
For anyone considering writing an academic paper on the subject of independent rock music, Holly Kruse’s *Site and Sound* is a necessary read. The book is a rare, incisive exploration of the narratives of independent (“indie”) music identity, and with its heavy emphasis on quotations from “indie” musicians, label managers, and employees, and college radio programmers, it is a standout in terms of its ethnographically inductive approach—stepping cautiously and reflexively from field to interpretation.

Since the late 1990s, it has become extremely challenging to write a book about popular music without devoting critical attention to the dramatic changes in music’s production, dissemination, and audition brought on by the popularity of Mp3 formats and file sharing tools. Kruse has managed to do just this by restricting her gaze to the period between, roughly, the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, a period of unprecedented corporate consolidation, vertical and horizontal integration, and co-optation in the commercial global music industry. In narrowing her focus temporally (the pre-Mp3 era) and topically (on the social construction of identity and social relations in independent music scenes), Kruse has here provided an excellent baseline analysis of independent music practice—one with which future analyses of this rapidly changing terrain will have to contend.

One of the greatest strengths of *Site and Sound* is its compelling empirical narrative. In the first four chapters, Kruse draws on an exhaustive set of interviews with “indie” music participants (working in small labels, college radio, and independent bands), mainly in the contexts of three different localized music scenes—one a large urban centre (San Francisco), another a smaller mid-Western town (Champaign-Urbana, Illinois), and another a small East coast city (Athens, Georgia). Through the words of her interviewees, Kruse conveys stories of small record labels and “indie” bands, and the tensions and challenges inherent in these players establishing both local identities and national media presences—a problem that is underscored by the issue of being perceived as a “sellout” (something that can be quite damaging to “indie” credibility).

While this ethnography is not as exhaustive an inventory of music practices as provided elsewhere (such as in Ruth Finnegan’s *The Hidden Musicians*, or Sara Cohen’s *Rock Culture in Liverpool*), Kruse’s study is focused on the genre of independent rock music nearly exclusively. As such, *Site and Sound* is more intensive than extensive, with special attention to the structuring logics of identity and social formations among “indie” rock bands, labels, retailers, and college radio stations, and between these entities and national, mainstream music industry structures.

Chapters five and six attempt to rein in the opinions, values, narratives, and observed practices of independent music into a theoretical overview. In “Locating Subjectivity in Independent Music” (chapter five) Kruse describes some of the multiple dimensions of “indie” rock’s constitution—locality, gender, and genre. Kruse observes the close association of a genre (“indie” rock or pop) and independent music scenes, noting how these musicians see themselves as part of a shared tradition of music practice constructed in opposition to, or “refusal” (p. 117) of mainstream modalities of music production and exchange. Kruse also finds that the gendering of activities common in the mainstream commercial music industry is also partially reproduced in independent rock music scenes, despite common Romantic claims to the contrary. As well, this section introduces her critique of Bourdieu: specifically, his observation of the relative importance of “physical space” over that of “social space” in the social construction of identity. Kruse argues that a unique feature of independent rock music scenes is the close social relationships that are extended over a wide (national) space, a phenomenon that would diminish the importance of physical space. Yet, she also observes that physical space plays an important role in nar-
narratives of independent music scenes, with many subjects telling of “scene-defining spaces” (p. 129), such as independent record shops and pubs.

In her final chapter, “Theorizing Independent Music Formations,” Kruse situates her observations about “situated practices” in independent music in terms of Bourdieu’s “fields of practice” and “habitus.” Kruse argues that an understanding of “habitus” (briefly defined as a kind of unmanaged, unconscious, structuring logic of social formations) can lead to a fruitful analysis of independent music formations, at least partially explaining the associations that are seen to emerge: for example, independent bands in particular places forming economic relationships with particular radio stations, record labels, and retail outlets, while not forming relations with others. Essentially, this is an approach that opens up the academic field for accounts of how “indie authenticity” is mediated in a nexus of genre, gender, location, and ethnicity (all attributes of “indie” music’s “habitus”).

Overall, the book raises some very interesting questions about the structure of experience in independent music, and the relation of this structure to supervening economic structures. Following Kruse’s lead, future scholarship might ask questions about how “indie” social formations articulate with different economic situations, such as in the United Kingdom, or Canada, where some structural differences in the industry may be observed. For example, the phenomenon of college radio in the U.S. has no precise parallel in the United Kingdom, for various reasons—the frequent observation that U.K. radio broadcasters typically have more diverse formats than their commercial U.S. counterparts, the relative scarcity of broadcast licenses. In some ways as a result of this structure, pirate radio has played a more significant role in disseminating “alternatives” (such as rave culture) in the U.K. Perhaps the narratives of independent music are impacted by this structural difference? And while college radio in Canada more closely resembles college radio in the U.S. (partially because commercial radio format homogeneity tends to mirror the American situation), broadcasters are under Canadian content constraints, which perhaps changes the scope of available music, and almost certainly has an impact on local and national identities as enunciated in independent music scene narratives.

The social reproduction of genre and ethnicity in independent music scenes are issues that Kruse raises but does not thoroughly explore. For example, the story of hiphop’s movement from “independent” to “mainstream” in the late 1980s and early 1990s (made possible more so by underground club culture and MTV than by college radio) is a very different account of “selling out” than is observed in independent rock scene narratives. Narratives of hiphop might reveal very different patterns of flow between “mainstream” and “alternative” music scenes, different spatial patterns (such as East Coast/West Coast rivalries, and heavier concentrations in inner cities as opposed to college towns). Absent this sort of comparison I have described and some of the subtle differences between music subcultures and their different relations to ideas about “independent” and “mainstream” are not as clear as they could be. This is an important question, deserving further exploration in future accounts of independent American music.

Site and Sound is an important contribution to popular music studies: not only for Kruse’s methodology and approach (ethnographic, inductive), but for an innovative application of focused theory to a specific problem of complex cultural narratives (indeed, “theorizing the independent”).

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