

Folk, Place, Rebellion and Booze: ethnography of an urban music scene

Abstract for Ethnography Symposium 2013

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The ethnography of urban music scenes is a well-established genre, with many of the contributions being North American, often jazz-based and implicated in the discourse of ethnicity, politics and gender (Becker, 2004). Lena and Peterson distinguish distinct genre types—Avant-garde, Scene-based, Industry-based, and Traditionalist, (Lena and Peterson, 2008). Danescu characterises the Rotterdam music scene (Danescu, 2013). UK ethnographies are relatively few in number and for folk music concentrated on clubs and festivals, rather than the pub scene (Kosby, 1977). Holt argues that some venues are subject to a process of gentrification (Holt, 2012) and Foucault that such spaces are subject to processes of de-authentication and become less “utopian” (Foucault (1967, 1994).

This paper is based on a participant-observation insider account of a contemporary scene-based venue, using the method of thick description, and centring on the use of space (V. Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010), that appears open and available for free access as the venue is in principle a public place, but in fact is strongly-determined and quite powerfully regulated, with informal sanctions against contravention of norms. The timings appear informal, fluid and open, with neither starting nor finishing times publicly known nor announced but follow in practice predictable envelopes. The playlist appears unplanned, spontaneous and impromptu, varying from performance to performance, depending on the personalities present and the balance of musical forces available but is disciplined with strict rules of conduct and certain themes, motifs and genres visible. The distinction between insiders and outsiders is emergent and to an extent subterranean, with entry opportunities for new participants and some micro-political games being played.

We discuss relative levels of musical competence, perceived differences between a “show”, a “jam”, a “session” and a “quiet night” and the role of the noise level and alcohol consumption in judgements about what is “good” or “bad” about a “night”. We depict the typical use of space as partly hierarchy-based but also performance-specific, creating opportunities for participant involvement, a typical performance, the allocation of time and the characteristic sequences of individual performances, and certain roles and rituals.

The categories of performance are identified and the informal rules for each and for the transitions between these genres are proposed, against the backdrop of a wider musical and cultural scene of which this venue is only a part, and proposes a typology of the participants in terms of “active engagement” (McQuail, 1997) defining “regulars”, “drop-ins”, “regulars”, “groupies” and “host” and describing how these various roles are enacted, and by sketching out the moral career of a participant.

We use Kolby's framework in depicting the "atmosphere" of the venue, varying by the nature of the participants and offers interpretations of "what works" and "what doesn't work", and the perceived importance of ethnicities and "tradition" in establishing and confirming meaning and authenticity, with especial reference to the role of "grittiness" (Zukin, 2010) in the urban scene and question the relevance of Foucault's claim of the loss of utopia.

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