to industry standards of what constitutes “profitable imagery”. For women artists online this is a particularly empowering aspect of administering their own websites.

Though not a recent phenomenon, the primacy of image in popular culture is so well entrenched as to be somewhat transparent in the thoughts of most music fans; that an artist is judged as much on appearance as sound is, in the 21st-century, taken for granted. For most musicians the image they present is almost of equal importance to the sounds they create. In the modern visually dominated climate of music videos, wall sized posters, and slick CD packaging, image and looks are all important.

For independent women artists online, the manner in which they engage with the politics of image is largely under their own control. Halifax singer/songwriter Meaghan Smith states:

I know that unfortunately image has a lot to do with how well you do in certain niches of music. I try not to focus so much on my image though. My website is not plastered with images of myself...I guess that's not really how I want to come across.¹⁸

Of importance here is not that Smith has made the decision to lessen the attention given her image, but rather that *the choice was hers to make*. London, Ontario, singer/guitarist Kristin Sweetland underscores aspects of independent control over her website content by stating,

I like to present myself exactly how I feel I am at any particular moment in time. There is no pretence or contrived representation, except in an

¹⁸ Interview with author.

artistic fashion [...] I just don't always jive with other people's representations of me.¹⁹

She also suggests that there is an added creative benefit to having control over her own image indicating, "I also love to have the opportunity to work with photography and graphic design in order to present myself wholly and completely from my artistic centre."²⁰ Understanding that the Internet gives artists more agency in how their image is presented creates an environment where, as audience members, we begin to re-examine how we relate these images to the artist. No longer do we see the artist's image as a promotional venture directed by an industry reliant on presenting profitable imagery. Instead, we can understand the image as an extension of the artists' overall creative vision – in a sense, the artist and their image are more unified. Therefore, as the Internet gains traction as a promotional space, our re-examination will result in an *alteration* of the artist/image/audience relationship.

For women artists, control and independence are of vital importance in circumventing and challenging the dominance of masculinist ideology within the framework of the music industry. The ability to control her own content – the representation of herself online – changes the way she and her audience view the relationships between her image and her music. The implicit independence of an artist promoting herself online also shifts the perception of the achievements of women artists towards self-determination and away from the historical understanding of these achievements as the result of her association with male superiors.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Mark Ribowsky, *He's A Rebel: The Truth About Phil Spector, Rock'n'Roll's Legendary Madman* (E.P. Dutton: New York, 1989) and Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Clearly, the artist website then, is not simply an informative document. Given the reasonable expectation that an independent artist has control over what is presented, the attention given to aesthetic properties communicates certain aspects of an artist's online persona in a way that simple text or sound could not. The developments of technologies (such as Flash animation), which allow greater flexibility in the temporal unfolding of a website experience, foreground the notion that a website is a distinct avenue for online expression, one that is becoming the primary means of disseminating information about the work of independent artists. It is a new creative outlet that the audience perceives as intimately allied to the music.

A dialogic approach to online discourse establishes the importance and indeed, the *necessity* of community in online behaviour. In a very practical way the Internet also facilitates the coming together of many independent, self-directed artists and opens up the possibilities for dialogue and the sharing of resources among these individuals. Indeed, this is perhaps the most important of the potentials created by the rise of the Internet, and holds the greatest capacity for large-scale social and cultural change.

Activist and author Naomi Klein describes how the Internet has influenced the modern protest movement:

[...] recent mass protests would have been impossible without the Internet, what has been overlooked is how the communication technology that facilitates these campaigns is shaping the movement in its own image. Thanks to the Net, mobilizations are able to unfold with sparse bureaucracy and minimal hierarchy; forced consensus and laboured manifestos are fading into the background, replaced instead by a culture of constant, loosely structured and sometimes compulsive information-swapping.²²

²² Naomi Klein, "Farewell To 'The End Of History': Organization And Vision In Anti-Corporate Movements" in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds., *The Socialist Register: A World of Contradictions* (2002). <http://www.yorku.ca/socreg/Klein.htm>. Accessed: October 22, 2004.

Annabelle Sreberny suggests a similar vision of networking:

[t]he decentralized women's movement, using a variety of mediated forms, is particularly interesting articulation of the new global networking [...] there are a huge range of women's media and cultural activities on the ground, often ignored by mainstream and malestream commentary, that nevertheless are channels for women's' empowerment and thus for social developments.²³

I believe that the Internet is similarly influencing independent music distribution.

Musicians such as the women discussed in this paper share an attraction to a technology that valorises, through its construction, social and community based activities.

In the history of decidedly feminist music movements, and indeed in the history of most social movements, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the ideals of community and networking. These communities, as Francis Mulhern suggests are "not places, but practices of collective identification."²⁴ The Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s expressed notions of community through the local (and sometimes larger) distribution networks of independently produced 'Zines. The Womyn's music festivals of the 1970s espoused similar ideas of community.²⁵ The concept of networking is important for any musician who is attempting to make a living through their creative works. However, I believe that networking is vital for women musicians who have to contend not only with the vagaries of a system based on the subjective valuation of creative endeavours, but also with the entrenched gender biases existing within this system.

²³ Annabelle Sreberny, "Feminist Internationalism: Imaging and building global civil society" in Daya Kishan Thussu, ed., *Electronic Empires: Global Media and Local Resistance* (London: Arnold, 1998) 209, 213.

²⁴ Quoted in Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, eds. *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989), 17.

²⁵ See Marion Leonard, "Rebel Girl, You Are The Queen of My World: Feminism, 'subculture' and grrrl power" in Sheila Whiteley, ed., *Sexing The Groove* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

Madalyn Sklar spearheads *GoGirlsMusic.com*, a gathering point for women musicians who want to learn about the music industry, make contacts, and share resources. Borne out of a common frustration among women musicians,²⁶ *GoGirlsMusic* is founded upon the ideals of communication and networking as a means to both relieve the tension experienced by women artists in a male dominated music world and gain exposure and success as a musician. Sklar describes the circumstances that led to *GoGirls*:

In 1996, I came up with the idea of starting an online women’s music community after being extremely frustrated with the way I was treated at the local guitar shops in Houston, where I live. I was tired of being ignored and figured there must be others out there experiencing this, too. The Internet was new back then — it seemed like a great way to connect with other female musicians.²⁷

Sklar’s valorisation of connectivity and cooperation is evident in most of her public statements about *GoGirlsMusic*: “It’s not just me who runs *GoGirlsMusic*,” she asserts, “it’s everyone. We all make it happen together.”²⁸ The website contains articles on topics vital to understanding the music business, opportunities to network with other musicians, and, remarkably, *free* coaching/consultation sessions provided by Madalyn Sklar herself. Interestingly, *GoGirlsMusic* has also entered into the primary debate concerning the Internet and music sharing by promoting use of the *Weed* file-sharing model, which rewards both artists and fans financially for sharing music online.²⁹

²⁶ See Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 30-31.

²⁷ Julia Bloch, “DIY Queen Behind The Music” in *Curve* (v. 14, n. 5)

<http://www.curvemag.com/Detailed/587.html>. Accessed: November 20, 2004.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ From the *Buzz Music* website: “The concept works specifically like this. Once the free Weed Media Activator is downloaded, Weed files are immediately available for sharing. You can play the file three times for free. After the third time, you are asked to pay for the file at a price determined by the artist. Purchasing a track allows you to play the song on up to three PCs, burn them onto a CD or transfer them to a portable device. You can also share the file with anyone you like as long as it isn’t tampered with. If the person you shared it with purchases the file, you will receive a payment as a distributor through a PayPal

Meaghan Smith also emphasises the value of community in successfully promoting her career as a musician, stating that, “[...] working with each other and promoting each other is the best way to go. Everyone gets ahead that way [...]”³⁰ In addition to her own content, which includes upcoming appearances, sample audio tracks, and some pictures, Smith’s site also offers links to other musicians with whom she has worked.³¹ Smith’s comments echo Alexa Freeman and Valle Jones’ suggestion that “feminist communication must incorporate the notion that to communicate is to share, that it is, through whatever medium, a process by which something is exchanged [...]”³² Meaghan Smith further emphasises the importance of networking with other women artists: “it’s good to have a group of people that you’re able to play with because they’re in the same genre.”³³ Smith indicates a very practical view of the use of networking, namely, that of finding similar musicians with whom she can collaborate. Furthermore, and this is important when considering the Internet as a venue for social change, Freeman and Jones also maintain that “this principle of mutuality demands both that [women] have access to the tools of communication and [...] actively participate in it.”³⁴

There are also websites such as *littleredhenmusic.com*, the web presence for the women’s music collective *Little Red Hen*. The site features regular updates on the members’ touring schedules and special events in addition to providing sample audio

account. The distribution of money breaks down as follows: the artist always receives 50% of each sale; 20% goes to you as a distributor. The person who shared the file with you gets 10% and the person who shared the file with them gets 5%. Weed, like any good manager, collects 15%.”

<http://www.buzzcommunicationsmusic.com/onstage/articles/article?id=22>. Accessed: November 15, 2004.

³⁰ Interview with author.

³¹ <http://www.meaghansmith.com>. Accessed: November 28, 2004.

³² Alexa Freeman and Valle Jones, “Creating Feminist Communications” in *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* (v. 3, Fall 1976), 10.

³³ Interview with author.

³⁴ Interview with author.

files for downloading. There seems to be no other aim of the site other than to provide information. While *Little Red Hen* does provide links to online stores or to artist websites where their members' recordings can be purchased, the site is decidedly non-commercial. The main aim of *Little Red Hen* is to provide artists with a sense of community, from the website:

Little Red Hen is an artist collective whose itinerant ways form a partnership built upon friendship and the power of music. Together we bring our songs and stories into the heart of our community, supporting one another on the road. Wherever you are, you're never far from a Little Red Hen.³⁵

Kristin Sweetland emphasises the importance of communities like *Little Red Hen*:

As an independent musician who spends a lot of time alone on the road it is so essential to know that I have community. My sisters keep me strong. I have had the best experiences and developed incredible relationships with my dearest female musical peers. I have leaned so much and made such amazing connections both with and through networking with other women [...] these ladies have saved my life more than once³⁶

As we increasingly see artists united and declaring their valuation of community and networking, our notion of how the popular music enterprise could function will begin to change. Our acceptance of a compartmentalised and centralised creative space – one which separates art and artists by genre, label affiliation, and gender – will become less and less absolute. Music piracy represents *only one* facet of the myriad of subversive potentials afforded by the Internet. Independent women artists, simply by choosing to promote themselves online, are directly challenging and reshaping the traditional gender biases of the music industry. Drawing on a history of valuing networking and communication as a means of achieving success, women artists are exploiting the

³⁵ *Little Red Hen*. <http://www.littleredhenmusic.com/index.html>. Accessed: November 28, 2004.

³⁶ Interview with author.

potential of the Internet and, in doing so, further challenge the centralised power structure of the existing entertainment industry.

The Internet is constantly being reinvented, every moment new pages appear, changes to existing pages take place, and pages disappear. As a discursive formation then, the Internet acts as any other, in a constant state of flux, unfixed and ever changing. This fundamental instability creates a place where traditional ideas of dialogue are constantly re-evaluated; and through these re-evaluations, change, like that which is underway for many independent women artists, takes place. We can consider the possibilities for those voices having been long marginalised by the traditional music industry business model, those voices that do not always align with “what sells”, or “what looks good.” In fact, our very understanding of the qualitative and quantitative criteria for success comes under question when “sales” are threatened by wide-spread free access to music and the primacy of “image” is subverted by artists’ free choice to include, or not include, visual representations of themselves on their website.

Ken Hirschkop suggests that after the establishment of modern nation-states, the idea that “access to an arena of public vernacular discourse was equivalent to access to political power.”³⁷ He also notes that despite the advent of “mass” media and culture, democratisation and public debate did not necessarily follow.³⁸ Internet technologies, which are almost impossible to regulate, are – in the hands of individuals – powerful tools through which vast networks of communication are possible. The fervour with which the recording and movie industries have reacted to the growth of online file sharing speaks volumes about the dramatic effects of the increased opportunity for people

³⁷ Hirschkop and Shepherd, 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

to communicate and share ideas. Lawrence Lessig asserts, “the Internet has unleashed an extraordinary possibility for many to participate in the process of building and cultivating a culture that reaches far beyond local boundaries.”³⁹ These boundaries are now knowable because of our ability to transcend them through networking technologies and ultimately, as Agger suggests, “the issue of boundaries, fortunately, is dialectical.”⁴⁰ While there are, most certainly, many aspects of technology that can be dangerous to the privacy of the individual, it is the emancipatory possibilities afforded by the discursive practices mentioned in this paper that interest me the most. The importance of individuals being able to “ingress into the culture, [...] to read and inform themselves and then to launch into writing, creating culture from the ground up [...]”⁴¹ presents new challenges to the way in which we understand our own participation in the creation of culture.

As an area of scholarly study, particularly in music, the Internet remains under-researched. It is a vast and complex combination of multiple identities, political agendas, cultural works, and economic concerns; an infinite space for dialogue. What is of utmost importance though is that it *is* dialogue, it *is* communication. I have suggested throughout this paper that it is the ability to have open-ended, infinitely referential, and constantly evolving discourse over vast geographical areas that presents the biggest challenge to entrenched ideas about how people relate to culture. The nature of Internet communication as discussed here is one where the increased agency of artists and listeners constitutes a powerful force in destabilising the traditional music industry. I

³⁹ Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2004), 9.

⁴⁰ Agger, 156.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

have sought to examine specific areas of online discourse in an effort to show that the cultural impact of Internet and music discourse is perhaps more important than its economic effects. Yet, whether the debate is over the morality of content or the ownership of intellectual property, the Internet *remains a public space*. Study of the potential for widespread social change that the Internet provides need not be obscured by the attempts of the entertainment industry to focus the debate on the aspect of ownership; there are so many other important topics to address. The dialogic space that is the Internet demands the active participation of its users, and part of this participation must include critical examination of the Internet's social and cultural potentials.

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