

**STEELTOWN SCENE:
GENRE, PERFORMANCE AND IDENTITY IN THE
ALTERNATIVE INDEPENDENT MUSIC SCENE
IN HAMILTON, ONTARIO**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the independent alternative music scene in the city of Hamilton, Ontario, also known, with reference to its industrial heritage, as "Steeltown." Drawing on the growing literature on the relationship between place and popular music, on my own experience as a local musician, direct observation of performances and of venues and other sites of interaction, as well as ethnographic interviews with scene participants, I focus on the role of space, genre and performance within the scene, and their contribution to a sense of local identity. In particular, I argue that the live performance event is essential to the success of the local music scene, as it represents an immediate process, a connection between performers and audience, one which is temporally rooted in the present. My research suggests that the Hamilton alternative music scene has become postmodern, embracing forms of "indie" music that lie outside of mainstream taste, and particularly those which engage in the exploration and deconstruction of pre-existing genres. Eventually, however, the creative successes of an "indie scene" permeate mass culture and often become co-opted into the popular music mainstream, a process which, in turn, promotes new experimentation and innovation at the local level.

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Chapter One: Introducing Hamilton and its Music

In 1973, Gordie Lewis purchased a copy of the eponymous first album released by the New York Dolls. Instantly drawn to its energy and style, Lewis shared the album with a small group of friends. From that group of friends, bands like the Forgotten Rebels, the Shakers and Lewis's own Teenage Head would emerge. Fronted by the charismatic Frankie Venom (real name Frank Kerr), and driven by Lewis' blend of rock-a-billy, rock n'roll, and punk, Teenage Head would achieve modest success in Hamilton and subsequently would help propel the Toronto punk scene of the late 1970s to make Toronto one of the dominant punk rock centres, behind only London and New York. Bands like the Forgotten Rebels would also help to put Hamilton on the rock and roll map and secure the city's place in rock history. The Forgotten Rebels song, "Surfin' on Heroin," for example, still stands as one of the great punk rock songs of all time, emphasizing the nihilism of early punk attitudes. It is also one of the first examples of Sex Pistols-style anarchy and nihilism in North American punk rock.

In 1991, members of a young alternative rock band, Tristan Psionic, created Sonic Unyon Records. The independent label started as a vehicle for the release of the band's own early material, but in 1993 it formally incorporated and began to record and distribute the music of other bands. A collection of young, musically diverse and innovative acts helped to make Sonic Unyon one of the most important independent

alternative labels in Canada by the mid 1990s. Its increased stature attracted Canadian artists such as Treble Charger and Hayden, as well as Frank Black (ex-Pixies) and the Archers of Loaf frontman, Erich Bachmann, both of whom released multiple albums through the Hamilton-based label, and also added the city to their touring schedules.

In this thesis, I describe and analyse the independent music scene in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. I examine the relationships between the music, participants and processes of the scene, in order to develop a framework to understand how scenes develop, are sustained, and eventually decline. I suggest that, while many alternative music scenes in the last thirty years have existed as sub-cultures, struggling to maintain their distinctiveness from dominant hegemonic cultural ideals, Hamilton is an example of a different evolutionary path in which a number of alternative and independent (“indie”) scenes co-exist, and that this co-existence reflects the loose postmodernity of contemporary western culture.

For a number of reasons, to be explored more fully in this thesis, the Hamilton alternative independent music scene reflects an accepting, exploratory environment wherein more exotic and experimental forms of popular music may be created. Genres and sub-genres of rock that were once regarded as “alternative,” such as punk, grunge, metal, and new wave, have largely been subsumed into the mainstream of popular music. Such genres can be seen throughout North America and internationally, and have become fixtures of local music scenes. They are reflections of contemporary mass youth culture which has embraced alternative music as a genre in and of itself. In using the term “*alternative independent music*,” therefore, I wish to distinguish more obscure and experimental forms of music-making from these (now mainstream) forms. It is these

truly “alternative” and “independent” modes, I suggest, which reflect the distinctive nature of the alternative music scene in Hamilton.

I will argue in this thesis that the contemporary Hamilton alternative music scene reflects a postmodern cultural space, embracing deconstruction and exploration. I will attempt to establish the aesthetics of Hamilton sound. I will also examine the relationships between genre, venue and performance. Finally, I will show that the Hamilton alternative music scene is most clearly defined through social relationships and conventions of performance.

It is not my intention to claim here that Hamilton is a major hub for independent music. However, as a smaller city, Hamilton has become a relatively influential centre of alternative music in Canada and is therefore an intriguing place to study. Moreover, because the local music scene is relatively concentrated, and therefore the number of people actively participating in independent alternative music is relatively small, the scene is accessible for the purpose of study, allowing for a detailed examination of the processes and participants in the local music scene.

The theoretical arguments that I will attempt to develop and support with this thesis are as follows: a) that alternative music scenes exist through a system of articulations of various processes and that the state of these scenes is in flux; b) that contemporary alternative music or “indie” scenes are immediate and dominated by the present, placing great emphasis on live performance; c) that social processes and aesthetic exploration have gained significance within local music scenes, while the importance of political motivations and the expression of new sounds and styles has diminished.

On Localities, Scenes and “Indie” Music

According to George O. Carney (2003), most research by cultural geographers on the relationships between music and place falls into one or more of ten general categories; these range from spatial differences in the musical tastes of audiences to the association of particular musical styles with certain cities and/or the inclusion of references to certain places or geographical characteristics in song lyrics (see Figure 1, below).¹

Figure 1 - Music and Place in Cultural Geography: Ten Dimensions

1. Spatial differences among nations, regions or places in the musical preferences or tastes of people (differences in audience response or consumption).
2. Geographical transfers of music from place to place along with human migration, trade and communications networks (e.g., transnational exchanges of artists between countries, import/export of music CDs).
3. Spatial dimensions of the organization of the music industry and music-related media.
4. The effects of music on the cultural landscape (e.g., spatial concentrations of music venues such as Beale Street in Memphis, Music Row in Nashville).
5. Interrelationships of music with other cultural traits in a spatial context (e.g., country music and car racing in the American south).
6. Relationship of music to the natural environment (e.g., environmental or geographical references in lyrical content, outdoor concerts).
7. The role of music to promote nationalism (or anti-national sentiments), regionalism, etc.
8. Geographical origins and diffusion of specific genres or sub-genres of music (e.g., the blues from the Delta to Chicago).
9. Psychological and symbolic elements of music invoking a sense of place.
10. Evolution of particular musical styles, genres or sounds in specific cities or regions (e.g., the Motown sound, the Seattle grunge scene, East Coast vs West Coast scenes in hip-hop).

Source: George Carney, “Music and Place” in Carney, ed., *The Sounds of People and Places*, 4th ed., Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003: 206-207

As Carney notes, the concept of “place” itself is applied to disparate contexts, denoting a

wide range of geographical phenomena, from particular houses (e.g., birthplace) or streets, to towns and cities, states or provinces and regions, countries or continents.

In similar fashion, the term “local” may be used to denote spaces or identities of varying scale. In the context of globalization, “local” music may mean anything that is not associated with the global (often read “American”) music industry, dominated by a handful of multinational corporations. On this scale, “local” may refer to indigenous folk musics or to “national” popular music forms or scenes which have to be protected from cultural imperialism and transnational takeovers (see Fairley 2001; Fenster 1995; Wallis & Malm 1984). Elsewhere, ‘local’ is used to refer to the production and consumption of popular music “in the context of specific urban and rural settings” (Bennett, 2000: 52). Hence, even within the nation, identification of music or musicians with a particular place or locale may be applied to regions, metropolitan areas, rural hinterlands, or even suburbs and districts within a city. In the identification of musicians, bands or sounds with particular places, much depends upon who is writing for whom and in what context. As John Street observes of the British context:

In the British pop press, London is broken into specific suburbs; whereas Manchester, Glasgow and Liverpool remain single conurbations; while foreign performers are, for the most part, allocated to a country (ABBA came from Sweden; the Sugarcubes from Iceland). America is the exception, where British readers are made to focus on single US cities (Seattle or Minneapolis), or even specific districts: Fishbone become “the grasshopping musical stylists from South Central Los Angeles” (Street 1995,256).

Noting that locality is a recurring reference point in writing about popular music - so much so that it assumes the role of an ideological construct, often equated with contested terms such as 'authenticity' - Street goes on to examine a number of ways in which music and locality are related in the rhetoric of writing about popular music. These are: locality as industrial base; locality as social experience; locality as aesthetic perspective; locality as political experience; locality as community; and locality as scene (Street 1995, 256-257). I shall return to some of these other usages later in the thesis (especially in Chapter 3), but here I will focus on the last two of Street's linkages between music and locality: these are "community" and "scene."

Some authors (for example Peterson and Bennett 2004, 3) credit Will Straw with the first use of the term "scene" as an academic construct in popular music studies. Straw distinguishes between music scenes and musical communities in the following terms:

The latter [a community] presumes a population group whose composition is relatively stable — according to a wide range of sociological variables — and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within a geographically specific historical heritage. A music scene, in contrast, is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization.

(Straw 1991, 273)

Straw's use of musical community as a relatively stable population of practising

musicians and fans, defined by their adherence to a particular genre or type of music in a specific geographical location (as in “the Montreal jazz community” or “the Toronto blues community”), is somewhat similar to the concept of “networks” of musicians proposed by Ruth Finnegan in her ethnographic study of music-making in Milton Keynes, a town in the English Midlands (Finnegan 1989).

A “scene,” for Straw, however, involves more transient sets of musical practices, both production and consumption, which take root in a particular locale, or in several locales at the same time (for example, local “indie” scenes or “rave” scenes in the early 1990s). Hence, while the term originated as a description of local musical practices, Straw left the way open for later authors who have separated “scene” from a particular local context by referring to “translocal scenes” and even “virtual” ones (see, for example, case studies in Bennett and Peterson 2004). While Holly Kruse, for example, argues that, in certain cases, translocal properties of music produce affective communities or scenes that transcend the need for direct, face-to-face interaction in a localized context (Kruse 1993), others suggest that such usages serve to reduce the usefulness of the term; for example, according to Brian Longhurst:

One of the issues raised by this expansion of the conceptualization of the idea of scene to include the translocal and the virtual is that it may reduce the specificity of the concept itself and make it descriptive rather than analytical. Thus, while it may be useful to point out that scenes have translocal and virtual dimensions, it is important to retain the idea that a scene involves some measure of co-present interaction. (Longhurst 2007, 253)

Following Longhurst, in this thesis I intend to use “scene” in its original and more restricted sense, as a set of practices surrounding the production and consumption of popular music in a specific locale.

According to Sara Cohen, the term “scene” is “used to describe situations in which distinctions between informal and formal music activity, and between the activities and roles of music audiences, producers and performers, are blurred” (1999, 239). But, while the scene is therefore largely a social construct, defined by the networks and patterns of interaction that occur among its members, institutions or infrastructures are also important as sites for these social activities. Hence, Cohen continues:

The scene is created through these people and their activities and interactions ... Such relationships involve a regular circulation and exchange of: information, advice and gossip; instruments, technical support and additional services; music recordings, journals, and other products. Such relationships comprise an informal economy. ... Central locations for interaction among scene participants include record shops and rehearsal and recording studios Live performance venues also act as a social hub of the scene. (Cohen 1999, 240-241)

Other authors have similarly emphasized the importance of both the “soft infrastructure” (social networks and interactions) and the “hard infrastructure” (institutions) for the development and maintenance of local music scenes. Hence, for example, John Connell and Chris Gibson propose that “before a ‘sound’ or ‘scene’ can develop, there should be both a ‘critical mass’ of active musicians or fans, and a set of physical infrastructures of

recording, performance and listening” (Connell and Gibson 2003, 102). Such physical infrastructures include recording studios, venues (“with sympathetic booking agents”), record companies or alternative labels, “methods of information flow and exchange (such as radio and street press)” and distribution outlets, such as record stores (102). Nick Baxter-Moore (2006) also makes a case for including local music stores among the supporting institutions (see also Tagasuki 1997).

In later chapters of the thesis (especially in chapter 2), I shall examine many of these infrastructural elements as spaces and places important to the development of the Hamilton “indie” scene. First, however, I should explain what I mean when I use the word “scene” to describe “indie” music in Hamilton. My use of the term “scene” draws on much of the critical work on the subject; at the same time it is based on personal experience and understanding. Specifically, I will be using the term “scene” to refer to the “indie scene” in Hamilton. The “indie scene” is one portion of the broader alternative music scene in Hamilton.

Historically, the term “indie” has signified independently released music, that is, music that is not recorded and distributed by major record labels. However, in her analysis of independent music culture in Britain, Wendy Fonarow lists at least four other ways in which the term is commonly used: “(2) a genre of music that has a particular sound and stylistic conventions; (3) music that communicates a particular ethos; (4) a category of critical assessment; and (5) music that can be contrasted with other genres, such as mainstream pop, dance, blues, country, or classical” (Fonarow 2006, 26). The contemporary use of the term “indie” therefore takes on both musicological and ideological connotations associated with genre. Indie music is often lo-fi, or at least

produced on a modest budget. It is usually based around traditional rock instruments, including drums, guitar (acoustic or electric), bass guitar, and keyboards. Electronic music and music involving electronic manipulation of traditional instruments can also be included; however, this is only the case if the music is distanced from dance music and dance culture, for example, in the case of electronic noise bands, or rock/electronic hybrids, like Le Tigre or Metric. Although not necessarily reflective of a specific sound or style, “indie” has come to signify that which is outside the mass youth culture, or the so-called “alternative” mainstream. This includes styles of music ranging from dissonant noise to hook-riddled pop-rock. But most importantly, for insiders or adherents, “indie” has increasingly been associated with the contested idea of “authenticity” in popular music (see Fonarow 2006, ch 2, esp. 28-30), a subject to which I will return later in this thesis.

The *indie scene* then, is one that may exist alongside, but has set itself apart from, the local punk, folk, blues and even rock’n’roll communities. This may be illustrated by reference to better-known “indie” rock scenes. For example, in the early 1990s “The Seattle Scene” referred only to specific bands associated with grunge, not to all the music played in Seattle. Similarly, the “D.C. Scene” specifically refers to political hardcore bands like Minor Threat and Fugazi. In this thesis, therefore, the *Hamilton music community* will refer to the entirety of music and music-making practices, rooted historically and geographically in the city, while the *Hamilton indie scene* refers only to that portion of the community involved in production and consumption of musical styles and sub-genres which are outside the commercial mainstream.

Introducing Hamilton

Hamilton is located in south western Ontario at the western end of Lake Ontario. Geographically, Hamilton is bisected by the Niagara Escarpment, dividing the city into two main parts; first, the downtown area and, second, upper Hamilton which is commonly known by locals as “the Mountain.”² The downtown area includes the Westdale village (at the far west end of the city), west and east central downtown, and the far east end, which borders on the neighbouring city of Stoney Creek. The major transportation arteries of the downtown area are King St. (one-way westbound) and Main St (one-way eastbound) which lie parallel, one city block apart. The Hamilton Mountain is bisected by two major arteries, the Lincoln Alexander Parkway, which runs east/west, and Upper James St., a leg of King’s Highway #6, which runs north-south.

According to the 2006 Canadian census, the population of the City of Hamilton was 504,559. The population was seventy five percent Christian, and predominantly English-speaking (seventy-three percent), with visible minorities representing only 13.6 percent of the total.

Hamilton’s industrial base has traditionally been dominated by heavy manufacturing, and in particular by two large steel companies, Dofasco and Stelco, giving rise to the city’s nickname, “Steeltown.” However, the traditional industries, located to the north end of downtown near Hamilton harbour, have been in decline for many decades. Employment has been growing in service, educational and health science industries, most located in the suburbs or in the west end which is also home to McMaster University. Hence, parts of the downtown area look run-down and prosperity tends to be lower there than in the suburbs.

In his influential study of the alternative music scene in Austin, Texas, Barry Shank begins with “an imaginary tour” of some of the most significant sites in the scene (Shank, 1994: chapter 1). I plan to follow his example here by devoting part of this introduction to the description of significant venues and spaces associated with the Hamilton alternative scene. The majority of these spaces are located in the east and west sections of downtown Hamilton, with significant density in the west and west central areas. Many of the venues and locations mentioned here will be described in further detail in later chapters.

In terms of relevant musical venues and spaces, east downtown offers very little. Although Gage Park, home of several of Hamilton’s large-scale music festivals, is located in this area, these events—such as “It’s Your Festival” or the “Festival of Friends”—tend to showcase Canadian folk and roots music, as opposed to bands representing the local alternative music scene.

East central downtown is a more significant area for its contribution to the alternative scene. Several blocks east of central downtown, Club Absinthe (formerly the Hudson), has regularly housed alternative music performances over the last ten years. Several blocks south, near the base of the Hamilton escarpment, sits the city’s most historic alternative venue, the Corktown. It has been a well-known punk and alternative venue for over thirty years.

Moving west into the central downtown area is King William Street (one block north of King St.), the former home of the X-Club, an extremely important venue in the history of both local and Canadian music. The Underground, one of a few major venues in the contemporary alternative music scene, is also located on King William Street.

Around the corner, on Caroline Street, another bar venue, AFB (formerly Home), has also staged many local alternative music performances. Further north, on Wilson Street (still less than one kilometre from King St.), one will find the offices of Sonic Unyon Records, as well as the label's record store. Next door is the long standing Dr. Disc record shop, which has been a key hub of the scene over the last fifteen years. This small stretch of downtown also includes the Transit Union Hall (the official hall of the Hamilton Student Railway, or Hamilton transit system, union members). From the late 1990s until 2002, the Transit Union Hall hosted a large number of all-ages alternative performances. Also, in one of the loft spaces above these locations, Sonic Unyon opened a short-lived, but popular performance space. Nearby, on King Street, the third major alternative record store, "Cheapies," is located. This area of the city has also been the home to several small venues and bars, including Joe Buttinsky's (formerly known as Grapes and Things, and as Dinosaur's), and Dante's.

Arguably, west downtown is the most vibrant area in the geography of the music scene. Hess Village (a collection of over a dozen pubs, clubs and bars) on Hess Street, has traditionally been a home to local folk, blues and cover bands. Some venues, such as 33 Hess and Mermaid's Lounge, have showcased local alternative music, but this has not been their main focus. This area has also been home to the Bauhaus Café, an art-house styled coffee shop, which often featured eclectic performances. One block from Hess Village on King Street, however, is the Casbah, currently one of the most prominent local alternative venues. Next to the Casbah is La Luna's, a Lebanese restaurant. The original downtown La Luna's was located a few blocks east on King Street. This small restaurant/bar housed many important alternative music performances for many years,

despite its cramped space. When the restaurant re-located to a larger building, the Casbah venue was built alongside. The west downtown area also includes Copps Coliseum, a large arena capable of housing roughly 20,000 people for major musical and sporting events, and Hamilton Place, a smaller auditorium of a few thousands seats that offers orchestral performances as well as some popular music performances.

Few live music venues are located on the Hamilton Mountain; most are sports bars that sometimes feature cover bands. As one moves away from the downtown core, therefore, it becomes harder to find venues associated with the Hamilton music scene. The physical manifestation of the scene (its “hard infrastructure”) is densely concentrated in a relatively small space, although, of course, the musicians, audience members and others who constitute its social networks are drawn from a much wider area.

Methodology and Purpose

It is my goal to undertake a contemporary study of a small, yet prosperous, local music scene and to make some modest contribution to the existing body of theory on music and place. Few studies have been published on contemporary Canadian music scenes (most notably, Straw 1991; Stahl 2004; Baxter-Moore 2006) and there has been little reported work previously undertaken on Hamilton.

Many of the best-known empirical studies of local music communities, scenes or subcultures have been based on ethnographic research (see, for example, Finnegan 1989; Cohen 1991; Shank 1994; Thornton 1995; contributions to Bennett and Peterson 2004). Since my purpose is not only to describe the Hamilton indie scene, but also understand its meaning from the perspective of its participants, my principal research strategy in

collecting evidence for this thesis has been qualitative and ethnographic in orientation (see REB clearance for the proposed research in Appendix A).

First, I have drawn upon my own experience and knowledge acquired as a participant (both musician and fan) in the local scene for the past sixteen years. In this time, I have played in eight different bands, four of which have recorded CDs, and have performed at all of the Hamilton “indie”/alternative venues mentioned in this thesis (see Appendix B).

Second, I have undertaken direct observation of performance styles and interactions between performers and audiences at numerous live concerts or gigs during the conduct of my research (see Appendix C). During the period in which formal research was undertaken for this thesis, September 2004-April 2006, I attended ‘Eclectricity’—a weekly showcase for independent artists from Hamilton and elsewhere—at the Casbah Lounge. Each weekend I would, if possible, attend shows on Friday and Saturday, usually at the Casbah, The Underground or Absinthe. I would also attend mid-week performances at other venues and clubs if the opportunity arose. Taking into account the years before and after my principal research period, I would estimate that I have attended over 500 indie performances in Hamilton, including every major indie venue (for more information on the observation process, see Appendix C).

Third, my thesis draws upon the contributions made by a number of informants, all members of the local Hamilton scene. These included other musicians, club owners and promoters, venue staff, record store staff, radio and club disc jockeys. In some cases, I conducted open-format, but relatively formal, qualitative interviews, each lasting two to three hours. In others, contact with informants was less formal, consisting of numerous

shorter conversations, e-mails and, sometimes, message board postings. These informants are listed in Appendix D, below.

These sources of information will be supported by textual analysis and analysis of performance. I have examined sound recordings, video recordings and observations of live performances to analyse specific elements of the scene, in particular genre, performance and sound, as well as evidence of local “identity.” The recordings and performances are the principal “products” of the local music scene and are therefore key sources of evidence in understanding the way it works.

Finally, evidence and arguments derived from the ethnographic and textual forms of analysis are also supported through archival research, with particular attention to local music magazines and newspapers which, rather than the mainstream media, are more useful sources of information on alternative and indie music.

The Organization of the Thesis

Following this introduction, the second chapter will focus on the history of the Hamilton indie scene and the contributions made by significant places (record shops, radio stations, performance venues) in which participants interact. I will examine the significance of history and specific spaces to the local scene and its participants. Barry Shanks’ ethnographic study of another particular scene, in Austin, Texas (Shank, 1994), is a relevant example; in particular, his chapter on “Punk Rock at Raul’s: The Performance of Contradiction” provides a detailed analysis of a venue’s relationship to the local music scene, a topic which is explored in more detail in my second chapter.

In *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes* (2003), Holly Kruse

also examines the role of space within an independent scene. She explains, “The institutions of independent pop/rock music — record stores, clubs, record companies, college radio stations — all helped to locate music scene participants within particular physical spaces, within a structure of social and economic relations, and within received and personal narratives of the local and national histories of indie music” (Kruse 2003, 113). Again, in Chapter Two, using the views of my informants and other kinds of historical evidence, I will examine the importance of such locations in the Hamilton indie scene.

Chapter Three will examine the relationship between musical genres and the local indie music scene. In addition to my research interviews, I will explore local indie genres through analysis of recorded material and observation of live performance. Some Hamilton bands/artists included in this study are Wax Mannequin, Chore, Sailboats are White, The Forgotten Rebels, The Inflation Kills and Mayor McCa. Since the concepts of “sound” and “scene” are often linked in studies of popular music and the local (see, for example, Connell and Gibson 2003, ch 5), I will also address the notion of “local sound”, in an attempt to identify whether there is a distinct sound of the Hamilton indie scene.

Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (1996) is of particular value in suggesting approaches to the analyses of genre, sound and musical aesthetics. Using Frith’s insights, I develop an aesthetic of a Hamilton indie sound, by determining how the cultural experience of Hamilton is reflected in the music. I also show that genre is a sustaining force in local music scenes. As Frith explains, “It is through genres that we experience music and musical relations, that we bring together the aesthetic and the ethical” (Frith 1996, p95). Musically, the alternative scene represents an

analysis, exploration and deconstruction of genre.

In *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*, Jason Toynbee suggests, “There is a tendency amongst popular music makers to idealize style. What seems to be at stake is a notion of the perfected genre made up of a set of sonic and musical attributes at the dead-centre of the class, so to speak” (2000, 104). However, my research suggests that, within the Hamilton indie scene, the “perfected genre” has been supplanted by a perfected deconstruction and/or reconstruction of genre. This is suggestive of a postmodern approach to genre — where the “perfected genre” becomes a negotiated path through an established genre, directed toward the perceived alternative characteristics.

In Chapter Four of the thesis I explore the role of performance in the Hamilton indie scene. An important aspect of my analysis is the relationship between the audience and the performers of the local indie scene, as this dynamic is the essence of the scene itself; the act of ‘going to shows’ is the driving social force which sustains the scene. Complementing my research interviews will be specific and general observations from personal attendance at local live performances at all of the current local venues and most of the significant performance sites in Hamilton over the past ten to fifteen years.

Again, I will draw on Simon Frith’s work. He emphasizes the non-textual nature of performance, and examines the difference between the “staged” and the everyday in music culture. Most crucial is his statement that “‘performance’ defines a social—or communicative—process. It requires an audience, and is dependent, in this sense, on interpretation” (Frith, 1996, 205). In my examination of live alternative music performance, therefore, I will examine the role of the performer, the relationship between

audience and performer, and the significance of the live performance event.

In the fifth chapter, I will conclude the thesis with a summary of the principal research findings and an assessment of the concepts and theoretical frameworks developed and applied in the preceding chapters, highlighting the functioning and distinctiveness of the local Hamilton scene. Specifically, I will examine how the constituent elements, especially its local infrastructure and institutions, help to maintain the scene and the ways in which the conventions of specific sub-genres and particular styles and modes of live performance combine to create a distinctive Hamilton indie scene.

Endnotes to Chapter 1

1. The first part of this discussion draws on Baxter-Moore 2004, with that author's permission.
2. The geographical focus of my research is on the 'original' City of Hamilton, as it existed before the January 2001 amalgamation with neighbouring municipalities of Wentworth County, including Stoney Creek, Dundas and Ancaster, created the Hamilton mega-city, or what is now referred to as the 'new' City of Hamilton.

Chapter Two: Cultural Spaces and Musical Histories

There is widespread consensus in the growing literature on music and place that, within a local music scene, history is tied to cultural space. By “cultural space,” I mean any particular location or institution in which social interactions occur which actively contribute to the creation or maintenance of the scene. While the concept can be generalized to include regional designations and areas, such as the string of pubs which make up Hamilton’s “Hess Village,” cultural spaces can also be identified as specific locations and arenas of activity, to include live performance venues, radio stations, record stores, music stores, and local media.

In this chapter, I examine the role of both history and place within the Hamilton alternative music scene, and further introduce many of the leading participants and important spaces and institutions within the scene. My principal timeframe will be the last two decades, though I will also examine some early contributors to the alternative scene, dating back to a maximum of thirty to thirty-five years ago.

Hamilton’s alternative music scene can mark its modern roots alongside many other North American cities. As what was then called “alternative” music culture began to be absorbed into mainstream youth culture in the early 1990s, most cities saw a rise in alternative music forms, or at the least, an increased level of exposure for them. More personally, this is *my* alternative music culture. I was in the eighth grade when Nirvana’s

Nevermind was released in 1991. Hamilton's Sonic Unyon Records was also established around this time. I went to my first "indie show" in grade ten. I caught a chartered bus at Dr. Disc, a significant local independent record store (which will be discussed further, below), and went to Lee's Palace in Toronto to see the entire roster of the Sonic Unyon label play at what was called "The Sonic Unyon Showcase." Five of the six bands that performed were from Hamilton; they were Gorp, Sianspheric, Shallow, Smoother, and Tristan Psionic. The sixth act was Treble Charger, one of the most successful Canadian 'indie' bands of the last decade; they were from Toronto, but had signed to the Hamilton label. Many of these bands have played major roles in the development of the local music scene.

What follows will be an examination of the specific sites that are considered a part of the Hamilton alternative music scene. These accounts are based in part on my own personal experience, on the information provided by participants in my research interviews, and on archival research.

The Record Store

The independent record store has frequently played an important role in the development and maintenance of local music scenes (see Cohen 1991). With the rise of the Internet and music downloads, one could argue that the value of the local record store as a source for new or relevant music has dwindled. Despite these recent trends, however, one cannot dismiss the value of record stores in establishing and contributing to contemporary scenes. In Hamilton specifically, the local record store has been a vital site for much of the last ten to fifteen years.

Hamilton has had a selection of short-lived record stores, which were valuable to the local scene while open, but have had little lasting significance. However, certain record stores which have thrived and survived over time have become heralded historic music locations.

The first and most notable of these stores is **Dr. Disc**. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, this store is located just off King Street in downtown Hamilton. It is situated in a dense, though not particularly affluent, commercial area. Although several other sites, which will be addressed later, have developed in the near vicinity, when it opened in 1991 Dr. Disc was the first important alternative music space established in the area.

The store itself evolved from a relatively small one-room business into a multi-floor operation, with the upper level focusing on dance and electronic music, the middle on more standard rock, blues and jazz, and the lower housing a selection of vinyl records. While the store does sell much of what would be considered mainstream music, it was also, prior to the opening of the Sonic Unyon Store, the city's primary source of independent alternative music; this included its role as a consignment store for recordings by local artists.

What is most intriguing about Dr. Disc is its entrance. The retail area is located above street level, requiring the use of a staircase to enter the store. This staircase is enclosed by a transparent glass entrance. However, the entrance is always well-covered by posters announcing forthcoming events. In the last several years, Internet message boards and e-mail lists have provided a convenient means for bands and venues to announce and advertise (and for potential audience members to inquire about) upcoming

music events. Before the Internet era, the Dr. Disc entrance served this function—and continues to do so, albeit to a more limited extent. Local music magazines, though few in number, also provided some information regarding events in the short-term (usually the next week), but the entrance to the record store allows scene participants and passers-by to browse the selection of promotional posters for upcoming shows. The Dr Disc posting area came to be seen as so important that musicians and fans alike came to rely on it for information about the scene.

Holly Kruse suggests that record stores are, “spaces of social interaction and socialization.” Through exchange of knowledge, scene participants learn about artists, labels, genres and the local music scene. She attributes some of this value to the atmosphere of the record store, which is more conducive to communication than a live venue (Kruse 2003, 94-95). Dr. Disc’s poster-covered front entrance can be seen as an indirect form of social interaction in the local scene, as a medium of communication. The posters provide a way to convey knowledge to other scene participants.

Chris Gallimore, a local musician who has played with Kitchens & Bathrooms and Texas Gold, supported this when asked about his thoughts on Dr. Disc. He described his reasons for going to Dr. Disc (from his hometown of Caledonia, 20 km south of Hamilton), “I wasn’t downtown all the time, so you know, you made a point of going there if you could, like if you were going to X-Club or something. It didn’t really matter if it was open, usually I was just checkin’ for shows” (personal interview, 2005).

Dr. Disc also provides other sources of information. As one staff member suggests, “People come in looking for help, all the time. We rent gear too, and I mean, we sell tickets. I think people assume we have an idea of what’s going on” (Cam

Chisholm, personal interview, 2006). In personal experience, my musical library was created, in part, through recommendations provided Dr. Disc's "Staff Pick" program. Stickers placed on CDs and albums would identify the "picks" of specific employees. Identifying with the tastes of specific employees allowed me to discover new music, based on their recommendations. Local musician Tyler McIntyre asserts the same in my interview with him.

The **Sonic Unyon Store** is reflective of this exchange as well. A more recent business, the Sonic Unyon Store (established in 1998) is located beside Dr. Disc and is a subsidiary of Hamilton's Sonic Unyon Records. The store sells material from all the labels which are distributed in Canada by Sonic Unyon. It offers a selection of music from the extreme avant-garde to more typical indie rock and pop. While the store provides a similar posting area, its value as a source of knowledge derives more from the kind of direct communication and interaction that Kruse identifies. Here, the record store and label staff provide a direct means of exchanging information about bands, artists, labels, venues and the local scene.

The staff of the Sonic Unyon store are selected based on their knowledge of indie music and indie record labels. Towards hiring his replacement, the original store manager (who was moving to another position within Sonic Unyon) commented that he, "wanted to come up with an exam," to test the knowledge of his successor. Through repeated visits, I have found the staff at Sonic Unyon are able to make strong recommendations and suggestions across a variety of genres. Their knowledge of specific performers is equally strong, and they supplement this with web-based information regarding labels, albums and performances.

Kruse points out that physical spaces like record stores and venues help to locate the scene's participants within a local music history (Kruse 2003, 113). In a focused group such as the Hamilton alternative music scene, knowledge of, and existence within, specific spaces can come to be associated with inclusion in that specific culture; they become a form of "cultural" or "subcultural capital" (see Thornton 1995). One local musician describes this relationship: "I think because Dr. Disc and Sonic Unyon are tucked away where they are, people don't go there unless they know about it and they know what they can get there. I know I didn't go to Dr. Disc until somebody introduced me to it. I always went to Cheapies" (Tyler McIntyre, personal interview). To clarify the reference to **Cheapies**, it is a record store located on King St., one of downtown Hamilton's major arteries. It functions in much the way Kruse suggests mall record stores (or chain stores) do, with varying degrees of detachment from the local scene (Kruse 2003, 95). Cheapies offers music which is more reflective of mass culture or mainstream musical taste than of the alternative or indie music scene.

Underpinning all of this is the record store's primary function, the sale of recorded music. That both these stores (Dr Disc and the Sonic Unyon Store) offered a diverse selection of independent alternative music is significant in that it allowed the Hamilton alternative music scene to develop and for its participants to experience more of alternative music, both past and present. While many larger centres are home to many specialist record stores, for a city of Hamilton's size, and the relative size of the alternative music scene, the presence of two such stores is a substantial boon. Both stores provide a means of communication, both within the scene and with the music output of others scenes, specifically, their recorded music. As a cultural space, the record store

helps to sustain the local scene by facilitating communication and interaction among its participants, and by making available the music, genres, and aesthetics of other scenes which may then influence the local. As Dr. Disc employee Cam Chisholm suggested, the store is a source of answers for scene participants. Scene participants trust in the record store employee to provide information regarding music, performances and even music equipment.

However, the record store may be less significant than it once was. As sales of recorded music, at least in physical form, continue to decline, fewer consumers are purchasing CDs and vinyl records and a number of record stores are going out of business. Hence, in the Spring of 2008, Sonic Unyon closed its record store in Hamilton. Although it continues to sell records on-line and by mail order, much of its existing inventory was taken over by the neighbouring Dr Disc store.

Record Labels

The role of the record label, as a cultural space, is less overt, and less obvious in a physical way, than that of the record store. Most indie labels in Hamilton, such as **Hot Tub Records** or **Cincinatti Records** are relatively small-scale operations. Most often, these labels are run out of the personal residences of the owner or founder, with one or two non-paid staff members, including said owner or founder. These spaces are not available to the regular scene participant, and hence do not have a direct effect—as a physical space—on the scene. However, the products of the label, including recordings, t-shirts and posters, are important artifacts of the scene. The quality of these artifacts, and the number of them in circulation, is important in gauging the critical value of the

scene itself, as well as representing a means of navigating the generic landscape of the indie genre (see Chapter 3).

Larger labels, like **Sonic Unyon** (introduced in Chapter One), employ several staff members and operate in a business office, but are still small-scale operations compared to major labels affiliated to one of the big transnational music corporations. As mentioned, the label did operate a retail outlet for many years, which created a public interface; however the day-to-day functioning of the business was closed to most scene participants (resident bands being excluded). Though it was a closed space, the role of Sonic Unyon as an institution was significant. Sonic Unyon has become one of the largest independent labels in Canada. In doing so, it has become a symbol of success and achievement within the local scene. “Authenticity” in indie music is intertwined with one’s accrued knowledge of the indie genre. Knowing “the good” from “the bad” is not only an important part of the scene’s ethos, but it also is a defining factor in participant membership. Local musician Luke Reed described in an interview what he mockingly called “scene points,” referring to the value, or cultural capital, which scene participants place on information and indie “authenticity.” The Sonic Unyon label allowed the scene’s participants to recognize a standard of quality. With the critical successes of the label’s acts and recordings, scene members were able to judge other local bands against this yardstick of indie music success. Musician Chris Gallimore explained, “You just accepted that everyone on Sonic Unyon was good and if you [your band] got good, you might get to be on it, too” (personal interview). Another example of this is exhibited in the label’s annual Christmas party, which features performances by the majority of the label’s roster of bands, alongside some other Canadian (including Hamilton) and

international indie bands. This show is regarded by many scene participants as the best indie show in the city each year, offering an accurate approximation of the scene's quality, and showcasing the best active bands in the indie scene.

College Radio

In the last several years, the Internet has facilitated many music sharing and streaming sites, such as MP3.COM, NAPSTER, and MYSPACE. One could argue that these sites have changed the importance of college radio for independent alternative music culture, in that the Internet has become a more productive tool than radio for distributing one's music. However, because the origins of Hamilton's alternative and indie scene(s) predate widespread access to the Internet, it remains prudent to examine the relationship between alternative music culture and college radio stations.

According to Holly Kruse, "College radio came to inhabit a key position in alternative music culture and the alternative music marketplace, but this position of importance was a late twentieth-century phenomenon" (Kruse 2003, 71). Kruse's statement illustrates one perspective on the place of college radio within alternative music culture. It is difficult to think of alternative music icons like Sonic Youth, Archers of Loaf or Husker Du without acknowledging their relationship to college radio. It provided a means of distributing music to people (specifically, those who would otherwise not hear it), while also serving as a place of interaction and communication, much like the role played by record stores. It is also a physical space which serves as site both within the scene's physical geography and within its history. According to Kruse:

The institutions of independent pop/rock music — record stores, clubs, record companies, college radio stations — all helped to locate music scene participants within particular physical spaces, within a structure of social and economic relations, and within received and personal narratives of the local and national histories of indie music. (Kruse 2003, 113)

Nonetheless, local college radio stations have played only a marginal role in the Hamilton alternative music scene. Currently, Hamilton has two college-type radio stations, CFMU located at McMaster University and C101, which broadcasts from Mohawk College. The latter was established more recently (C101 was granted an FM license in 1997), while CFMU's history extends beyond the timeframe of this research. One could argue that the McMaster station was more valuable to the local music scene during the blossoming of the punk scene in the 1970s, but this information has been acquired through personal anecdotes and years of participation within the scene, and cannot be formally substantiated. Since this historical role is not the focus of this research, I will focus on the role the station played during my established time frame.

The two local stations themselves are somewhat different. While CFMU functions in much the same way as the traditional college radio station model, highlighting more diverse (and usually “non-commercial”) musical programming and an array of multi-cultural programs, C101's principal function is to serve as a training site for Mohawk College's Radio Broadcasting program. Programming on both stations includes local alternative music, and programs are often hosted by local scene participants. Both stations support the local scene by encouraging the broadcast of local

music. However, neither of the two stations could be considered a significant cultural space.

Dave Crosbie is a local Hamilton musician who has achieved some success in the local alternative scene. He also works as a DJ and doorman at both the Casbah and the Underground. When asked about the role that college radio plays within the Hamilton alternative scene, Crosbie stated, “I think, as much as I hate to say it, it is pretty peripheral. I don’t know . . . ’cause they’re great stations . . . nobody listens . . . which is crazy, especially in a university town” (Crosbie, personal interview).

Similarly, another local musician told me that while he would consider both radio stations to be significant spaces within local scene, he also acknowledges that he doesn’t listen to them (Tyler McIntyre, personal interview). Similar sentiments were affirmed in my other interviews. The apparent lack of interest in the stations may be because they are perceived not be influential, or may be a cause of their perceived lack of influence. Their physical location might also be a factor, since neither is situated in the downtown area which, as shown in Chapter One, is the geographic core of the Hamilton indie scene. McMaster University is located to the west of downtown in Westdale, while Mohawk College is on the western side of upper Hamilton, on “the Mountain.” Hence, their relative distance from the other physical spaces, whose concentration I am arguing to be significant, may also contribute to their limited role within the scene.

Yet if one accepts the emphasis placed by Kruse and others on the importance of the relationship between college radio and alternative music scenes, it is then intriguing that the Hamilton scene has survived without the substantial influence of local college radio. As Roy Shuker has pointed out, however, drawing in part on Michael Azerrad’s

work on independent music scenes in the US: “Alternative music scenes fall into two basic categories, they are either college or university towns, or large cities that are somehow ‘alternative,’ usually to even larger urban centres nearby” (Shuker 2008, 199; see also Azerrad 2001). Given Hamilton’s historic relationship with the much larger centre of Metropolitan Toronto (explored further in Chapter 3), it may well be the case that Hamilton fits the second of these categories.

In addition, I would hypothesize that the licensing conditions placed on college radio stations in Canada, which require them to broadcast a wide variety of programming, including diverse forms of popular music, in addition to non-musical content, preclude them from exercising the same degree of influence in support of independent or alternative music scenes that all-music (often tightly formatted) college radio stations have played in some US towns.

Moreover, the college and university population is, proportionately, much smaller in Hamilton than in a city such as Athens, Georgia. Whereas McMaster University and Mohawk College have a combined full-time student registration of about 30,000 in a city of nearly half-a-million people, in Athens the 33,000 students of the University of Georgia constitute about one-third of the total population of the city; thus it may be expected that, in the latter case, the university, and its institutions such as the radio station, would play a relatively more significant role in shaping the cultural life of the city, including its music scene.

Hence, I would suggest that in Hamilton, the local college-type radio stations function more as scene participants than as dominant cultural spaces within a historic narrative. While both are active contributors to the dynamic of the local music scene,

neither are vital cogs. Both stations certainly provide a supportive function within the scene, offering access to information and music, but this function is secondary at best when compared to the role played by live performance venues.

Venues

In “Jazz Places,” Howard Becker (2004) examines the importance of physical spaces to specific jazz scenes. He discusses Nathan Pearson’s work on the Kansas city jazz scene in the 1920s and 30s, and describes how the scene flourished in and around a vast array of night clubs (Becker 2004, 17-19). In Hamilton, venues are the most significant cultural spaces for the alternative music scene.

To begin, I will examine specific venues in Hamilton which have been connected with the alternative music scene. In doing so, I will explore perceptions of these venues and the roles they have played within the scene. Finally, I will extrapolate from this examination some theoretical assertions about the significance of the night club or bar to alternative music scenes in general.

I briefly want to define the notion of venue, within the alternative scene. While the term includes, perhaps dominantly so, the traditional night club which offers live music, there are other spaces which can be included under the term venue, and also those which cannot. Unlike the more mainstream rock and pop genres, independent alternative music rarely, if ever, utilizes large-scale venues like arenas. Similarly, the larger spaces employed by classical and jazz musicians, such as concert halls or auditoriums, also go beyond the scope of the alternative music venue. While these mainstream musical genres flourish in larger spaces, small, and often out-of-the-way, spaces often function as venues

within the alternative music scene. Hence, in addition to clubs and bars, performances in small downtown retail spaces, house basements, small galleries and other more bizarre sites, are part of and arguably vital to the alternative music scene in Hamilton.

On a very basic level, these unique spaces provide a differentiation that is sought out by the alternative music scene, as a means of separating itself from mass culture. For example, an art gallery show can signify a perceived artistic value to the music being performed. This artistic value alone could be seen as a means of differentiating the purpose and aesthetics of alternative music from those of popular music which, for its critics, is not made to be critically disseminated or appreciated.

These unusual, or non-traditional, venues reflect the limitations, the general smallness, of the independent alternative music scene in comparison to broader, more accepted genres and scenes, but often play an important part in the creation or maintenance of identification with the scene. A show in someone's house, for example, is not only an alternative venue, it is a physical space which connotes a sense of community for its occupants. An invitation into someone's home, or to a performance attended by a very limited group, implies community, friendship, and belonging and, in so doing, helps to create or sustain a sense of scene. Such a venue discourages "the outsider," by limiting both the knowledge of and access to the performance, serving further to differentiate those within the scene from those outside. As Dave Crosbie observed, "The best shows I've ever seen have not been in [traditional] venues. I saw Richard Laviolette. . .on a bus in Guelph. Those kinda shows are usually the best because of the communal feel. Which I feel is a more legitimate scene" (Crosbie, personal interview).

Smaller, non-traditional musical spaces help to establish a sense of scene and community, while also attributing certain values and signs to the music performed which works to differentiate the scene from mass culture. However, sporadic scheduling and limited crowds prevent such venues from being dominant hubs of social interaction and cultural exchange. Their value to the scene's identity is unquestionable, but it is the night club which serves as the scene's dominant physical space, providing the cultural, social and historical narratives of the scene with a firm notion of place.

Over the last fifteen years, there have been, at any given time, somewhere between two and five night club venues in Hamilton which have highlighted local alternative music. While some of these have been short-lived, lasting only a year or two, others have endured well over five years as active scene spaces. The longest operating venue, the **Corktown**, was associated with the alternative scene even before the period covered by my research until its very recent conversion into an Irish pub. As mentioned in the first chapter, the Corktown is located a few blocks off Main Street, but is still well within the downtown core. For much of its time as an alternative venue, the Corktown boasted the loudest sound system in the city. As a result, the venue tended to host louder acts, including various punk and metal shows. In fact, genre and style are closely related to the reputations and participants' perceptions of most venues in Hamilton. The relationship between genre and the alternative music scene will be explored in more detail the next chapter.

In the early to mid-1990s, the **X-Club** was the dominant alternative music venue in the city. Live alternative music performances only occurred a few nights a week, yet these nights often had relatively "big-name" alternative acts and quite large crowds.

During the alternative music boom of the early 1990s, the X-Club housed performances by some of Canada's top performers in the genre, including Sloan, Hayden, Treble Charger, 13 Engines and even Skinny Puppy's side projects. In 1994, the club also served as the site for Sonic Unyon's second all-day music festival, WOOLSOCK, which featured over twenty prominent local and national alternative acts.¹ The X-Club offered an opportunity for local bands to perform on bills with larger drawing acts, increasing the exposure of local bands within the local scene. The X-Club closed in the mid-1990s.

During the late 1990s, many shows were performed at the **Transit Union Hall**. It functioned both as a traditional and non-traditional alternative music venue. While not a night club, by any means, the hall had two floors, and the lower floor did have a licensed bar, much as a Canadian Legion hall might. The upstairs was unlicensed, but housed a large stage. Performances were staged on both floors. Often, larger scene events, like Sonic Unyon's Christmas party, would utilize both floors concurrently. Most importantly, a large portion of the shows at Transit Union hall were "all-ages" shows, allowing underage non-drinkers to attend and participate in the scene, thus permitting the scene to renew itself by recruiting new cohorts of participants.

Aside from the Corktown, the **Raven** and the **Hudson**, were the only two alternative night clubs active during the late 1990s. The Hudson has since been renamed Club Absinthe, but still functions in much the same way. Although the music is usually provided by a DJ (the club includes a large basement dance area, and has gained popularity with its weekly Motown night), it also presents frequent live alternative music performances. The Raven was only open for a few years, but was an extremely important space. The club presented live alternative music virtually every night of the week. It

became a regularly visited venue for many alternative musicians from Canada and the rest of North America. Though short-lived, the club's fame was such that successful Washington D.C. post-rockers, The Dismemberment Plan, cited it as their favourite place to perform in Canada. The positive sentiments were also supported by Ted Leo Pharmacists and Boston's Warren Commission (see *Ravenzine* 2001-2002)

Brodie Schwendiman, the former booker and promoter at the Raven, currently operates both the **Casbah** and the **Underground**. The venues differ in style and atmosphere, with the Casbah being more upscale, but both offer live alternative music on most nights. Generally, touring acts will play either of these two clubs. This is in part attributable to Schwendiman's booking, but also because the two clubs are the largest and best equipped alternative music venues currently active in the city.

It is also important to note that not every venue is a significant cultural space. A particular club may have immediate value as a site for a specific show or event, but it may not accrue significant historical and cultural value. One could also think of such spaces as tools, much like Hamilton's college radio stations. In this case, the venues serve their primary function as performance and social interaction sites, and in doing so help to sustain the music scene, but they are not grounding physical spaces in the scene's historical narrative. The Hudson/Club Absinthe and other Hamilton clubs like Dante's, Pepper Jack's and Polo's would fit into this grouping.

The value of any venue as a cultural space derives from several factors and processes. The first is that a venue is a place of musical performance. The success of any particular venue is directly related to one's ability to "put on a good show" within that space. By no means does this simply imply that the best space, the best equipment,

best crowd and best bands make the best venue. My research has shown that these factors contribute, but many more intangible elements play a role. As Dave Crosbie states of the Club Absinthe: “personally, I think I don’t really like the Motown crowd and the Absinthe sound system, but every time I’ve played there, it’s been good people” (personal interview). From personal experience of attending performances at the Raven, I can say that the building was awkwardly designed, with poor sight lines and did not lend itself well to a live performance space. Yet, none of these factors inhibited the club from becoming a successful venue and a significant place within the scene.

A venue is also a space of social interaction. As Kruse suggests, it may not facilitate communication as well as a record store (op. cit.), but it is nonetheless the hub of social and cultural exchange within the alternative music scene. Attendance at a specific event at a specific venue is the quintessential means by which one becomes a participant in the local music scene. Live performance, as will be discussed in the fourth chapter, is at the heart of the independent alternative music scene. Ever-changing bands and clubs imbue the active music scene with a sense of urgency and immediacy. The “now” becomes extremely important. This immediacy is embodied in live performance. Hence one’s attendance at a show—that is, one’s existence within a physical cultural space—constitutes an immediate and direct form of participation in the scene. Inclusion within the scene community then becomes something that derives directly from attendance at live performances.

In describing what contributes to a thriving scene, Dave Crosbie suggests, “It’s not even really an issue of talent, it’s really just kinda fan-base and people willing to come out . . . I guess promoters and venues too” (personal interview). All of Crosbie’s criteria

are directly related to live performance, which, of course, cannot occur without a venue. Thus, for the scene to thrive, it must have significant physical cultural spaces to experience and create the cultural product. From this, I would argue that one's perceptions of a specific physical space (at a specific point in the scene's history) shapes one's perceptions of the scene at that time; and that perceptions of the physical space are dictated, at least in part, by the social interaction that occurred there.

When asked why he thought of the X-Club as a significant historical space within the scene, local musician Tyler McIntyre states, "I met a lot of friends at those shows, for sure. People I still talk to now" (McIntyre, personal interview). Crosbie's thoughts are similar: "Before, when every band I was in, or my friends, played Transit . . . you could pretty much count on going out every weekend and just seeing friends and at least hear what other people are doing" (Crosbie, personal interview). Both would also suggest that the time they spent going to those venues also represented a high point in the scene's life cycle.

Brodie Schwendiman, as a club manager, argues that the scene is much larger and more active now. He suggests that during the early 90s and the time of the X-Club, the scene had a small number of active and motivated participants, in a small number of quality venues. As a result, the perceptions may be more positive than those of the current scene, which is broader in scope and larger in size, but is also more widely distributed across the city (Schwendiman, personal interview).

A Sense of History

When I discussed with the participants their perceptions of the scene, they were, for the

most part, rooted in the past; within the history of the scene. I chose to combine my examinations of space and history because physical space is a vital component of the scene's sense of history. The Hamilton alternative music scene is pervaded by a sense of history, even if it is not always well-known to all participants. For example, Chore was a successful local alternative band during the late 1990s and early part of this decade. They played melodic rhythmic math-rock (and will be discussed, stylistically, in the following chapter). They released three relatively successful albums (in terms of local independent music sales), toured internationally, and even had a few songs appear on Keifer Sutherland's *24* television series. Undoubtedly, they are a noteworthy part of the alternative scene's history. Kitchens and Bathrooms, a band of similar style and renown, were contemporaries of Chore. However, as Dave Crosbie suggested in an interview, historical knowledge is not inherent to the scene:

But it's weird. . . Brandon and Steve—the two young guys in my band—Brandon does, you know, 50-60% of the songwriting; they don't know Chore. And its like, they're in this intensely math rock band, and they never saw Kitchens and Bathrooms live.

Both Brodie Schwendiman and Tyler McIntyre acknowledged the Forgotten Rebels and Teenage Head as being significant bands, historically. However, both also believed that a great many contemporary participants in the scene were not aware of the historic local, and even national, importance of these bands. Nonetheless, while Schwendiman believed that the scene was not historically rooted, he suggested that it was heavily influenced aesthetically by its history. Although aesthetics will be discussed in depth in the next chapter, briefly for the purpose of the present discussion, he suggests

that certain elements of both Hamilton's math-rock style and gimmick-type band derive from the scene's musical history (Schwendiman, personal interview). McIntyre, on the other hand, suggests that a sense of history is not that important to the maintenance of the scene: bluntly he states, "I don't think it can live off its history" (personal interview).

Dave Crosbie also downplays the importance of specific local historical knowledge, placing the scene's sense of history in the context of an apparent aura of postmodern elitism within the scene. In order to create new alternative music, Crosbie's argument continues, the musician would have to have a sense of musical history, but not necessarily a specific history of the scene itself (Crosbie, personal interview).

When asked about historically significant spaces within the local scene, all of the participants listed venues first, with some listing venues only. Yet the connection goes beyond this. When asked to discuss the history of the scene, the interview participants used the venues to describe an entire era in the scene's history. For McIntyre, it was the X-Club that represented an era; for Crosbie, "The scene to me was Transit and Sonic Unyon, and its all dissipated now" (personal interviews).

I would argue that, for scene participants, venues represent a means of historically defining the alternative music scene. The immediacy of the alternative music scene, its dependence on the present, is reflective of the volatility of its history. Bands often stay together for less than a year. Hundreds of bands and musicians tour through Hamilton every year. Though venues turn over at a slower rate, they change nonetheless.

However, in an active scene, rooted in the present, venues do provide a means of segmenting and contextualizing a larger historical narrative. Thus, the association of the scene's history to a particular venue is not only about the venue itself; it also draws

reference to the bands that played there, the genres that were prevalent during the time it was open, and most importantly the social interaction which occurred there.

Overview

According to Holly Kruse: “Music scenes . . . are defined by places within them that are meaningful” (2003, 126). Among the meaningful spaces in Hamilton’s alternative music scene are venues, record stores and radio stations. More generally, they are spaces which are the active participation sites of the music scene. To some extent, these spaces may be viewed as participants or actors within the scene, yet they are also cultural spaces which provide a means of developing and sustaining the scene. They are sites of performance, dissemination, distribution, information exchange, and most importantly, social interaction.

In Hamilton’s scene, two record stores are directly connected to the alternative music scene. In examining them, I hoped to show the value of the record store as a space of information exchange; specifically, the poster window at Dr. Disc and the music-based knowledge of the store staffs. They also serve as spaces of social interaction. I also explored the relationship between college radio and alternative music scenes. In doing so, I illustrated how Hamilton’s alternative scene was unusual in comparison to scenes in other university towns (such as Athens, Georgia—see Jipson 1994—or Chapel Hill, North Carolina, for example) in that its college radio stations were only marginal contributors to the local scene.

In the second half of the chapter, I examined the significance of the live performance venue as a physical cultural space. I examined the role of both the nightclub

and the non-traditional venue within the scene. A venue is more than a simple space of social interaction. By occupying that space, by attending a performance at a venue, one becomes an active participant within the scene. Venues are a means through which the scene itself can navigate its own historical narrative. The venues themselves come to reflect the perceptions of the scene at the time. In addition, and this will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four, venues are a performance spaces and performance is vital to the existence of the alternative music scene. First, however, the discussion moves to the kinds of music which characterize the alternative indie scene in Hamilton.

Endnote to Chapter 2

1. The first WOOLSOCK Festival was held in a field in Dunnville, Ontario (60 km south-east of Hamilton) in 1993. A court injunction prevented Sonic Unyon from holding a second festival on the same site, and X-Club offered itself as an alternative venue (see Barclay 2001, 75-76).

Chapter Three: The Sounds of Hamilton: Genre and Aesthetics

Genre is a pervasive means of categorizing and organizing both the artifacts and products of art, especially of popular culture, and our relationship to them. In this chapter, I intend to examine the basic elements of the concept of genre, apply the so-called “rules” of genre developed by Franco Fabbri and Simon Frith to “indie” music and identify some of the key sub-genres which make the Hamilton alternative indie scene distinctive.

Music, as an art form, can be divided into broad categories, sometimes known as meta-genres, such as country, classical/compositional, jazz, pop and rock (see Shuker 1998, 147). As genres have evolved and the varieties of rock music, for example, have proliferated, this meta-genre has fragmented into a wide spectrum of genres, in which one could place such styles as metal, progressive rock, punk and new wave, along with their many attendant sub-genres and even sub-sub-genres.

New genres and sub-genres develop as a consequence of musical and technological innovations, often through the mixing or syncretism of pre-existing musical forms—indeed, the origins of contemporary rock music may be traced to the blending of elements of country/hillbilly and bluegrass music with R&B or rhythm-and-blues, itself the product of elements of blues, boogie-woogie and gospel (see Hatch and Millward 1987). Alternative rock itself is the product of such a process of genre evolution. The genre itself developed out of the early punk movement. Punk was seen, and represented

itself, as an “alternative” to mainstream rock. Yet, as punk solidified its generic boundaries, alternative music began to include a more generalized “other” in rock music; including new wave, post-punk, hardcore, indie pop and the like. Alternative music represented a loose genre of rock which offered an exploratory style and a voice of opposition to the mainstream rock canon, an opposition which lay not in outright rejection of rock principles, but rather in a refusal to recognize the limitations of more traditional rock forms.

As Kruse (2003, 21) suggests, the year 1991 was a very significant one in alternative music history. With the release of Nirvana’s album, *Nevermind*, alternative music—and, in particular, the “grunge” sub-genre originating in the American north-west—became *the* music of youthful rebellion, of generational politics, as opposed to a form of canonical opposition. But, like other genres or sub-genres which became popular precisely because they represented innovation and rebellion, alternative music of the 1990s was co-opted into the popular music mainstream. As a result, the term “alternative music” has now come to represent a genre which hybridizes the traditional rock form with elements of numerous other genres and the style, but not the attitude, of early alternative rock like Soundgarden and Nirvana. More recently, the trend has continued with a mass revival of dance and proto-punk rock bands inspired by early alternative acts such as bands like Television, Mission to Burma and Gang of Four. In this sense, contemporary “alternative music” represents something different from mainstream rock, yet lacking the innovation and creativity of its punk and grunge predecessors.

The term “indie” has many meanings within alternative music and alternative music scenes. Most notably, “indie” has come to represent the sub-genres of alternative

music which still function, at least to some degree, in opposition to mainstream rock (see, for example, Fairchild 1995). The fragmentation and labeling of these sub-genres will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter, but it is more prudent at this point to examine the 'indie' genre as a whole. "Indie" or "independent" music is something that must be defined in the context of multiple processes and concepts. Most simply and traditionally, 'indie' music is, as its name suggests, a musical product created independently of the music business, as typified by the mega-corporations that own, among other properties, the major record labels. However, like alternative music, 'indie' music does not necessarily define itself literally. Kruse suggests that, "For many fans and music scene participants though, 'indie' described a sound and a point of origin more than it describes a specific economic relationship" (Kruse 2003, 8).

Unconventional musical styles, such as world music, are not categorized under the alternative genre. Even though they represent alternative musical forms, they do not fit the characteristics of alternative rock or pop—indeed, "World Music" is now an established meta-genre in its own right. Similarly, an independently released album of traditional Irish fiddle music, for example, is not situated within the 'indie' genre, despite its independent origins. Instead, the labeling is suggestive of an ethos that is present in the musical, social, ideological and cultural processes of the genre. The 'indie' genre then becomes an embodiment not only of specific musical sounds, but of the culture, the scene, which surrounds it.

In his book, *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith examines what he calls "genre rules" and, in particular, bases his discussion on Franco Fabbri's work on genre (Frith 1996; Fabbri 1982). Specifically, he examines how the genre processes mentioned above, the

musical, social, ideological and cultural elements, all represent part of the genre or contribute to how it is defined (1996, 90-93). These rules are divided into five categories.

The first grouping includes *formal* and *technical rules*. This category includes the practical elements of music performance and production; skill sets, instrument types, instrumental proficiency, use of vocals, and other such playing conventions. The second set consists of the *semiotic rules* which involve the conveyance of meaning and the rhetoric of musical communication. Specifically, Frith asks (1996, 91): “How is ‘truth’ or ‘sincerity’ indicated musically? How do we know what music is ‘about’?”

The third set is referred to as the *behavioral rules* defining genre, which Frith describes as being gestural, or about “performance rituals in a widely defined sense” (92). These rules address the interplay of stage persona with technical musicianship. Also included in this is the relationship between how the performer acts onstage and the performer’s offstage demeanor. The rules of behavior are vital to understanding some of the sub-genres of indie music to be discussed below.

Social and *ideological rules* constitute the fourth category in the Fabbri/Frith scheme. Frith defines them as covering, “the social image of the musician regardless of reality. . .,” and reflecting, “. . .what the music is meant to stand for as a social force, its account of an ideal world as well as of the real one.” (93). I hope to show that such rules, while obviously essential to understanding socio-politically driven genres, like punk or hardcore, can also be useful in understanding the “art for art’s sake” nature of the indie genre.

The last set of rules consists of *commercial* and *juridical* considerations, which address production means, ownership and copyright, and the financial processes of the

genre. They determine how a particular genre or sub-genre of music fits into the world of commodified popular culture and its relationship to the world of law and public policy.

These five categories provide a framework for analyzing and exploring genre, yet the framework is not a rigid one. As Frith notes, Fabbri acknowledges that some sets of rules may be more important for one genre, while other sets may be more significant in defining another genre (1996, 93). Moreover, boundaries are frequently redefined in response to changes in technology, musical innovations, changing audience tastes or commercial strategies. Change is inherent within the indie genre, as the genre produces musical forms which filter into the mainstream, which in turn forces the genre to react and redefine itself once again.

It is my intention to use the Fabbri/Frith rules to examine how the indie genre functions and is defined within the Hamilton music scene. My examination will be divided into two main sections. The first will explore the non-musical elements of the genre, by defining the rules of the indie genre and the dynamics of the relationship between genre and scene. The second part of the discussion will focus more on the musical elements, specifically, the dominant sub-genres within the indie scene and the development and/or projection of a “local” sound. The indie genre (and its many fragmented sub-genres, including math-rock, post-rock, emo, and alt-country) may be seen as a late stage in the evolution of the meta-genre that we call rock music. In this chapter, I intend to argue that the indie genre can be defined as an evolving genre, driven more by postmodern artistic exploration than any social or political motives. Furthermore, I hope to illustrate how the wide diversity of sub-genres under the “indie”

umbrella serves to navigate an increasingly cluttered postmodern artistic terrain, providing reference points for both the audience and the artist.

Scene and Genre

It is important to identify the connection between the indie genre and the indie scene.

While it is possible to make an analytical distinction between these concepts, whereby the scene is defined largely in sociological terms as a collection of people and places, while the genre or “sound” refers to the aesthetic and musical properties of the artistic product, “sounds” (genres or sub-genres) and “scenes” have long been linked together in both popular and academic discourse. Most of the definitions and studies of “scenes” introduced in Chapter One or examined elsewhere in this thesis (among others, Cohen 1991; Straw 1991; Jipson 1994; Shank 1994; Fairchild 1995; Tagasuki 1997; Bennett 2000; Kruse 2003; Stahl 2004; the studies in Bennett and Peterson 2004) link the emergence of a scene in a particular location, or in multiple locations—or, in the case of “virtual scenes,” in no particular place at all—with a specific genre or sub-genre, or a narrow range of (sub-)genres, of popular music. Moreover, as the Fabbri/Frith model (above) emphasizes, genre is defined by a system of overlapping processes and rules, which include the formal and technical rules of the music which is produced, as well as the semiotic and social/ideological sets of rules which focus attention on relationships among performers, music, audience and the creation of meaning and identity which are part of almost every definition of scene.

Hence while the “indie” genre and “indie” scenes may, at first sight, appear somewhat amorphous, it is possible to identify certain commonalities, or shared

differences from other genres and scenes, which set them apart and serve as the basis for a sense of musical and social/personal identity. Thus, according to Simon Frith (1996, 86):

...it may be difficult to say what different acts in a genre have in common musically. This is obvious, for example, in the case of 'indie' music. Such a label refers both to a means of production...and to an attitude, supposedly embodied in the music, its listeners, and, perhaps most important, in the relationship between.

But it is in the diversity of the application of genre-defining rules that one can also identify certain boundaries for the scene itself. As a larger, more encompassing genre, indie music lends itself to such a theoretical extraction and re-application.

Behavioral rules refer to the examination of personality within the genre, both on and off the stage. By nature, the indie genre attempts to distinguish itself from the behavioral values and patterns of mainstream rock music (or, at least, the way that "mainstream rock music" is represented in the mass media and in everyday discourse). Central to this process of distinction is the rejection of what are perceived to be traditional "rockstar" values and spectacle. In the Hamilton indie scene, however, this "rejection" of the mainstream may take one of two extreme forms. While most conceptions of "indie" emphasize an understated stage demeanour, in the sub-genre known as "gimmick-rock" (of which more below) the subversion of traditional performance conventions leads to exaggerated, flamboyant onstage personae; but this is the exception rather than the rule. The indie musician, at least in idealized form, is

expected to project the same personality, and the same patterns of behavior, on and off the stage. With this comes a seeming rejection of exaggerated showmanship and the arrogance associated with technical prowess. This is not to say that technical skill is neglected or rejected, but it is not flaunted for its own sake. Spectacle is not entirely absent from live performance, but it is generally embraced by the audience only if it may be interpreted as ironic or satirical in purpose. It is conventional for the indie musician to display, in visible terms, an emotional connection with the music, rather than “put on a show” for the audience or indulge in thrashing guitar solos.

The musician’s off-stage persona is perhaps even more reserved. In interviews, photographs, even album design, artists of the indie genre promote audience identification with the music rather than “fandom” or identification with bands or individual musicians. The indie musician is not selfless, but is revered, if at all, more for his/her participation in the genre and within a specific scene than as an iconic “showbiz” figure.

These attitudes were clearly revealed in my interviews, when I raised with my participants the idea of “making it” and what it meant to them as musicians. Their responses did not suggest grandiose dreams of rock stardom. For musicians within the indie genre, “making it” meant being able to survive financially through making music. Tyler McIntyre, a singer and guitarist, described success in very basic terms: “To me? [Making it means] making a living off of it. And doing only that” (personal interview). The ambitions of Dave Crosby, another local musician, are even further removed from dreams of commercial success:

I think ideally, for me, I would love to do nothing else with my life

but, you know, make music . . . I don't need a lot of money, just enough to eat and keep playing . . . I realize that's not really a possibility, so 'making it,' I guess, is just have people enjoy it and I guess if anybody ever sings along to any song, that's all I'd ever ask. (Crosbie, personal interview)

The commercial and juridical rules are exemplified in the literal definition of the genre. Generally, the music is created, recorded, produced and distributed independently, and ownership of the music (including legal copyright) remains in the hands of the musicians themselves. However, even when an "indie" band signs with a major label, it may not lose its "indie" status. "Selling out" is not as simple as it used to be. As Fonarow (cited in chapter 1) observes, "indie" has come to mean more than just a process of production and distribution. The other processes and rules of the scene and genre, both musical and non-musical, can therefore help a musician or band maintain a certain genre status. As with the idea of "making it", "selling out" is more associated with a rejection of musical values, rather than an automatic consequence of commercial success.

The indie genre has become one that embraces the exploration of rock music forms. The politics of hardcore, the DIY aesthetic and anti-commercialism of punk and late 1980s alternative music are all part of the history and evolution of the indie genre. However, the genre has continued to evolve: as in the cinematic evolution of the western, from *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939) to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford 1962), the indie genre has become self-reflective and exploratory, embracing both the creation of new forms and the critical re-examination of existing boundaries and rules. The driving

force is the music itself, not a desire to bring about political or social change. Dave Crosbie suggests a possible reason:

I think the reason that bands or artists aren't really making anything for a cause, or that the political element is 99.9% of the time removed, is also really just a reflection of our lives. . . We all live pretty cushy lives I think, especially Hamilton, but really all over North America. . . So there's not really anything to rebel against. So you have to look from the postmodern perspective of the art separated from social context. (Crosbie, personal interview)

While these assertions reflect the privileged status of white males who are the principal participants in indie music, and their relative middle-class standard of living in the Hamilton area, the demographics of Hamilton's indie musicians, these demographics are similar to those of other participants in the indie genre and indie scenes in Canada and elsewhere in North America.

In his analysis of alternative and indie scenes, Will Straw found that, even by the early 1990s, the genre had developed complex stylistic practices and combinations from which sub-genres began to form, co-exist and communicate. The sub-genres no longer displaced each other as "the alternative" in relation to the historical and cultural significance of mainstream rock, rather multiple "alternatives" existed at the same time. Straw describes these scenes and sub-genres as "idiosyncratic passages across the space of alternative rock rather than attempts at redirection" (Straw 1991, 376).

Mapping Genres through Sub-genres

From the argument so far, one can postulate that the indie genre encompasses a broad spectrum of musical styles. As with rock, indie music has continued to evolve, resulting in its latest form in a postmodern fragmentation of the genre into an array of sub-genres, which, though diverse, draw from each other and reflect the whole in many ways.

Ironically, the indie genre, and its exploratory ideology, may well be focused on rejecting the labeling of genre categories. In fact this can be seen in many contemporary interviews with bands, who refer to themselves as simply “rock bands”. Regardless, genre labels serve a vital purpose in such a fragmented landscape, wherein knowledge of style and redundancy is essential to the maintenance of the genre’s ideology.

Kruse refers to sub-genres as a means of segmenting and understanding a vast musical terrain (Kruse 2003, 10), a map through which the overarching genre can be navigated. The best analogy to this is a network of hubs and sub-nodes all contributing to the mother network itself. This, however, is not perfect metaphor or framework for analysis because, as Frith points out (1996, 77), “Genre maps change according to who they’re for.” For example, a sub-genre called “math rock” means little to a person who distinguishes music largely in terms of folk, country, or rock’n’roll. Within the indie scene, then, the concept of participation has come to include the acquisition of knowledge about musical styles and sub-genres. Given the nature of much of the music of the indie genre, specifically its exploratory style within both new and established musical concepts, value is in part determined by the ability of the listener to understand the stylistic intentions within the overall landscape of the genre.

Frith argues (1996, 87) that “genre discourse depends . . . on a certain sort of

shared musical knowledge and experience.” The indie genre is dependent on this shared knowledge and experience, and the ability to understand the genre discourse. Sub-genres help facilitate this understanding and the communication of knowledge. Thus, the indie scene is one which requires active participation and the acquisition of cultural capital. Sub-genres and genre maps allow the individual scene participant to understand the discourse and more easily embrace the genre and scene.

Within a local scene, genre can play somewhat differing roles in different localities. In the Hamilton music scene, genre has two clear functions. The first represents the more obvious and more commercial uses of labeling; genre is an excellent marketing device. The second function is to establish conventions which help to define the music for artists and audiences alike.

The Commercial Uses of Genre

Genre is used for commercial purposes to define our tastes as consumers. This is why generic labels are important for the music business, radio stations and other media, record stores and live venues. If an individual likes a certain band, it may well follow that he or she will like other bands playing the same or similar types of music. As Tyler McIntyre stated in our interview: “When people start really figuring out what they want to listen to, they don’t want to go to a show and hear a punk, then an alt-country band.”

Promoter and club manager Brodie Schwendiman emphasized the importance of booking bands of the same or similar genres on the same bill. However, he also acknowledged that the diversity of the indie genre and its spectrum of sub-genres allow him some flexibility to experiment in creating bills. Using genre as a map, he is able to

book shows that offer bands from different sub-genres that, nonetheless, through various processes and rules, can appeal to a single audience (Schwendiman, personal interview).

Local promoter and record label owner Lou Molinaro, on the other hand, admitted to moving away from being genre-specific and looking for what he called “punk rock ethics in the songwriting” rather than punk rock bands (Molinaro, personal interview).

The crossing of boundaries between genres and sub-genres is also evident in the practices of live performance venues. The contemporary venues mentioned in the second chapter, are only genre-specific in that they represent “alternative music” as a vast, all-encompassing whole. Hamilton’s population of roughly 500,000 people and the fact that there are relatively few alternative music venues within the city make it difficult for a club to focus on only one genre or sub-genre of music. The only relevant distinction is the separation of indie and punk within the wider category of alternative music. However, as both Schwendiman and Molinaro suggest, this distinction is largely subjective. Schwendiman mentioned that, for several years, his former club, the Raven, considered to be one of the most successful *indie* venues in Hamilton’s history, actually housed more *punk* shows than the local “punk bar,” The Corktown.

Dave Crosbie attributes this generic flexibility to Hamilton’s size: “Hamilton’s a weird city, though, in terms of its scale, you can’t really . . . just have like a folk bar. There aren’t enough people, there aren’t enough people going to shows to make it fiscally logical” (personal interview). Thus, the limitations imposed on the scene by factors such as population require a certain creativity among promoters and venues. Genre identification is important to developing successful venues, but no single style or sub-genre can sustain a venue. As a result, as mentioned above, multi-band shows often

reflect the connectivity of indie's sub-genres. Even the dominant sub-genres, like math rock and gimmick-rock (discussed further below), are represented in only a small proportion of the total number of live performances. However, the presence of successful bands in dominant local genres allows the promoters to attract audiences based upon assumptions of moderate genre-connectivity.

All of my informants referred to a thriving scene as one where participants attended performances to support the "indie" genre rather than specific bands. Accordingly, a scene would struggle if participants attended performances only to see a single act, and not the entire show. The umbrella of the indie genre as a whole cannot sustain the local scene, but when its represented sub-genres are such that connectivity between styles and forms is possible, and more importantly plausible for the audience, the scene is able to maintain itself and even thrive.

The Musical Elements of Genre

It can be argued that alternative and indie scenes are very similar across different spaces. As Straw states, "Each local space has evolved, to varying degrees, the range of musical vernaculars emergent within others, and the global culture of alternative rock music is one in which localism has been reproduced, in relatively uniform ways, on a continental and international level" (Straw 1991, 378).

What is definitely true is that certain musical styles and indie sub-genres are prevalent across localities. These styles tend to be representative of the mass youth culture and the trends of more commercial alternative music. Hence, such sub-genres as nu-metal and emo are commonly found in the majority of rock scenes in all parts of

North America, but do not reflect any real local identity. Local scenes are no longer directly associated with genre tags. In the past, there were obvious examples in which a particular genre or sub-genre of music was associated with a particular place, for example, the Seattle “grunge” scene, the DC “hardcore” and Southern California “punk” scenes. Now, even the smallest local scenes support a large group of sub-genres. In fact, most scenes reflect a reasonably broad spectrum of sub-genres (see, for example, Azerrad 2001; Fonarow 2006). Identity is no longer associated with broad genre categories, but expressed through genre deconstruction and the exploration of musical form.

As indie music evolves as a genre, earlier styles, especially the more popular ones, begin to function pervasively, as loose foundations for the advancement of the scene. For example, in Hamilton several local bands have emerged following in the footsteps of garage and post-punk influenced bands like The White Stripes and the Strokes. Since these sub-genres are so widespread, to find anything particularly “local” about the Hamilton scene, one either has to turn to those sub-genres which are well-represented locally but receive more limited exposure elsewhere, or to particular combinations of genres and sub-genres which are not found together in other places.

These dominant “micro-scenes” and their respective sub-genres are valuable in determining how a local identity presents itself through music, and more specifically, how a certain locality can contribute to the indie genre. They have become the expression of identity of the larger scene. As the indie genre has evolved and become more complex, the expression of local identity has become more difficult. Sub-genres allow for the expression of a local identity amidst what is a very national, continental and global culture.

Hamilton's Distinctive Sub-Genres

In this section, I examine two of the dominant, and more distinctive, sub-genres of the Hamilton indie scene. Again, while these styles are represented in many other local scenes, they are not uniformly common or well-supported, and both are relatively distant from the musical mainstream consumed by the mass youth audience. These sub-genres will be examined in terms of both their musical attributes and performance qualities. Specific performers and bands will also be described in detail. From this, I hope to develop at least a general understanding of a specific Hamilton indie sound, and how it is reflective of a local identity.

Holly Kruse suggests that alternative and indie rock fans constitute distinct (sub-) cultures in the places where they are found, in that they “share particular tastes and demographic characteristics with each other more so than with the general population” (Kruse 2003, 13). While this may hold true for the indie genre in relation to mainstream rock, and even mainstream culture for that matter, it also reflects the development of distinctive styles within a local scene. Musical styles develop within a local scene that reflect not only the general tastes of the indie culture as a whole, but the specific tastes that have developed locally based on personal exposure and experience. The evolution of certain tastes in specific local scenes sometimes leads to surprising events; for example, when a touring band with only limited national exposure visits a distant town where it performs to a large crowd, despite the band's own expectation of a small audience which is what it has experienced in most other places on the tour. This can also work in reverse. Sometimes a performer or band will achieve success at the regional, national or international level, but not receive the same degree of appreciation in their own

hometown scene. For example, the international success of Hamilton electronic artist, Caribou, has occurred despite the absence of a thriving electronic scene, or a large audience for that style of music, in the city.

The evolution of distinctively local performance preferences and audience tastes in Hamilton is represented by the importance in the local indie scene of two particular sub-genres: the first is a style of music and performance which I label here “gimmick-rock”; the second is a sub-genre of indie music commonly known as “math rock.”

Gimmick-rock is a sub-genre which is as much performance art as it is live music. The music and lyrics are usually quirky, but are often based on adaptation of more popular mainstream styles into an ironic or self-reflective form. It is not necessarily the same as novelty or parody acts, such as McLean and McLean, Weird Al Yankovic or alternative stars, Bloodhound Gang. “Gimmick-rock” bands, though often comedic, are usually more interested in satire and irony than parody and cheap laughs.

In Hamilton, several bands and artists who have achieved success over the last fifteen years are reflective of this sub-genre. Wax Mannequin is one of the more successful Hamilton “gimmick-rock” performers. He generally performs as a solo act, playing guitar along with pre-programmed digital synthesizer providing drums and extra instrumentation. Although his given name is Chris Adeney, he is generally better known to most people as “Wax”; like Marilyn Manson (a.k.a. Brian Warner), for example, his stage persona appears to predominate over the “real” person behind it. Wax Mannequin’s songs are usually absurdist fables, emphasizing images of technology and magic.

Usually written using diverse vocabulary and technically correct, “proper” grammar, his lyrics help to increase the absurdity of his persona. His performances also include the use

of an elaborate e-mail listserve, written as series of bizarre narratives, keeping fans updated on both his live appearances and his persona.

Mayor McCa, the self-proclaimed “One-man-band, singing sensation,” has also achieved success within the sub-genre; his second album, *Welcome to McCaLand*, won *Chart* magazine’s album of the year in 1999. A former candidate for city mayor—his election promises included a pledge to rename Hamilton “Donut Rock City” in honor of its musical heritage and the fact that it was home to the first Tim Hortons store—Mayor Mayor McCa (real name Christopher Anderson Smith) plays guitar astride a bass drum and accompanies his songs with various tricks and gadgets. For example, he will often sing, play guitar, play the bass drum with his left foot, and play a keyboard with a pencil taped to his right; sometimes he will tapdance in the middle of a song. His songs are smart and simple, sometimes heartfelt and poignant, but often quirky rants, like “I’m getting fat again” and its response, “I’m getting skinny again.” Among his five albums are titles such as *El Limb Men Oh Pee* (2003) and *Cue Are Es Tea You* (2006).

Other local bands in the “gimmick-rock” sub-genre include The Evil Engine, a band with a more typical rock music lineup, who sing about *Star Wars* and bodily functions; Rainbow Meow, a trio of musicians in character as cats from outerspace; and Zildo Ildo, a quirky country band who often would “boo” themselves off the stage, only to finish their set under the name XOS, the arch-rivals of Zildo Ildo. Bands such as the Residents, Ween, or even The Darkness, are more widely known performers that could conceivably be identified with this sub-genre.

There is most commonly a comedic element to these bands, ranging from childish bodily function jokes to clever wit and befuddling imagery. Narrative plays a central role

in “gimmick-rock” as well. Lyrically, the songs will often feature recurring themes. For example, the Evil Engine performed a series of songs about specific bodily functions, referenced in episodic form. Wax Mannequin presents in many of his songs a recurring character named Jimmy, a strange boy with a penchant for computers, magic, trains and factories.

Musically, “gimmick-rock” bands are fairly diverse; what unites them under a single sub-generic label is the emphasis on flamboyant performance and a shared subversive wit. However, the songs are generally simple, or at the very least employ a very simple structure; they are also quirky. This is achieved through both satirical representations of traditional forms and through the employment of dissonance and bizarre instrumentation. Performance-driven rock bands like Queen are also an obvious influence.

One of the reasons for the success of the local Hamilton “gimmick-rock” bands is their personal relationship with their audience and, in particular, the performative interplay between band and audience. Not only do the performers interact with the audience at a single performance, but they also include a narrative-like quality to their stage show (this includes elements such as songs, song lyrics, and stage banter) which requires repeat attendance if one is to make full sense of it. This is clearly evident in some of the tactics used by Wax Mannequin. On stage, the performers are very animated, and to some extent act out or at least express the mood of the song through dance and action. The performers embody elements of lounge lizards, rock guitar heroes and even hip hop stars (other aspects of performance will be discussed further in the next chapter).

Though seemingly insubstantial in nature, “gimmick-rock” is an intriguing phenomenon. While many communities have comedic musical acts, the specifically indie “gimmick-rock” genre is relatively unusual, especially in Canada. I believe much can be drawn from the significance of this sub-genre within the Hamilton indie scene. First, it is a reflection of the evolution of the indie genre as a whole. From film and genre theory, one can state that a genre in its later stage often becomes self-reflective and often incorporates satire of early forms—reflection leads to inflection and, often, subversion. This is the essence of “gimmick-rock” (according to Barry Grant, it is also one of the distinguishing features of Canadian rock music in general—see Grant 1986). While reflecting on, and inflecting or subverting, the rules of the indie genre, “gimmick-rock” also incorporates elements, both good and bad, of mainstream rock and other genres.

Secondly, I believe the success of “gimmick rock” in Hamilton is suggestive of its relationship to other major Canadian scenes and even international scenes. Most Hamilton musicians believe that their scene does, at least to some degree, exist in the shadow of the larger and more expansive Toronto scene. The close proximity of the two cities (less than one hour by car) makes this a likely possibility on a national and international level. Interestingly, as Schwendiman points out in our interview, “gimmick-rock” acts like Wax Mannequin do well in smaller cities like Hamilton, Peterborough, and London but often struggle in Toronto. By personalizing and serializing the performance, “gimmick-rock” acts are able to thrive in the limits of smaller scenes. The avant-garde nature of much of their material, both music and performance, also takes advantage of this familiarity. While those within the local scene may appreciate and understand the intent of this genre, without context it could be very confusing or even

obnoxious. Such is seemingly the reception given to many of Hamilton's "gimmick-rock" bands in Toronto, yet this rejection conflicts with the appeal they have locally. Thus, the sub-genre contributes to the projection of local identity by accenting the unique tastes of the local scene. Similarly, the proliferation of the "gimmick-rock" form might be attributed to the need of Hamilton musicians to reject the influence and dominance of the larger Toronto scene. As a result a sub-genre that is respected locally in Hamilton, but not necessarily in another city, becomes a means of expressing identity across the indie genre terrain, and is accordingly pursued by local musicians.

Math rock, like gimmick-rock, is not unique to Hamilton. It is a sub-genre that can trace its musical roots to the late 1980s, before the release of *Nevermind*, but, perhaps by definition, it has remained somewhat obscure. Math rock refers to a sub-genre that is defined more by the technical elements of the music than the actual sound. The "math" refers to the use of different time signatures from those traditionally used in rock music; that is to say, time signatures other than 3/4 and 4/4. The songs usually employ multiple time signatures, sometime overlapping them across instruments; for example, rhythm guitar in 7/8 may be accompanied by a drummer playing 5/4 and the bass keeping 3/4 time. While such polyrhythms are not uncommon in classical composition, or in certain world musics, they are unusual in rock music or in the realm of twelve-bar blues.

The original definition of math rock was fairly rigid, referring to a specific musical style (as well as technique). Early bands usually employed a great deal of dissonance in their music, and utilized over-driven, but not excessively distorted, guitars. The vocals were part spoken, part sung and part screamed. The sub-genre has expanded to the extent that a contemporary definition of math rock would encompass sounds

ranging from near unlistenable dissonance to extremely soothing and melodic, yet unusual, rhythms. I will be examining the specific style of Hamilton math rock and how it has evolved over the last fifteen years.

Internationally, one of the more recognizable works of early indie math rock was Slint's 1989 album, *Spiderland*. However, one cannot discount the role of artists like Steve Albini, Can, the Boredoms and John Zorn (amongst others) in pioneering and influencing the math rock sub-genre. Hamilton's recent math rock history can be traced backed to a band called Gorp. Gorp were a traditional four-piece rock outfit that, by the early 1990s, had signed with Hamilton's Sonic Unyon label. Gorp took a very compositional approach to their songs, but offered up both dissonance and melody, with interplay between these elements. Highlighted by elaborate melodic bass lines, finger-style guitar and skilled percussion, Gorp allowed many local scene participants to experience a more intellectual and complex form of indie music. They would cite influences such as Soundgarden, Zorn, Fugazi and Mr. Bungle, yet Gorp also offered far softer and more melodic songs than created by those bands or artists. Gorp dissolved in 1995, reforming as Golden Lake Diner, becoming a three piece, with guitar, drums and bass. Golden Lake Diner removed much of the dissonance from their song writing; their songs were softer and were technically and lyrically more advanced than those of their predecessors.

During the mid to late 1990s, Chore became a focal point of the local scene. Their music was far more aggressive than Gorp, but this aggression was presented through rhythm and distortion, not speed and angst. Chore's music was also more accessible to a wider audience, and accordingly helped to develop more local interest in

the math rock genre. Since Chore, bands like Kitchens and Bathrooms, Tell the Divers, and the Inflation Kills have garnered some relative success as math rock artists. The style has come to incorporate both the melodic and the dissonant.

The math rock sub-genre is not uniquely Hamiltonian—although, interestingly, many of the centers of math rock have been, like Hamilton, declining industrial cities of the so-called “Rust Belt,” such as Buffalo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and, most importantly, Chicago—but Hamilton has been an important site (especially an important Canadian site) for the math rock sub-genre to continue to grow. Like “gimmick-rock,” math rock is successful within the wider indie scene, and accordingly functions, in part, as an expression of local identity. While gimmick-rock has a unique relationship with Hamilton, I would argue that, through the math rock sub-genre, Hamilton has developed, at least to a degree, its local sound, or more specifically, its local indie sound.

Postmodernism and the Indie Scene

Elsewhere in this thesis I have made the claim that Hamilton’s indie scene displays characteristics of postmodernism. Perhaps what is most interesting about the distinctive combination of gimmick-rock and math-rock in Hamilton is that each of these sub-genres, in its own particular ways, focuses on the working and reworking of the conventions of popular music to an extent that it displays many of the characteristics of postmodern art.

Brian Longhurst (2007, 104-105) has applied principles of postmodernism derived from Strinati (1992) to the study of popular music. For the purposes of this discussion, the three most significant are: (1) “the emphasis on style at the expense of

substance and content”; (2) “the breakdown of the distinction between high culture (art) and popular culture”; and (3) “confusions over time and space.”

Noise bands, embracing dissonance and chaos are a prime example of the first of these principles, an emphasis on style at the expense of substance. The musical style employed often seems to represent a complete rejection of the emotive and melodic elements of songwriting. In gimmick-rock, substance is removed out of necessity. The value of gimmick-rock as a sub-genre is in its ability to satirize the style of another genre. In effect, increased substance over style would diminish the cultural value of the sub-genre.

With respect to the second principle of postmodernism, math-rock is an attempt to formalize the compositional elements of a popular music form, applying the methodologies of high culture creation to production of popular culture and thereby eroding the distinction between the two. Gimmick-rock, noted for its crude humour and often rudimentary musical styles, is in part a form of high satire. The songs and performances of gimmick-rock are based on sophisticated (intellectual?) critiques of popular music forms, yet simultaneously evoke elements of vaudeville and pantomime, which are often associated with mass culture.

Though the interpretation is arguable, one could suggest that math-rock typifies the third of these postmodern principles, in that the distinctive conventions of the sub-genre are based on confusions about time and space. Rhythmic elements and song structuring are employed to disrupt the accepted and normalized forms of popular music; in particular, overlapping time signatures (not commonly found in rock music) and, often,

the removal of any recognizable verse/chorus structure challenge conventional notions of time and space in popular music.

In his discussion of postmodernism and its core principles, citing Featherstone (1988), Longhurst also contrasts it to the characteristics of modernism, noting five major points of difference. One of these—"the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture"—has already been dealt with, above. In the following paragraphs, I comment briefly on each of the other four, citing particular evidence where possible from the Hamilton scene.

a) "*The effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life*"—the understated performance styles of indie artists, rejecting "rockstar" personas, generally remove the boundary between performer and audience. In the case of gimmick-rock artists, such as Wax Mannequin, however, the opposite is true: rather than making art more like everyday life, they carry their art into everyday life, maintaining their stage personas and their "acts" off-stage as well as on.

b) "*A stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and mixing of codes*"—this process is a dominant element of indie music. As mentioned above, gimmick-rock employs what could be called low humour and elements of vaudeville or burlesque, while simultaneously presenting high satire. Math-rock is an exploration of rock music using elements of country, jazz, classical and world musics to dissect and amend traditional fundamentals.

c) "*Parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface 'depthlessness' of culture*"—this characteristic is obviously reflective of the principles of gimmick-rock. In part, one could use this to define gimmick-rock as a sub-genre. In

similar vein, however, the combination of different time signatures in math-rock may be viewed as a form of playfulness and pastiche.

d) *“The decline of originality/genius of the artistic producer and the assumption that art can only be repetitious”*—unlike Toynbee’s assertion that style is idolized in attempt to create the “perfected genre” (Toynbee, 2000), the indie rock musician idolizes style as a means of creating artistic value in a medium burdened by repetitions and redundancies. Indie musicians question and subvert traditional notions of “the artist” (either through deliberate understatement or by wildly exaggerated overstatement – see more of the discussion on performance styles in Chapter 4). Indie music as art becomes a process of genre deconstruction and the exploration and criticism of familiar (repeated) terrain.

A Hamilton Sound?

Through my examination of genre forms in the Hamilton indie scene, I began to develop criteria that reflected a distinct Hamilton sound. As discussed above, no one style is representative of the local scene. However, local sound is not something that can be specifically identified. It is sometimes simple elements of music, technique or stylistic choice which offer projections of a more local identity, but not a definable sound. Yet through examination of these various elements and other motivations, at least some semblance of a local sound can be ascertained.

It may be argued that the Hamilton indie sound is reflective of the city’s industrial core, and specifically of the steel industry. This relationship exists structurally, rhythmically and aesthetically. The structures of local indie music derive two stylistic

elements from the iconography of the steel industry. The fundamental functionality of steel girder structures, off-set by rigid and complex engineering, is something one also finds in the structuring of math-rock—stripped-down songs, with minimalist instrumentation, concise riffs, with a focus on foundation and shape over layers of sound. The songs are written to emphasize the base design not the decorations. Most importantly, the industrial city is one of noises, crashes and bangs, booms and crunches. The assembly lines of the steel mill are a prime example. From the cacophony of clashing mechanical sounds, the overlap of conflicting rhythms, one can hear the inspiration for the rhythmic experimentation and deconstruction of math rock.

But pollution and decay are also inevitable connotations of the iconography of the decline of Hamilton's traditional industrial base. In the same way, the musical aesthetics of the local scene are mostly grainy and dissonant, distorted rather than clean, the rusted and polluted version of a pristine and pretty conventional pop-rock song. In my interview with him, local promoter Brodie Schwendiman suggested that such factors have a latent effect on the local sound, that they have given "an edge" to Hamilton's music. This "edge" can be heard in the songwriting, but not quite so clearly as one might assume. While aggressive music is heard, it is often rooted in minor scales; but lyrics, attitude, style, technique and even stage performance all also reflect a certain sound. The Hamilton sound is raw and edgy, even in its most pop-oriented forms. It is not necessarily angry, but is pervaded by a pensive cynicism that may derive in part from Hamilton's recent industrial decline (perhaps symbolizing "post-industrialism" as much as postmodernism), but also reflects its longer-established competition with the larger and more affluent city of Toronto.

From the previous genre analysis, it is clear that irony is also an integral part of Hamilton's indie music. While it is more obviously central to "gimmick-rock," irony is also pervasive in math rock, in songwriting approach, lyrical content, and even some stylistic choices. This irony can, in part, be attributed to Hamilton's relationship with Toronto—a shared joke among the musicians and audience members of the smaller city, often at the expense of the pretensions of the larger one.

A local sound is not obvious in Hamilton. It comes from the culture of the scene and city and pervades the music over time. The local sound is one that is raw and emotional, and to a degree, pessimistic. More specifically, Hamilton's sound is usually complex, and leans towards the use of minor scales rather than major scales. It is often loud and aggressive but at the same time, it stays safely removed from metal and hardcore styles. Dave Crosbie points out that Hamilton has come close to wider recognition on a number of occasions: "We've been so close to a Hamilton sound so many times. It's ridiculous that bands like Sianspheric, A Northern Chorus, Golden Lake Diner and even Chore, Kitchens and Bathrooms, and even Wax Mannequin, that they haven't been successful" (personal interview).

Ironically, the bands mentioned by Crosbie *can* be seen to embody elements of the Hamilton sound. The Hamilton sound is thematic, and in turn it can be established through technique, style and performance. It is not an obvious generic definition of a sound; it is as much a feeling and a shared understanding among performers and audiences alike.

Chapter Four: Performance in the Independent Rock Music Scene

“The term ‘performance’ defines a social —or communicative— process. It requires an audience and is dependent, in this sense, on interpretation; it is about meaning.” (Frith 1996, 205)

Despite our vast album collections and downloaded songs, not all music is consumed in a material, or even virtual, static recorded form, as a single physical object of art. Live music performance is a complex system through which music becomes located in the present, in an immediate site of action. Performance is the primary system by which most music scenes sustain themselves. Sites of communication, production, and distribution are made necessary by the demands of the performance system.

Through performance, a band or artist develops a presence within the systems that drive the scene. Performance can lead to the need to produce recorded material. It can, in turn, promote scene participants to obtain a recording of the performer. More importantly, performance, through its immediacy, becomes an active means of embedding the artist as topic, within the systems of communication of the scene. By placing the performance in the immediate awareness of the scene participants (through attendance at the performance), the band or artist becomes part of the active scene; part of the “now” of the scene.

In this chapter, I will examine the live rock music performance event and the significance it has within a music scene. I will begin by exploring the means of performance analysis. Specifically, I will strive to present the methods of examining performances that can be applied to the live rock music event.

The second part of this chapter will look toward the defining elements of live music performance. Rock performance is a multi-layered system that draws upon many unique factors. These factors, or to infer Simon Frith, these “rules”, are not only a reflection of the performance system, but of the driving forces of the music scene itself.

Finally, turning toward the specific, I will examine the roles and rules of performance within the Hamilton alternative music scene. Audience or participant relationships, genre, venue, the good and the bad are all elements in this complex system. This section will examine specific examples of these relationships and the potential insights that they may bestow on our understanding of into the scene in general. From this, one hopes to derive some insight on the significance of performance to “indie” music.

Analyzing Performance

To understand performance and the role it plays in indie music, one must be able to employ a method of extracting meaning from the event. In his paper “Dislocated? Rhetoric, Politics, Meaning and the Locality,” Street implies that there is little written on the subject of rock performance, and that which has been published tends to examine the

event from the perspective of dramatic and/or literary analysis. In describing attempts to study musical performance through dramatic and literary means, Street states, "Most of these... are concerned with performance as the enacting of a prescribed musical piece, or with fitting rock performance within a framework borrowed from theatre" (Street 1995, 261). Both the theatrical and the literary can yield important insights into rock performance, yet neither fully captures the entirety of the rock performance event. Relatively little has changed since Street wrote this in 1995, but recent works, notably Fonarow's Empire of Dirt (2006), have begun to explore indie rock music performance in greater depth.

Street suggests that, "playing live remains a defining feature of the ideology of pop" (1995, 261). The live rock performance is vital to the indie scene. It cannot be viewed solely as a static text, or an enacted prescribed piece. It is the social event through which the bonds of the scene are formed, strengthened, and destroyed. The health of the performance system is the reflection of the health of the scene itself. The artists, the audiences and the venues affect the present through performance.

One can easily see the correlations between the study of theatrical performance and rock performance. Frith writes, "all live performance involves both spontaneous action and the playing of a role" (1996, 207). A band's or artist's set, their repertoire of songs, is without a doubt a form of functioning script, interplayed with stage banter, feedback and interludes spurred on by defective equipment. Yet the farther one drifts from the commercial centre of mainstream rock music, the more difficult it becomes to

apply external theories to the music performance.

Large-scale productions, like the concert performances of U2 or Britney Spears lend themselves, in part, to analysis through dramatic/theatrical methodologies. Elaborate set pieces, scripted dialogue and banter, even orchestrated dance and interactions (more obvious in pop performance) are all well understood through dramaturgy and theatrical performance conventions. The reduced scale and stature of indie rock performance increase the likelihood of error and random events, removing much of what could be seen as a theatrical performance. However, one can see how conventions of improvisational theatre might be applied to the jam band and their organic, free form music performances.

Mainstream pop and rock performances are often glamourized presentations of pre-recorded material. Taken to the extreme with the lip-synching performance of pop stars, these performances (even those which are authentically live) strive to present the audience with the familiarity of albums and songs already recorded, a regurgitation of an established text. The indie rock performance is an event wherein the art itself, the musical piece, is not only presented, but is in a sense, created. Each indie rock performance, with its flaws and failures provides the audience with a work which is rooted in the present. There is no anticipation of recreation of established pieces. Quite often a band or artist has no pre-recorded material, especially for bands on the local level.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Hamilton musician Tyler McIntyre acknowledges buying locally produced albums, but rarely listening to them. Similarly, musician Mark Raymond of A Northern Chorus, Rainbow Meow and others,

acknowledges playing music steadily for the last ten years, yet not releasing an album since 2002. The experience of indie rock music is in the performance not in the recorded album. Of course, many great albums and songs have been generated through the indie music community. However, as bands achieve some measure of success, they are most often required to adopt more rehearsed theatrical forms of performance.

Frith suggests that instability and questioning play a prominent role in popular performance, deriving from both the performers and the social elements of the event (Frith 1996, 204). One could argue that the farther these instabilities are driven from the performance, the less meaning one can obtain from them. As performers' fame and wealth increase, they develop means to remove these instabilities from any given performance: guitar technicians, redundant sound systems and amplifiers, even managers and creative assistants work to remove awkward silences, broken strings, bad jokes and forgotten lyrics. The use of technologies, like pitch modulators and harmonizers, is another example of the enforced perfection of mainstream rock performance. In contrast, I have attended indie rock performances which have ground to a halt while one band negotiates with another to borrow equipment.

Though theories of theatrical conventions do hold some value for the examination of musical performance, at the local scene level, especially in genres outside the mainstream, the theories fail to apply. Although narrative is not at the heart of all theatre, most representational theatrical performances, involve the presentation of a narrative. How that narrative is expressed becomes the methodology of the theatrical performance.

Theatrical conventions can be seen in only the most basic elements of musical performance. They are therefore valid, but only provide a partial means of interpreting the rock music performance event.

The audience-performer relationship is also different between the theatrical performance and the live indie music performance. True, both require a process of communication and they both allocate particular positions or spaces to the audience and the performer, but the relationship between performer and audience at a rock music event is far more dynamic. The rock audience is generally required to follow many short, discrete pieces (songs) as opposed to one infrequently segmented piece (a multi-act play). Also, where the role of the conventional theatre audience is one predicated on absorption, comprehension and appreciation, membership of the live music audience requires a higher degree of active participation, including physical and vocal expression. Dancing, moshing, swaying, head bobbing, even singing along, are immediate responses which imply that audience members understand their function in this interactive relationship. Arguably, the audience could be perceived as part of the performance at a rock event. In gimmick-rock, audience participation is often integrated into the performance itself. For example, the members of Hamilton's Rainbow Meow are noted for dancing with audience members during their song, "Twisty Cats!" and having audience members pour beer into cat food dishes for the band to consume.

Examining music performance as a static text, or even a recreation of a static text is also problematic. Much can be learned about an individual artist or artists through the

textual examination of a song or an album. However, the data gathered from such a study would likely focus on lyrics, primarily, and an examination of the tempo and style of the music beneath. While beneficial, these insights fail to reflect the scene or genre as an expanding whole. Textual analysis can contribute to the way one understands the politics and intentions of a particular group or individual but fails to reference a scene or genre. A song is a performance, even in recorded form, and hence cannot be analyzed purely as a literary text.

Another approach to the analysis of musical performance is to view it as performance art. This idea situates the work in the present (not as a static text), yet also considers the importance of the performing body. Despite their do-it-yourself attitudes and shoe-gazing stage presence, despite the removal of barriers typical of the classic performer-audience social process (which is typical of much mainstream rock and pop), indie rock performers are nonetheless bodies on a stage. They are knowingly “performing,” even while they eschew many of the conventions of “performance.” The absence of a portrayed character or even “rock star” persona is seemingly disarming. The performer is perceived more as a participant within the scene as a whole, than as part of a hierarchical relationship between performer and audience. (The gimmick-rock artist, on the other hand, is even more obviously a performer, albeit engaged in a satirical representation of more traditional rock performance.)

Frith suggests that “the performance artist depends on an audience which can interpret her work through its own experience of performing” (Frith 1996, 205). Indie

rock performance can be considered in much the same way. However, the performer is anticipating an audience which will not only interpret through their experience of performing, but also through the social experience and history of the local scene and the practiced musical genre. The failure of this relationship is that the music performer is not a part of the art itself. They are part of the experience; they are the creators of the art, but they are not the art. A performance artist is as much art as he or she is creator. If then, we situate performance along a more fluid continuum, with performance art representing one extreme or pole, and highly structured, text-based forms of performance at the other, then indie rock performers can be seen to occupy a place near the performance art end of the continuum. In contrast, a standardized and stylized rock/pop performance, that might be typified by a Britney Spears concert, would be situated towards the other end of the continuum, while traditional theatre and symphony orchestras would be even closer to that pole.

The rock performer is a body on stage which conveys meaning, but that meaning is presented in addition to, or at best in harmony with the meaning of the performed song. The rock music performance is a temporal event that produces an art product, but the event itself is a creative process directed by the performer and interpreted by the audience. The band or musician must then be conceived as both part of and absent from the art itself.

How then, do we look at rock performance? By drawing on these various perspectives and examining the process of the indie rock performance, one can establish a

series of conventions and rules that suggest the meaning of the event. However, as indie rock is an generic term, which encompasses many sub-genres, these conventions are not universal, but iterations reflective of the whole. Often, as is the case with math-rock and gimmick-rock, these performance methods can represent very different approaches to a similar goal; in this case, the subversion and deconstruction of traditional rock performance and music making.

Rules of Indie Rock Performance

In this section, I will outline what I have identified as dominant modes of indie rock performance. Specifically, I will look at three performer-types: the **emotive performer**, the **shoe-gazer**, and the **ironic rock star** (the gimmick-rocker). I will also discuss some of the dominant performance conventions of indie rock, and examine the performer/audience relationship at live indie rock performance events. In the next section, I hope to draw associations with the performers of the Hamilton scene.

The obvious starting point is the performer her or himself. Meaning can be drawn from the body performing on stage. The first of the three main performance types listed above is the **emotive performer** who mimics the meaning and emotion of the song through his or her body. This can be seen in the wild flails of intensity when a band is “rocking out”, or even the twisted facial expression of the quietest acoustic performer. There is an extroverted emotional connection between performer and music. While this is not exclusive to indie rock, the indie rock genre is driven by its authenticity; its

“rooted-ness” in the art and the meaning. The second is the “shoe-gazer”, the laconic soul staring away from the audience and seemingly unaware of it, or perhaps overly aware and cocooned against fear. The value placed on the music as art allows the indie rock artist to forego the demands of the body in performance. Essentially, the “shoe-gazer” removes him- or her-self from the formation of meaning within the audience-performer relationship. The music and the song are heralded as the site of meaning, and presented to be examined and critiqued without a guise of showmanship or passion. The third type of performer is the “ironic rock star”, the gimmick-rocker. Here, the performer is like the performance artist, drawing upon the audience’s experiences of grandiose performance conventions, especially those of mainstream rock. Energy and passion are embraced by the indie rock audience as signs of authenticity, while showmanship and gaudiness are symbols of the mainstream and canonical culture. Therefore, the satirical presentation of these conventions has also become a means of performing within the indie rock genre. Choreography, kneeling guitar solos, ridiculous costumes and smoke machines become ironic manipulations of convention that question the genre which they evoke.

Generally, indie rock performers use standard rock n’ roll instruments—bass, guitar, drums and keyboards—embracing what Kruse describes as “the musical conventions that eschew[ed] elaborate technology and instrumentation in favor of a guitar dominated sound; the ‘do-it-yourself’ ethic that told fans that they could easily be in the position of the musicians” (Kruse 2003, 121-22). However, the absurd, the ridiculous,

and the strange also have a place in indie rock. Instruments such as keymonicas and accordions, as well as noise machines and feedback loops, are employed to help express the contrast to the mainstream.

Instrument aptitude is also relevant to indie rock performance conventions. While technical prowess is a boon, such ability is superceded by one's ability to write quality songs. Arguably, high technical skill can provide a greater challenge to successful songwriting. With better instrumentation comes a need to create distinctive and important music. Within the indie scene, skill without substance readily implies the mainstream genres of rock that alternative music has subverted since its inception. Virtuosity, then, is embraced only if it is substantiated with creativity.

It is important to mention costume. As a body in performance, a musician's clothing also becomes a symbol of meaning. For the indie rock performer, clothing must reflect the self, not a portrayed image or character. Essentially, one cannot appear to be in costume. The indie rock performer appears on stage as he or she is off stage. The rock star persona must be absent. The performer is most often indistinguishable from the audience, being defined by the act of performance not the appearance of performance. The performer strives to be a reflection of the scene and the audience. This, of course, does not hold for gimmick and ironic performers. In these cases, the costumes must serve to distinguish the performer from the audience, but also the performer from the object of satire; the costumes must denote irony not image.

To say the indie rock audience is unique would be wrong, yet the relationship

between audience and performer requires the development of some kind of personal connection. In most cases, this emerges through the regular participation of both performers and audience in a local scene. As Andy Bennett has observed, most indie performers “remain tied to their local communities and continue to play to local audiences in local venues” (Bennett 2000, 144). Though tours and travel are a prominent part of the success of the indie rock performer, it is in the local scene that any notion of regularity or prosperity resides. This being so, the indie scene in a city like Hamilton is one of familiarity and community, being housed in few spaces occupied by a small and identifiable group of people. The indie rock audience not only interprets performance through a general experience of genre and performance convention, but also through specific social and artistic experiences shared within the scene community. The limitations of a local indie scene allow for this specific shared experience. The performer does not need to function under the perception of shared knowledge. The audience and performer share knowledge and history because both function as participants within the local scene. They are exposed to the same music, and most likely, have attended the same performances.

Audiences at indie rock events tend to be highly critical, reflecting on the value of the music performed in relation both to the mainstream, from which it seeks to set itself apart, and the established values of the indie genre. The nature of the music, which exists as an attempt to create meaning in opposition to the mainstream, demands an audience that not only examines the art through shared experience, but reflects on the value of that

art and situates it within the generic landscape. Indie music performance is assessed not only for its quality but for its authenticity as an alternative music form. As Frith points out, “The success of a performance for a performer can, in the end, only be measured by the audience response” (Frith 1996, 209).

The third, and vital, element in the relationship between performer and audience is the space in which their interaction takes place. The manner in which a stage is arranged and lit, the quality of the sound system, and the layout of the venue are elements of indie rock performance that are the responsibility of the venue operator. Primarily, the environment created is one that reflects the desire for ‘authenticity’ in the music; an ideal expression style and ethos of the indie genre. Of the major venues in the Hamilton area, only one, The Underground, is decorated expressively. Red and black paint, abstract art, band posters, gig posters and local music artifacts (guitars, drum skins, etc.) line the walls of the basement venue. Here, the venue operator has projected authenticity by representing the club as an object of the scene, by layering it with the iconography and artifacts of the local scene. In contrast, the other principal venues are decorated in generic club fashion: leather couches, hardwood floors, brass or metal railings. At these venues, the emphasis is shifted away from décor, and focused on the stage and performers. In these cases, authenticity is projected principally through the performances of the bands and the responses of the audience. These venues represent an “everydayness” that foregrounds the performance itself, moving the perceptions of the venue to the periphery. The venue’s projection of authenticity becomes interpreted through the

perceptions of the performances.

Stage arrangement and lighting are very simple in indie rock performances. The stage itself is usually flat, and sized as large as possible within the venue, while still maintaining a functionality that discourages a connection to the large-scale stages of mainstream rock venues. Lighting is most often of soft yellow and red hue; very plain and non-suggestive. This enforces the “ordinariness” of the performer, by eliminating associative elements of flashy mainstream rock shows. All of the major indie venues had lighting systems. Though the lights at the Casbah Lounge were very simple, the other venues utilized relatively large scale lighting systems. There were very few filters used on the lights, although most venues did have some lights with red filters. The lights were never used in concert with the music. They always were maintained at constant level from the beginning of the performance until the end.

Indie rock venues, in general, have modest sound systems, at best. Some have very poor systems which permit only basic vocal amplification. As a result, the quality of the performance is not in the hands of experts and guitar technicians, but in the performers’ ability to adapt and utilize their environment. The indie rock performer then succeeds if he or she achieves a high level of quality, while avoiding the glossy professionalism that detracts from the authenticity and anti-canonical nature of the music. In Hamilton, all of the venues I attended have some form of house sound system. The smallest system was at the Casbah Lounge, and, prior to its conversion into a traditional Irish pub, the Corktown had the largest sound system. While some venues, such as The

Underground and the Casbah, provide amplification for all major instruments, the much smaller stage at the Casbah Lounge provided only two microphones and the chance to hook up electronic equipment such as a keyboard or drum machine. Club Absinthe and Pepper Jacks tend to lie somewhere between these extremes, catering mainly to vocals and bass; on occasion, they will amplify all instruments, but this occurs for important performances only. Even the largest of these sound systems is only capable of providing some balance to the audio levels. One overly loud guitar amp can effectively ruin the sound quality at any one of these venues.

The performance event also functions as a means of distribution. Indie rock bands use performances as a means of selling merchandise, most commonly low-budget recordings and home-printed t-shirts. The albums serve as much to commemorate attendance at the work of art that was the performance event as they do to represent a work of art in themselves. However, this point further underscores the importance of live performance in the indie rock genre. Because indie bands are not generally distributed by major labels and receive only limited radio play (especially if there is no alternative college music station), gigs are the principal—and sometimes the only—direct link between bands and their audience.

Indie Rock Performance in Hamilton

By identifying the conventions of indie rock performance we are able to extract the elements of a specific scene which help create its own local identity. The indie rock

scene in Hamilton, Ontario is unusual, insofar as it is marked by diverse musical and performance styles. For example, Hamilton musician Tyler McIntyre comments in discussing modes of indie performance: “Well, if you do it, they say ‘oh man, those guys were good, that guy went nuts, that was an awesome show.’ . . .Anything anyone’s doing on stage, like acting all mopey and depressed, it’s all part of it too” (McIntyre, personal interview). McIntyre, a prominent gimmick-rock musician, has been known to perform dressed as a mad scientist, a cat burglar, and even a 1980s headbanger, with leather chaps and a black wig. By examining in more detail the dynamics of the various conventions of indie rock performance, as displayed in Hamilton, we may begin to establish elements of a local performance identity.

Although in the previous section, I identified three principal modes of indie rock performance—“emotive performer,” “shoe-gazer,” and “ironic rockstar”—only two of these are particularly prominent in Hamilton. The ‘**shoe-gazer**’ is less common in the local scene, though this performance style does occur within specific sub-genres; in particular, ambient, noise and experimental bands. In part, this reflects the intent of musicians in these sub-genres to focus on style and sound, attempting to distract attention from the artist. Hamilton band Fossils, as well as solo performers like Matt Boughner and Electroluminescent, perform with a stoic stillness, often sitting on chairs or the floor at certain points of the performance and otherwise standing immobile.

These exceptions aside, Hamilton’s indie rock performers are found in the other two of my three categories: the **ironic rockstar** and the **emotive performer**. The

majority of both categories of performers could be described as “active performers”; by “active”, I refer to the overall ‘energy’ of the performers—movement, dance, and dialogue with the audience all contribute to this. Promoter Brodie Schwendiman believes that the industrial nature of the city of Hamilton plays a part in defining these local performance conventions (personal interview). He suggests that local performers display a raw quality that is reflective of the industrial backbone of the city, and its related sound (see Chapter Three), the performances being more cathartic and expressive than those typically found in indie rock scenes.

Hamilton bands such as Chore, Kitchens & Bathrooms, Sailboats are White, Shallow North Dakota and Inflation Kills are known for their active performances; all could be categorized as **emotive performers**. The emphasis of their performance is on physically expressing the emotions conveyed in the music. The gritty angst displayed in performance by Sailboats are White has escalated (on at least 4 occasions that I have witnessed) into fist fights between band members on stage. The band Inflation Kills was particularly noted for the intensity of its performances, offering a wealth of physicality in the expression of emotion on stage (which may be seen in clips to be found at www.youtube.com). This emotional emphasis, even among math-rock bands, is one of the elements which help to make the Hamilton scene distinctive from other indie scenes.

Schwendiman also argues that Hamiltonians thrive on an opportunity not only to outperform, but on occasion to perplex. He describes it as “loving to tell a joke, that people from Toronto don’t get” (personal interview). He was referring to the absurdity in

the performances of local acts like Wax Mannequin, Evil Engine, Canada and Rainbow Meow. These performers are representative of what I have categorized as **gimmick-rockers**. Wax Mannequin, performer Chris Adeney, performs in Hamilton frequently, at various venues. He is a guitar player and vocalist. He performs as both a solo artist (accompanied by a drum machine and sequencer) and also with a band (lead guitar, bass and drums). When he chooses to perform with a band, the musicians are also given a new name at each show. For example, he has performed as ‘Wax Mannequin and the Embers of Pung,’ as well as, ‘Wax Mannequin and the Kings of Song.’ As Wax Mannequin, Adeney has centralized his music around a character named Jimmy, a boy with superpowers. By frequenting Wax Mannequin performances, audience members could obtain “Jimmy Points,” allowing them, upon sufficient accumulation, to purchase their own super powers from Jimmy, through his agent, Wax Mannequin. With my “Jimmy Points,” I purchased the power “Moon in the Basement: Lets You Harness the Power of the Moon. . .In Your Basement!” Adeney has created an absurd character, who presents the image of an insane science-fiction-inspired cult leader through the guise of a rockstar persona.

Rainbow Meow employs similar distortions of the rockstar persona to create characters which subvert/question the classic iconography and ethos of rock stardom. The band members—CA Smith, Mark Raymond and Chris Adeney—portray a group of alien cat people who have landed on Earth and plan to take over the world by becoming rock superstars. Their performances include dancing with audience members, fighting

their enemies (friends dressed in dog costumes) and, as noted earlier, drinking beer (often provided by the audience) out of cat bowls. These bands, like the others of Hamilton's gimmick-rock genre, create characters that incorporate the absurd with notions of rock stardom and the rockstar persona, in an attempt to subvert and question mainstream rock music. Their performances involve a high degree of audience participation, and foreground the ridiculousness of the characters they present.

For the most part, however, Hamilton's audiences are notoriously quiet, informed and reflective. As Tyler McIntyre asserted in my interview with him: "They just kinda stand there. And they do that for anything." Though one finds increased activity at all-ages shows and amongst younger scene participants, the majority of the audience watches the performer intently. The audience does not hesitate to applaud good performances, but they also do not applaud out of expectation. Poor performance can often be followed by critical silence. In an interview in Hamilton's *Ravenzine* 2001, Boston-based band, Warren Commission, described its excitement to play Hamilton because the local audience let its opinions be known, good or bad.

The audience-performer relationship is generally very informal, due to the familiarity and sense of community within the scene. With only a half dozen venues and a modest roster of bands, the relationship between scene participants becomes quite close. All my informants believed this close relationship helps the scene to thrive and maintain its distinctiveness, not only from the mainstream music scene in Hamilton but also from nearby indie scenes, such as that in Toronto. For example, Tyler McIntyre asserts that

Hamilton artists refuse to let the local scene function as a training ground for movement towards or into the Toronto scene. Rather, they promote value in the scene itself.

Conclusion

Performance represents the “immediate” within the music scene. It is where the scene itself is populated and where, primarily, the art is created. In this chapter I have suggested how different approaches can be applied to the understanding of indie rock performance. From this, I attempted to express the conventions that make up the indie rock performance form. I have discussed stylistic modes that performers employ, the use of costume, the role of venue, and the relationship between audience and performer.

Finally, I looked at the expression of these conventions within the Hamilton music scene. Though similar in many attributes to other scenes, small variances are what help to create this or any local identity. The Hamilton scene is dominated by the **emotive performers** and the **ironic rock star**, indie artists who employ an active stage demeanor. The stages are simply lit and designed, emphasizing the authenticity of the music. Though quiet and reflective, the audience in Hamilton is also critical and yet supportive and appreciative of the music and scene.

Here, perhaps, are elements of the scene’s identity. The industrial nature of the city and the scene’s relationship to its neighbour in Toronto can also be identified as contributors to variations in performing conventions. Raw and cathartic performances (which are found even among math-rock bands) help to highlight blue-collar frustrations

and 'everyday-ness' by foregrounding emotion and diminishing the barrier between audience and performer. On the other hand, the absurd spectacles offered by gimmick-rock artists suggest a confidence in the local scene, repudiating the influence of larger metropolitan markets like Toronto, and often telling the joke that outsiders do not get.

Chapter Five: The Rhetoric of the Local

The concept of “scene” was originally used by journalists to describe the marginal way of life associated with various bohemian figures such as jazz musicians, poets or beatniks. It was subsequently applied to other fields of artistic endeavor, including popular music. According to Peterson and Bennett, the term was first introduced into academic discourse on popular music by Will Straw (1991) and came to refer to situations where “performers, support facilities, and fans come together to collectively create music for their own enjoyment” (Peterson and Bennett 2004, 3).

Scenes may therefore be conceptualized as sites of resistance, since, by the Peterson/Bennett definition, relations of production and consumption of popular music in a scene are very different from those in the industrial model which characterizes much of the popular music mainstream, traditionally dominated by a handful of transnational corporations. For this reason, the study of scenes has often been associated with a focus on particular subcultures (the punk scene, the goth scene, the rave scene, etc.) which, particularly when viewed through the lens of the Birmingham School (CCCS), were also viewed as sites of resistance to the hegemonic values of mainstream capitalist society. Later work, pioneered by Thornton (1995), Maffesoli (1996) and Bennett (1999), called into question the usefulness of the concept of *subculture* as an umbrella term for any and all musical taste-groups which fall outside of the mainstream, and hence as an alternative

descriptor for *scene*, in part because it is increasingly difficult in “late capitalist” or “postmodern” society to identify a single, unified dominant culture from which subcultures “deviate,” and in part because few musical taste-groups, including most musicians and audience members in music scenes, “live the life”—that is, most members of a scene are only part-time participants, there mostly for the music, while otherwise participating in what might be called “mainstream” institutions and adhering to “mainstream” values in other aspects of their lives. If scenes are sites of resistance, therefore, it is largely resistance against the commercialization of popular music, rather than the broader values and structures of capitalist society.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that there is a symbiotic relationship between scenes and the mainstream music business. First, the music industry depends for its survival on its ability to co-opt new and locally-popular forms of music from time to time in order to regenerate itself (see Peterson & Berger 1975; Burnett 1993; Ross 2005), as it did, for example, in the 1990s when the so-called “alternative rock” movement, which originated in peripheral cities such as Seattle, WA, and Athens, GA, was absorbed into the mainstream. But local scenes, in turn, often need the mainstream as a kind of negative yardstick against which to define themselves. “Alternative” requires an antithesis, as does “independent,” and although “independent” may be defined in a number of ways, or carry various connotations (see Fonarow 2006, cited p9, above; and the discussion in Chapter Three), the most common usages of the term are those that describe music which is not produced or distributed through major industrial or media channels, or that falls outside of the generic and aesthetic “norms” of the commercial mainstream. If, therefore, according to Peterson and Bennett, “scenes” do not fit the

mainstream industrial model of music production and consumption, it follows that many, perhaps most, scenes are characterized by musical forms, or genres and sub-genres, which are also outside of the mainstream.

Initially, the term “scene” applied to the relationship between “*local* music-making processes and the everyday life of specific communities,” (Peterson and Bennett 2004, 7, emphasis added). However, the term “scene” has since been broadened to encompass the concepts of “translocal” and “virtual” scenes. A translocal scene is one in which participants are connected over large spaces by the commonalities of musical interest between them. The exchange of musical forms and artifacts, including fanzines and recordings, among scene participants provides the social interaction which, in the local scene, is more personal and face-to-face. Like translocal scenes, virtual scenes are also constituted by participants spread over a large geographic area. However, unlike translocal scenes in which participants in different places are connected by physical forms of exchange, virtual scenes identify a population occupying a common virtual space. Listserv, MySpace, and Facebook, among countless other independent message boards and online communication programs, allow participants to interact and communicate directly, mediated by the virtual space they occupy (see Peterson and Bennett 2004, 8-10).

My reasons for undertaking this thesis, most notably, to examine the unique generic styles of music produced in the Hamilton area, and to increase the critical work on music in Hamilton and Canada, logically situate this as a study of Hamilton, as a “local scene.” There are, however, some translocal elements—for example, Hamilton’s rivalry with the Toronto scene and connections between math-rock musicians in

Hamilton and other places—and some elements of the virtual—in the form of message boards like Hammer Rock and Steel City Music—but, in each case, these forms of interaction are much less important than the physical proximity and personal connections among musicians and audiences in the cultural spaces that constitute the local, downtown Hamilton, music scene.

Cultural Spaces and Musical Histories

In Chapter 2, I proposed that the Hamilton indie scene does not have a shared history that ties its members together; rather the history of the scene is mediated through place. Particular venues and other cultural spaces have their own histories. The literature on “scenes” suggests that specific institutions and infrastructures of the local community play important roles in the development and maintenance of a local scene; these typically include record labels, recording studios, record stores, supportive media, promoters and venues. In the Hamilton indie scene, most such cultural spaces or institutions are concentrated in the downtown core of the city, which is the geographical centre of the scene.

Record stores have long played a prominent role in the communication of information to and among scene participants, as well as centres of commerce. Beyond casual comings-and-goings and happenstance meetings, these stores represent sources of information on subjects relating to the scene; knowledge about music and artists, performance schedules and music gear can be acquired through these sites. This is achieved, in part, through the knowledge and expertise of the store staffs, as well as the services and display locations (bulletin boards, poster space in windows, etc.) provided

by these stores. The two principal local stores, Dr. Disc and the Sonic Unyon Store, are examples of this. As discussed in Chapter 2, Dr. Disc was a noted source of information regarding upcoming performances; for much of the last fifteen years, the store's glass front entrance has functioned as a giant display case for posters for upcoming performances. Dr. Disc is also an important source of information about indie music, in general, and of available recorded material. The store also sells and rents amplification and recording equipment. The staff of the Sonic Unyon Store was also a vast resource on indie music. The employees at this store utilized personal knowledge and various on-line databases to provide scene participants with in-depth recommendations based on genre, past purchases and even record label affinities. Both stores have played an invaluable support function for the local scene, by offering scene participants a physical space for information gathering and exchange.

Record labels offer a less direct form of support. Indie labels, both small and large, are private businesses which are closed to the general population of the indie scene. However, these sites do support the scene indirectly. The value which the Hamilton's indie scene's participants place on knowledge and authenticity has been documented in this thesis (see Chapter 2 and 4). Participation in the indie scene is, in part, motivated by a person's awareness of the indie genre and the local scene itself. The success of local labels, specifically Sonic Unyon, not only endows scene participants with specific standards of quality—represented by the bands or artists on the label—but also works to validate the entire scene through its national stature, based on the inference that members of a scene which supports, and is represented in the releases of, a successful indie label must know what constitutes “good” or successful indie music.

In contrast to many other indie or alternative music scenes (especially in the United States), radio stations have played a less significant role in the Hamilton scene. In Chapter 2, I suggested a number of reasons for the more limited role of radio stations in the Hamilton case. One is that Canadian college stations operate under different licensing and format regulations than their counterparts elsewhere; thus, while both McMaster University's CFMU and Mohawk College's C101 offer listeners some shows which play local indie music, this is a very small portion of their overall programming. Moreover, the number of college and university students, the principal target audience of college radio stations, is considerably smaller in Hamilton as a percentage of the total population than in more typical "college towns" with active local indie scenes, such as Athens, Georgia. Hamilton is also at the centre of one of the most competitive broadcast markets in North America, and radio listeners have a wide variety of stations (based in western New York and southern Ontario) from which to choose

Roy Shuker suggests that alternative music scenes tend to develop in two distinct types of locality, "college or university towns" and "large cities that are somehow 'alternative,' usually to even larger urban centres" (see Shuker 2008 and Chapter 2, above). Since Hamilton is an industrial city, at least in origin, rather than a "college town," it may be suggested that its close proximity to the much larger city of Toronto make it likely that the second of Shuker's categories would better fit the development of the local scene and the city. Indeed, in later chapters (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), I argue that Hamilton's industrial origins and now near-"postindustrial" status, as well as its long-standing rivalry with Toronto, have helped to shape both musical and performance styles in the local indie scene.

The most important physical space for the maintenance of the indie scene is the venue. In Hamilton, indie music venues include more permanent business ventures, such as night clubs and bars, as well as non-traditional, usually temporary, spaces such as parks, building rooftops, and local houses or basement apartments. Hamilton has had many alternative venues come and go over the last twenty years. In Chapter 2, I described many of the prominent active venues (the Casbah and Casbah Lounge, The Underground, Pepper Jack's, and Absinthe) and the significance of these sites to the scene. Local venues are the active participation spaces within the indie scene. Venues are the sites of performance, which as argued in Chapter 4, is the essential cog of the Hamilton indie scene. They are also the dominant location for social interaction within the indie scene. Arguably, membership in the scene is determined by one's participation or attendance at significant scene events which, for the most part, happen at local venues.

The Sounds of Hamilton: Genre and Aesthetics

In Chapter 3, I discussed the role of genre in relation to a local scene. Genre can function as a means for marketing music. Record labels, record stores, media, promoters and fans alike use genre tags to group specific artists or bands together. Genre also provides a way to navigate difficult musical terrain. One map for this navigation is furnished by the list of "genre rules" elaborated by Franco Fabbri and Simon Frith. In Chapter 3, I apply these genre rules to the production and consumption of indie music in general and to specific sub-genres of indie music.

Indie music is divided into many sub-genres. Some overlap across the convoluted indie music landscape, others remain distinct, even unique. An indie scene is often

associated with a specific sub-genre, which can be perceived to reflect or express certain characteristics of the local scene. On occasion, a scene is typified by more than one sub-genre, as is the case with Hamilton. These particular combinations of sub-genres are often unique to a specific scene (or not found widely elsewhere). Hamilton's indie scene is distinguished by the coexistence of the sub-genres of gimmick-rock and math-rock. "Gimmick-rock" is an ironic or comedic sub-genre of indie music which subverts, flaunts and satirizes the iconography, style and purpose of mainstream rock. In part, gimmick-rock can be said to be an expression of the Hamilton indie scene's relationship to the larger city of Toronto; Hamilton's desire to be recognized as an "alternative" to the larger Toronto scene led the local scene to embrace gimmick-rock as a means of foregrounding originality and creativity. As discussed in Chapter 3, indie music, specifically in Hamilton, and especially in the case of gimmick-rock, is self-consciously postmodern, emphasizing self-reflexivity, deconstruction, subversion, the erosion of traditional differences between high culture (art) and popular or mass culture, and, notably, the questioning of the role of the artist/author. Indeed both gimmick-rock and math-rock, the two dominant sub-genres in the Hamilton scene, are forms of creativity which begin by critiquing, then adapting and subverting popular music forms. The process creates new art through the critical (re-)examination of standard forms and processes of popular music-making.

Math-rock utilizes musical time signatures not usually found in the standard forms of traditional rock music; other characteristics include overlapping time signatures and rhythms, and also non-traditional song structures. I argued that the structures of the math-rock sub-genre—as they are expressed in Hamilton—reflect the industrial history of

the city. The complex and often chaotic songs of the math-rock genre can be likened to the clashing sounds of assembly lines, industrial access streets and, of course, steel mills. The aesthetics of the Hamilton math-rock sound are also suggestive of the iconography of industrial decline. Muddied tones, dissonant noises and abstract rhythms are examples of some the stylistic choices that have reflected the grit, grime and decay that is associated with the demise of the local steel industry and other heavy manufacturing. The fact that other notable math-rock scenes are also located in “Rust Belt” cities like Hamilton, including places such as Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Chicago, lends further support to my argument that the math-rock sound derives, in part, from the industrial nature of the localities in which this particular sub-genre has evolved and survived.

In Hamilton, the unique co-existence of the sub-genres of gimmick-rock and math-rock help contribute to the identity of the local scene. Gimmick-rock helps maintain the scene as an “alternative” to the larger Toronto scene. Math-rock can be suggested as an expression of certain elements of Hamilton’s steel industry and industrial core. I also identified the local approach to math-rock as being the best example of a distinct Hamilton indie sound or style.

Performance in the Independent Rock Music Scene

The live music performance event is the most vital element of the indie music scene. In Chapter 4, I discuss the importance of performance as a central expression of the scene, in comparison to artifacts such as music recordings. Without access to major label distribution, commercial radio and high quality equipment, the production of a good recording is difficult for the indie musician. As a result, less significance is placed on the

recorded album. Recordings are sometimes valued as mementos of the scene and specific performances, but many Hamilton-area musicians suggested that local indie recordings, for the most part, fail to capture the quality or the essence of the artists or bands. Instead, it is accepted by the local scene participants that the live performance event holds the most value as an artistic product.

The indie performance event has many functions. As mentioned in Chapter 2, performances events have a social function, offering an opportunity for scene participants to interact and exchange information. They also offer a means of distribution; both local and touring musicians use performance events to sell merchandise, such as recordings and clothing. However, the performance event is, in itself, the most important function. Through performance, participants are able to actively pursue their respective roles in the indie scene; the musicians get to play music, while the non-musicians get to hear and critique indie music, although the division of labour is rarely that clear-cut, as many of the “non-musicians” will themselves be performers at other events—it is one of the hallmarks of a strong sense of scene identity that musicians will, when not playing, support other artists and bands by joining their audiences .

In Chapter 4, I analysed the modes of performance in the Hamilton indie scene. I introduced three distinct types of local performers. The first, the “emotive” performer, is one who physically displays emotions (through movement and expression) that reflect the intention of the song. I suggested that this mode of performance is adopted by many math-rock musicians. The second type of performer I introduced was the “shoe-gazer.” These performers appear to disassociate from the audience, staring downward (toward their shoes, of course) or concentrating on their instrumentation. In Hamilton, this style

of performance will most likely be found among performers from the noise and ambient sub-genres, although it is the least common of the three performance modes. The emotive performer and the shoe-gazer are both typical of indie rock and reflect the intent of many indie performers to represent themselves as “ordinary” scene participants, blurring the distinction between audience and performer, and emphasizing their shared identity with the audience. The indie performer is therefore a subversion of the iconography and ethos of rock stardom.

Gimmick-rockers represent the third type of performance style in Hamilton: the “ironic rockstar.” Unlike the other types of indie performer, above, the ironic rockstar exaggerates the conventions of rock stardom, rather than subverting them through rejection or understatement. Costumes, wigs, characterizations and fabricated “fan clubs” all serve to emphasize the ridiculousness of the performance and its performers.

Much like the earlier examination of the prevalent sub-genres in the Hamilton scene, an examination of performance types also yields information about the local scene. The emotive performer, often the math-rock performer, emphasizes the gritty nature of the music (see above and Chapter 3) through raw emotive physical expression. Like the structural and aesthetic elements of math rock, this mode of performance can be argued to express a sense of local identity, through actions which reflect the raw physicality of the city’s steel industry and, often, the pessimism associated with industrial decline. The gimmick-rock performance and the ironic rockstar performance type are similarly congruent to the musical conventions of the sub-genre. Through its obscure humour and absurd parody and satire, gimmick-rock works to evoke a sense of originality in association with the Hamilton scene, which in turn helps to identify the local scene as an

alternative to, but clearly distinguishable from, the nearby Toronto music scene.

Finally, Hamilton indie rock audiences are notably reserved and pensive. They have a strong critical appreciation of indie music; they support the scene, and they know what music is “good,” but they do not applaud a weak performance out of some sense of social obligation. They are not malicious, but they do demand high quality performances that simultaneously accord with local perceptions of indie “authenticity” (see Chapter 4).

Conclusions

Finally, it is important to discuss the relationships among these various findings and their implications for our overall understanding of the Hamilton indie scene. First, the local indie scene relies upon various institutions and infrastructures (also called “cultural spaces”) which focus its activity in a particular locale. The infrastructures employed by the Hamilton scene suggest an importance on performance. Venues are the dominant physical spaces of the scene, while other secondary spaces, like record stores, function to support the performance infrastructure, by providing information about upcoming performances and as a knowledge resource on the indie music genre and its sub-genres. Such resources help to inform the perspectives of the Hamilton scene participants, including expanding the critical reference points for the audience, and enhancing the ability of the musician to create self-reflexively and authentically.

The Hamilton indie scene is represented by two prominent sub-genres: math-rock and gimmick-rock. Math-rock, through its style, structure and associated performance conventions, deconstructs and adapts traditional rock music, overlaying it with emotion, grit and complexity. In doing so, it suggests a conscious desire, by the musicians and the

accepting audience, to create music that critically examines the conventions of rock music and questions standard notions of rock music songwriting. Also, elements of Hamilton math-rock project a part of a local scene identity. As discussed in Chapter 3, math-rock's structural and aesthetic elements reflect, in some ways, the sounds and iconography of the local steel industry and industrial base.

Gimmick-rock and its associated performance style also contribute to the identity of the local Hamilton indie scene. Through its absurdities and oddities, Hamilton's gimmick-rockers "tell the joke that Toronto doesn't get" and in doing so emphasizes the Hamilton scene as distinct from the larger scene in nearby Toronto. At the same time, if math-rock is a musical expression of Hamilton's (now-declining) industrial past, gimmick-rock is particularly reflective of a sense of postmodernity, of the city's post-industrial present.

More generally, the local scene places great importance on the indie music performance. A live performance event allows one to experience the temporal and spatial immediacy, the "now" of the scene, the moment in time and space where the scene becomes tangible. Performance is a means of expressing local identity (through style, music, and irony), but more importantly it is the foundation on which indie music scenes are built. To be a band, an audience participant, a club manager, one must be present, in some capacity, at live performance events. The specific venue is almost irrelevant; as long as there is a space in which to play and meet, it is the performance itself which roots the participants in space and time and makes them part of the local Hamilton scene.

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APPENDIX A REB Clearance

DATE: Thursday, September 09, 2004

FROM: Linda Rose-Krasnor, Chair
Research Ethics Board (REB)

TO: Nick Baxter-Moore, Communications, Popular Culture and Film
Joshua Holt, Interdisciplinary MA Program in Popular Culture

FILE: 03-385 - Holt, Joshua

TITLE: Hamilton Music Community Research Project

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: Accepted as Clarified

This project has been approved for the period of **September 09, 2004 to December 31, 2004** subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The approval may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB. The Board must approve any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to www.BrockU.CA/researchservices/forms.html to complete the appropriate form ***REB-03 (2001) Request for Clearance of a Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.***

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects, with the exception of undergraduate projects, upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form ***REB-02 (2001) Continuing Review/Final Report*** is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

Heather Becker, Office of Research Ethics
Brock University Office of Research Services
500 Glenridge Avenue, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1
phone: (905)688-5550, ext. 3035 fax: (905)688-0748
email: hbecker@brocku.ca
<http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/humanethics.html>

APPENDIX B: JOSH HOLT – A HAMILTON SCENE BIOGRAPHY

I have been an active participant in the Hamilton indie music scene since 1993. As a teenager I attended all-ages performances at the X-Club every Sunday night that I could. During the research for this thesis, while living in the Hamilton area, between 2004 and 2006, I attended at least 75 (and up to 100) local performance per year. This total included some non-indie performances, such as blues or folk at Pepper Jacks or in Hess Village.

During the research period, I attended 'Eclectricity' at the Casbah Lounge every Wednesday. Each weekend I would, if possible, attend shows on Friday and Saturday, usually at the Casbah, The Underground or Absinthe. I also attended other mid-week performances if the opportunity arose. In the preceding years and those since, I have also attended performances on a regular basis. I would estimate that I have attended over 500 indie performance in Hamilton, at every major indie venue.

I have written for local magazines, including both *Ravenzine* and *The Mantle*, and acted as assistant editor of the latter. For the completion of my BA in Multimedia at McMaster, my senior thesis was an interactive film which functioned as a fictional representation or "mockumentary" (much like *Spinal Tap*) of Rainbow Meow and their real-life selves, Mark Raymond, CA Smith (Mayor McCa) and Chris Adeney (Wax Mannequin).

Since 1995, I have also performed locally in several bands across various genres. I have sung and/or played guitar, bass, drums and keyboards in fifteen bands in the Hamilton area, some of which lasted for years, some only for a few weeks. In the late 1990s, I toured Southern Ontario and played many local shows with my hardcore punk band, Janitors of Anarchy. Starting in 1999, I played for two years in the Tighties, playing pop-punk with a suggestion of math-rock influence. In 2000, the Tighties released a CD, *Load "*" 8, 1*, which held the top position on the McMaster Radio chart for more than a month. Since 2003 I have been a member of two math-rock groups, Texas Gold, and Ships at Sea. I have also played in the gimmick-rock band, Big Brother, for over ten years. I have also played drums, guitar and bass for another gimmick-rock band, Evil Engine, at various times during that band's fifteen-year lifespan. The myriad of failed bands and short-lived projects with which I have been affiliated is too long to list. Most of these played only a handful of performances or perhaps recorded a few songs.

I have performed at venues in Hamilton, St. Catharines, Toronto, London, Ottawa, and Chicago. I have released four albums, one each with the Tighties, Big Brother, Evil Engine and the Huge Trucks. My bands have also had songs released on two different local music compilations. I have performed at small house gigs for five people, outdoor punk festivals for two thousand. I have played at Toronto's North by North East festival as well as Hamilton's "It's your Festival". I have recorded albums in studios in Hamilton and Chicago. My bands have been featured in the "Music Notes" section of VIEW

(Appendix B: Josh Holt, cont'd)

magazine and received a full-page colour article in the Hamilton Spectator. My bands have been interviewed and our music played on both Mohawk and McMaster radio stations, as well as CBC Radio Two (*BraveNew Wave*) in 2001.

These bands have played at every major indie venue in the city. Our shows have included gigs with Inflation Kills, Chore, Kitchens and Bathrooms, and the Constantines. In my time as a local musician, I have played more than a dozen times at every venue listed in this thesis, with the exception of the X-Club, where I performed twice

APPENDIX C: OBSERVING THE HAMILTON MUSIC SCENE

Observational Methodology

My observational method involved regular attendance at live music performance events. At these events, I would examine specific elements of the venue and the performance. For the venue, I would note the relative size of the space and the size of the stage, the location and quantity of bar areas, the décor of the venue, and size, type and quality of the lighting and sound systems. With this, I also noted any enhancements such as smoke machines.

Venue	Stage	Equipment
Pepper Jacks -large venue, with 2 floors -one bar on each level -modest décor -soft blues, blacks and greens for colour	-medium stage (~150 sq. ft) -high elevation -no obvious backstage area	-modest sound system, amplifying vocals predominantly -some coloured lights and lighting enhancements
Casbah -large venue, 1 floor -Lounge on lower level cited as a second venue -one large bar to rear of venue -hardwood	-large stage (>150 sq. ft) -medium elevation (~1.5 ft) -separate backstage room on lower level	-larger sound system, amplifying bass, vocals and drums -very functional lighting system, mostly white
Casbah Lounge -small room -decorated with local art (on sale) -one bar	-no stage -performances take place beside DJ Booth on the floor	-small sound system, amplifying vocals or electronic equipment only -minimal lights, utilizing mainly house lights
The Underground -large venue -decorated with local music paraphernalia and abstract art pieces. -mainly black and red colours	-large stage -high elevation -located in centre of venue -large backstage area	-large sound system, provided full amplification of performers -advanced light system that focus on realistic presentation, mainly white
Club Absinthe -very large venue, 2 floors -upstairs has a more polished upscale design -one bar per floor	-medium size stage upstairs -no stage on lower floor though some performances held on dance floor.	-medium sound system, amplifying vocals and some instruments -some presentational lighting

(Appendix C: Observing the Hamilton Music Scene, cont'd)

Performances were observed in relation to both the performers and the audience. While observing performers, I noted the number of people on stage, the amount of interaction with the audience and its style (formal or informal), and finally the dynamics of the performance, including stage movement, energy and emotiveness. This is discussed in the examples provided in Chapter 4.

The audience was observed with emphases on reaction, location and demographic consistency. Consistently, in keeping with Fonorow's (2006) findings, audience members tended to arrange themselves with the younger participants near the front and the older ones near the back. If the average age of the audience was younger, specifically between 18-23, the crowd participation and reaction was slightly more excited. However, Hamilton audiences were consistently reserved across all venues and age groups; the one exception was found during gimmick-rock performances, when audience participation increased substantially. These findings are summarized further in Chapter 4.

Performances Attended

In order to acquire a general perspective on local 'indie' performance and the local scene, I attended many performance from January 2005 to December 2006. To facilitate this, I spent April 2005 to May 2006 living in downtown Hamilton. I will provide a list of the usual performance nights and the venues which I regularly attended. Also included below is a list of several specific performers whose performances were attended more regularly (at least 3 times) and regarded more thoroughly.

Primary Venues Attended:

- i. Club Absinthe; regular performances on Friday and Saturday evenings.
- ii. The Underground; performances throughout the week.
- iii. The Casbah; performances throughout the week.
- iv. The Casbah Lounge; small and eclectic performances on Wednesdays.

Primary Performers:

- i. The Inflation Kills
- ii. Alive and Living
- iii. Bird Rentals
- iv. Wax Mannequin
- v. Sailboats are White

APPENDIX D: LIST OF INFORMANTS

Marc Brenzil. Local musician and film maker. His past musical ventures include Big Brother, Nasrad and Flex, The LoveBolt, The Fifties, and The Huge Trucks. He has also filmed music videos for local musicians like Mayor McCa and Evil Engine. Currently he is working on documentary on local band, Rainbow Meow. Has performed in the Hamilton area for over 15 years.

Sarah Cairns. Local club DJ, former host a regular Wednesday night event at the Casbah Lounge known as "Eclectricity," eclectic, experimental and folk performance with indie rock DJs playing music during downtime. She has also hosted many house shows features out-of-town acts, especially artists from K Records on the west coast.

Cam Chisholm. Local show promoter, primarily booking at Absinthe and Pepper Jacks. Employee of Dr. Disc record store.

Dave Crosbie. A musician based in the Hamilton-area, he has performed locally for over 10 years. His early work was in a ska band called The Wisties. More recently, he has performed in the math-rock group, Bird Rentals. He has also worked for several years at both the Underground and Casbah venues. Formal interview, July 2006.

Dave Dunham. Local musician. Singer and drummer for the band Chore. Currently, he is the drummer for the band Don Vail. He was also a member of the band, Sons of Butcher. Sons of Butcher were a gimmick-rock band that was accompanied by a cartoon on the Comedy Network. Dunham co-created and starred in the show as well.

Chris Gallimore. A Hamilton-based multi-instrumentalist (playing keyboards, drums, guitar, and bass), Gallimore has been a member of many local bands, including Big Brother, Evil Engine, Canada, and Kitchens and Bathrooms. He has also co-produced albums by Hamilton bands including the Tighties, the Huge Trucks and Big Brother.

Michael Keire. Drummer for local bands Evil Engine, Zildo Ildo and the Astroknights, he has been actively playing in the local scene for over 15 years. He has also recorded many local bands at his home studio and more recently at Catherine North Studios in Hamilton.

Tyler McIntyre. He has lived and performed in Hamilton for over 15 years. Most notably, he has fronted the gimmick-rock band, Evil Engine, for much of this time. McIntyre has also released several solo albums, and has recorded and produced albums for other local performers. He also spent some time running a local music website called "Steel City Music" (www.steelcitymusic.ca). Formal interview, July 2006.

(Appendix D: List of Informants, cont'd)

Lou Molinaro. Molinaro has spent many years as an active Hamilton scene participant. He has worked at Mohawk College radio since 2002, hosting shows focusing on local music. He also runs his own record label, "Double Hell Records." Molinaro was also the booker/promoter for the Corktown tavern for several years in the early part of this decade. Formal interview, January 2004 (this interview was originally performed as part of early M.A. course work).

Mark Raymond. Local musician who has performed with Wax Mannequin, Gorp, Golden Lake Diner and Rainbow Meow. Mark also plays his own solo material. He has performed in the indie scene in Hamilton for over 15 years.

Luke Reed. A local musician and club disc jockey, Reed has performed regularly in the Hamilton indie scene over the last ten years as part of Texas Gold and Dead City Summer, and early in the Burlington hardcore scene. Formal interview,

Vic Rinieri. Local musician played in Evil Engine, Dead City Summer, the Tighties and Texas Gold. He has played locally for over 10 years.

Brodie Schwendiman. Hamilton-area booker/promoter who has worked for the majority of the top venues in the last 10 years, including Hudson, the Raven, the Underground and the Casbah. He is now the operator of the Casbah venue. He has been responsible for booking many international 'indie' performers as well as countless local events. He also runs his own label, "Cincinnati Records". In the past he was editor of several local music magazines, including *Ravenzine* and *The Mantle*. Formal interview, July 2006.

Rob Stockman. Bartender at Casbah and Casbah lounge, 2004-2006.

Ric Taylor. CFMU (McMaster University) Radio show host, focusing on local music. Ric also writes the "Music Notes" column for *VIEW* magazine, the longest-running weekly "alternative" newspaper serving the Hamilton area.

Phil Williams. Local musician, frontman of Kitchens & Bathrooms and Inflation Kills, two important local bands that were both signed to Sonic Unyon Records. Has toured North America extensively and recorded at Steve Albini's Chicago studios.