THE NO-AUDIENCE UNDERGROUND: NAVIGATING DEGREES OF AUTONOMY IN AN EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC SCENE

Craig Stewart Johnson

PhD

2026

THE NO-AUDIENCE UNDERGROUND: NAVIGATING DEGREES OF AUTONOMY IN AN EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC SCENE

CRAIG STEWART JOHNSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Research undertaken in the Faculty of Society and Culture.

May 2026

Abstract

My research examines how the DIY, experimental, translocal music scene known as the no-audience underground (n-au) has transformed in relation to changing social, technological, spatial and economic contexts over the past 25 years. This thesis provides an original and necessary perspective on the relevance, and continued existence, of the notion of an underground in the contemporary climate by engaging in the first in-depth, empirical study of the no-audience underground, contributing to this contemporary discourse. I provide a large of amount of new archival material to bring awareness to the activities of a scene which has been previously overlooked in academic study and in doing so demonstrate how it can potentially be considered a framework for musicking. In this process, I put forward new arguments about the positioning of the n-au and its social capacity as it is entangled within, and variously autonomous from, wider external contexts.

I begin by situating and contextualising the n-au's key principles - aesthetic variety, non-hierarchical structure, self-sufficiency, hobbyist approach to practice, indifference to the mainstream and marginal appeal - in ongoing academic discourse surrounding DIY, underground, experimental music. Following a critical reading of the notion of the n-au, I employ embodied ethnographic research methods, comprising participant interviews alongside extensive fieldwork and reflexive practice, to examine a scene which has transformed over time. From the adoption of digital distribution platforms to the search for available performance space, I demonstrate how the n-au is continually navigating a balance between the affordances and limitations of resources external to it, manifest through two key sites of cultural production – recording and performance.

My thesis contends that the no-audience underground is a scene whose practices are not entirely distinct from the wider, more mainstream, cultural industries but are entangled within it, operating with fluctuating degrees of cultural autonomy. I identify the scene as actively attempting to provide a space for creative experimentation and show how its practices look to maintain the conditions of possibility for this to happen but are being constantly challenged by external forces, providing a new and timely perspective on the social capacity of its active participants to ensure the survival of the scene, their agency and autonomy in doing so is becoming increasingly diminished.

The practices and processes outlined in this thesis demonstrate a way of working which is pre-figurative in its capacity to speculate how we might engage with culture which foregrounds the experimental and curious. Taken alongside wider calls for societal change, what I demonstrate is that the activity of the n-au builds capacity to work both within the cracks of a current system while also attempting to build something which transcends it. This scene, personified by its weird music, is predicated on producing a space in which we can allow ourselves to become distracted.

List of Contents

Abstract 2

List of Contents 4

List of Figures.....7

Acknowledgements 9

Authors Declaration..... 11

Introduction..... 12

The No-Audience Underground 12

No-Audience Underground as a Scene 15

Situating the No-Audience Underground 18

Becoming Distracted..... 25

Researching the No-Audience Underground 30

One amongst many..... 31

Observing the N-Au 34

Ways of Working..... 37

Chapter 1. Setting the scene..... 41

Introducing the No-Audience Underground 41

Leeds and Beyond 45

Aesthetic Variety..... 50

Non-hierarchical structure..... 54

Self-sufficiency 59

Hobbyist Approach to Practice..... 64

Indifference to the mainstream..... 68

Marginal Appeal 71

Summarising the No-Audience Underground..... 75

Chapter 2. Discovering the N-Au..... 77

No-Audience Underground: A Useful Catch All 79

Entering the No-Audience Underground..... 87

From Punk to DIY..... 88

One Gateway Band 93
Micro-Media: Zines and Catalogues 97
Micro media: Blogs and Social Media 102
Leaving the N-Au 107
A Drifting Scene 113
Chapter 3. Recording and Distance 122
The Conventions of Recording 124
The Rituals of Recording 130
Individual Expression and Collaboration 131
Recording Tactically 138
Record Labels or Self-Released Audio 143
Facilitating the Eternal Network 146
Goodwill as Currency 151
Material Economies 154
Bandcamp and its Alternatives 162
Navigating Monocultural Independence 165
Considering the Alternative 169
Chapter 4. Recording Performance 177
The Ephemerality of Performance 178
No-Audience Underground Tapes 181
Chapter 5. Performance and Proximity 188
Conventions of performance 190
From Confrontation to Accommodation 198
Rearranging Hundred Years Gallery 202
Rituals of Performance 207
Spaces of the No-Audience Underground 212
Material Space 221
Social and Cultural Space 225
The Role of the Organiser 230

Organising Performance 231
Organiser as Host 239
Chapter 6. Conclusion 248
Operating with Degrees of Autonomy 248
Bibliography 253
Interviews 253
References 255

List of Figures

Figure 1. Liminal Haze Tour Poster (June 2023) 36
Figure 2. Liminal Haze Tour Poster (April 2024) 36
Figure 3. Invisible City Records presents. The Central Bar, Gateshead (24th June 2024)... 38
Figure 4. Screenshot of the Radio Free Midwich title banner.................................. 41
Figure 5. Termite Club Annual Festival Flyer (November 2003) 47
Figure 6. Timeline of Radio Free Midwich activity... 57
Figure 7. The Bald Heads of Noise cartoon. The Barrell Nut Zine #12 (2015) .... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Figure 8. Front cover and contents page from Bananafish 14. (2000) 98
Figure 9. Fisheye Catalogue 7 (Spring 1994)...100
Figure 10. TQ Zine Issue 2 (August 2017)...101
Figure 11. Poster for a Giant Tank afternoon gig (16th January 2016)........................108
Figure 12. Noise + Punk All Dayer flyer (24th March 2012).....................................116
Figure 13. Wharf Chambers exterior, Leeds (June 2023) 117
Figure 14. Free Music Lessons listings flyer (2025) 118
Figure 15. Earworm presents flyer (21st June 2025) 119
Figure 16. Leeds Weirdo Experimental Gig Listings poster (August 2024) 126
Figure 17. Matt Atkins & Stuart Chalmers - Random Architecture (More Mars, 2024)......136
Figure 18. Matt Atkins (L) and Stuart Chalmers (R) - The Central Bar, Gateshead (13th July 2024) 137
Figure 19. Vile Plumage - Excavation at Hobbs Lane: The Early Days of Community Radio cover (Burselm Crypt Recordings, 2022) 140
Figure 20. see monsd & Stuart Chalmers – BOTHBOTHBOTH (Invisible City Records, 2019) 149
Figure 21. Ivy Nostrum - Circle (Self Released, 2021)..152
Figure 22. Posset - Eyes Like Macioce (Self-Released, 2024) 153
Figure 23. Food People / Human Heads (Cardboard Club, 2022)..............................159
Figure 24. Carnivorous Plants – Stretch Out Over An Empty Place and Hang the Earth Upon Nothing (Liquid Library, 2022) 160
Figure 25. Screenshot of a search for the term 'No-Audience Underground' on Bandcamp (2025) 162
Figure 26. Liquid Library restricted section flyer (2023) 172
Figure 27. Chocolate Monk advert (Fisheye Distribution Catalogue #7, Spring 1994). 174
Figure 28. Chocolate Monk release page for the sold-out Wino Lodge boxset (2025)......175

Figure 29. David Howcroft captures a performance by Posset. The Central Bar, Gateshead (24th January 2025) 183
Figure 30. Artwork for 154N-aut# (No-Audience Underground Tapes, 2022). 184
Figure 31. 154N-Aut# (No-Audience Underground Tapes, 2022)...............................186
Figure 32. Notice in the entrance of Decimal Place, Lincoln (June 2023) 189
Figure 33. Mia Windsor and Thomas Carroll. The Lubber Fiend, Newcastle (22nd February 2025) 193
Figure 34. Mosquito Farm. Avalon Cafe, London (28th August 2024) 194
Figure 35. Yakki Da. Wharf Chambers, Leeds (1st June 2023).................................196
Figure 36. Nikki Moran and Off Brand. Fruitmarket, Edinburgh (19th April 2024)...........197
Figure 37. Before - Rory Salter & Ecka Mordecai rearrange Hundred Years Gallery, London (2nd June 2023) 204
Figure 38. After - Rory Salter & Ecka Mordecai rearrange Hundred Years Gallery, London (2nd June 2023) 206
Figure 39. A typical running order. The Lubber Fiend, Newcastle (March 2024) 208
Figure 40. Posset. The Lubber Fiend, Newcastle (26th March 2024) 210
Figure 41. The former Old Police House (December 2025) 217
Figure 42. Spanners, London (2024)...219
Figure 43. The Fruitmarket, Edinburgh performance backdrop. Arttu Partinen celebrates (2024) 225
Figure 44. Cafe Oto, London performance backdrop (2024) 225
Figure 45. A selection of posters inside Wharf Chambers, Leeds (2022) 227
Figure 46. BLACKCLOUDSUMMONER - JS Soar, Nottingham (4th June 2023).................228
Figure 47. Interior of Hatch, Sheffield (25th April 2024) 228
Figure 48. Singing Knives Presents poster (26th April 2013) 235
Figure 49. Wonkystuff #18 poster (10th June 2019)..235
Figure 50. A Better Noise Poster (17th November 2011) 236
Figure 51. Luxury Bucket Poster (13th April 2018) 236
Figure 52. Scans Cops & Robbers zine from 2000 (L) and 2019 (R) - Front and back.......238
Figure 53. CHEWn Zine #1 (2019)...242
Figure 54. Baked Beans on the Doorstep poster (20th September 2023)......................246
Figure 55. Adhuman Presents poster (2nd November 2023)....................................246

Acknowledgements

The work in this thesis could not have been completed without the endless, unwavering support of my wife, Virginia Rizzi and our two cats – Geroge Michael and Dario Argento. Ti Amo.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my principal supervisor Prof. Gavin Butt for his time and energy reading countless drafts of this thesis and offering valuable advice along the way, without which the research would not have been the same. Furthermore, I would like to thank my second supervisor Dr. Martyn Hudson who has been encouraging in offering both academic and personal support and advice throughout the process. I am also grateful to Dr. Julie Crawshaw and Dr. Jamie Sexton for their support through the progression stages involved in realising this thesis.

Without the peer support of my fellow Arts PGR's, this would have been a much more difficult and isolating undertaking. The endless conversations, both formal and informal, and time spent being together have made this experience not only an intellectually rewarding one but an enjoyable one. Abi, Alan, Ben, Bob, Bryony, Conal, Dawn, Grace, Gracie, Hannah, Liza, Maddie, Rachel, Shona – You've been the best.

Of course, I could not write an acknowledgment list without special mention to Rob Hayler, without who this work could not exist. Solidarity comrade! Here's to the continuation of the no-audience underground. On that note, to everyone involved in the no-audience underground, in whatever capacity that may be - this could not happen with you. It has been endlessly energising to see you play, chat with you and encourage what you are doing. A special thank you goes out to everyone who I interviewed for this thesis – Ryoko, Stuart, Natalia, Jorge, Eleanor, Own, Sophie, Jonathan, Martin, Graham, Theo, Duncan, Rob, David, Andy, Phil J, Phil L, Layla, Becky, Paul, Ecka, Joe, Luke, Louie, Ali, Charlotte, Murray, Rory, Andy Wild, Andy Wood - as without your input, generosity and camaraderie, this research would not have been possible. What you are doing is commendable and every one of you is doing something truly inspiring.

During the period of research, from October 2022 until October 2025, I had the immense pleasure of being hosted by and hosting multiple artists across the n-au. All these experiences were unforgettable and immensely fulfilling, both artistically and socially. For

those who invited me to play, said kind words, put me up, made food and shared space - Anna, Theo, Tom and Hilary in Leeds, Paul, Matt and Martin in London, Jonny in Derby, Murray in Nottingham, John in York, Jon and Fiona in Sheffield, Ali, Colette and Firas in Edinburgh, Fritz and David in Glasgow, Steve in Middlesborough, Tom, Jon, Sam and Bish at The Lubber Fiend, Andy, Kev, Toby and Harriet in Newcastle, Lauren in Todmorden, Gavin, Lucy and Peter in Lincoln - thank you. Likewise, all the artist I played alongside – which are too vast to mention – it was a pleasure! For all those who played an Invisible City Records night – Ross, Lee, Martyn, Stuart, Jorge, Eleanor, Emily, Arttu, Tim, Ali, Matt, Stuart, Jason, Ashling, Adam, Jonathan, Madelaine, Joe, James, Theo, Nick, Tom, Mia, Shona, Toi, Dawn, Jon, Lindsay, Richard, Issac, Nat, Katee, Marijn, Graeme – thank you!

Equally, I would like to thank all those who I have collaborated artistically with during this period, in whatever way that materialised - Eleanor, Joe, Ross, Toi, Emily, Matt, Paul, Ashling, James, Lee, Maddie, Liz, Grace, Andy, Jorge, Graeme, David - you mean the world to me!

Finally, an extra special thank you is extended to those whose houses I spent time in writing this thesis and sitting their cats - Danila, Paul, Claire, Fritz and Rachel and their cats Jesse and Tulip, Marnie, Smudge and Wilton – your kindness is immensurable.

Authors Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this commentary has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted through the researcher's submission to Northumbria University's Ethics Online System on 04/11/22.

I declare that the word count of this thesis is 92,271 words

Name: Craig Stewart Johnson

Date: 6th May 2026

Introduction

The No-Audience Underground

In the year 2000, Leeds based artist and organiser Rob Hayler (2015b) coined the term no-audience underground (n-au) which, he describes, was the result of needing a succinct way to refer to 'the music scene I found myself in, specifically the type of gigs I was attending and the network of micro-labels, invigorated by the availability of cheap CD-Rs'. Writing on his blog Radio Free Midwich, he suggests this was a scene whose music 'ranged from the most delicate bowing of singing bowls to hour-long, incense-choked psychedelic happenings to three-minute PA-busting squalls of hideous feedback' (Hayler, 2015b)[1]. What linked these sonic experiments was, he wryly suggests, the fact that 'on reflection, the only thing all these types of racket had in common was that almost no-one was interested in them', hence his 'tongue-in-cheek, irreverent bit of shorthand' – naming them products of the n-au (Hayler, 2012c). However, despite the self-deprecation that the term might suggest, it was in fact indicative of a distinct way of approaching the act of what Christopher Small (1991) calls 'musicking', the activity of making music - a framework for doing. Beyond the aesthetic tendencies of this music scene, what Hayler (2015b) found to be of note was how these artists operated, their DIY approaches to creating, distributing and organising this aesthetically varied music resulting in the term being more accurately intended to describe the 'assumptions and working methods of a group of practitioners'. This was not a collection of separate, siloed, localised music scenes, but a larger network connected through their shared aesthetic preferences and underlying values. Despite this scene largely existing in the materiality of performed or recorded music, it was through Hayler's (2012c, 2015b) writing on Radio Free Midwich, where he outlined this 'manifesto' of sorts, that the term gained traction and came to help demarcate this broader, networked scene.

In the n-au, you might find amateur musicians making kitchen sink musique concrète with semi functioning Dictaphones, their activity played out in the function room of a nondescript pub in Newcastle or recorded at home and immortalised on lovingly assembled CD-R's which are then slipped into your hand free of charge. You might be tucked away in a basement gallery space watching a sheet of metal being scraped with a knife to produce wails of screeching feedback by one person while another sends electronic surges through

[1] Radio Free Midwich, from 2009 – 2020, was the main source of information about the activities of the n-au on the internet.

a tiny modular synth, resulting in a collaborative cacophony deep beneath the streets of South London. The music might be subdued and minimal, glacial drones and sustained tones coaxed out of analogue synthesisers, stringed instruments or cassette tapes. Or, it might be frenetic and immediate, bursts of improvised action realised with a restless spontaneity and intentionality on an assortment of everyday found objects – no musical instruments in sight. You could be in proximity to all these activities, in the room, as a listener and, even more likely, as an active participant – situated close to the action. Equally, you could be sat at home browsing Bandcamp from a distance. In this case, you might stumble across a three-hour long compilation album featuring field recordings of the inside of domestic fridges or a meticulously constructed acousmatic tape collage, the artists assembling everything from the flow of a river to the guttural groan of a person's throat into one continual, weird sonic passage[2]. The music may be marginal, considered weird outside of a small yet dedicated coterie, but as Hayler (2012c) argues, 'recognizing that this endeavour is only ever going to be of fringe interest is incredibly liberating' – suggesting a different way of approaching the act of musicking.

Taking cues from noise, experimental, avant-garde and free improvised music, the n-au has come to symbolise a scene based on relative aesthetic variety, albeit contained within the fluid parameters of these overarching stylistic borders. Like with other forms of underground music, it exists 'on the fringes and outside mainstream pop and classical genres', neither aligned with one genre nor completely siloed, in a somewhat in-between state (Graham, 2016: vii). Situated at these edges, inhabiting space underground, its outsider status as a music scene is a key part of why this is the no-audience *underground*. Stuart Arnot and Susan Fitzpatrick (2016) suggest that the aesthetic variety found in the n-au encourages a scene built around 'a happy dissensus of individually constructed meanings', where styles may vary between players and places but are bound by the shared value practitioners' place on self-expression, sonic investigation and creative autonomy. Here, artists are encouraged to experiment, to test out ideas and improvise. Aesthetic freedom is given precedence, with all this occurring in a dynamic, albeit small, 'community' (Arnot & Fitzpatrick, 2016).

The n-au is, as Stuart Arnot (2017) describes, characterised by its distinct 'lack' of material resource, in part because of its marginal appeal becoming reliant on the work of its participants to keep things going. The 'happy dissensus' that is so integral to the n-au

[2] The album featuring field recordings of fridges, aptly titled *Field Recordings of Fridges*, was released by Nottingham based label KIKS/GFR in 2018 and features fourteen artists offering their recordings.

is thus the work of active participants in the scene to 'maintain the conditions under which this can occur' (Arnot & Fitzpatrick, 2016). This collective work becomes manifest in the n-au's distinct division of labour, where everyone involved in the n-au contributes in some active way, whether that be though running a label, organising a gig, performing, listening to a recording or simply attending a performance. Positioning each role as having equal importance, structured in a non-hierarchical manner, informs Hayler's (2012c) tongue-in-cheek terminology, proposing that 'there is no "audience" as such, in the sense of "passive receivers", because almost everyone with an interest in the scene is involved', where he goes on to state that 'there is no "audience" for the scene because the scene is the audience'. This twofold wordplay – of the n-au's marginal appeal and its dissolution of artist and audience hierarchy – are what, in Hayler's eyes, make it unique from other zones of DIY or experimental culture.

Despite the equality encouraged between roles and activities carried out by those in the n-au, it is important to point out that Hayler (2020a) considers the work of its practitioners to be a form of 'hobbyism', carried out not for financial reward or social standing but simply for the love of it. To quote Hayler (2019b), 'there is no money, obviously, no fame, no retiring to a life of boat drinks' but what the n-au does have in abundance is 'goodwill', that which is the 'lifeblood oxygenating the scene'. This goodwill results in a sharing and mobilisation of resources, a collective activity built around solidarity, alternative forms of economy and an innate desire to get the work done. Operating in this deeply DIY manner looks to promote a sense of autonomy in the n-au, a scene which attempts to exist freely of any external constraints, constructed entirely from the resources of its participants. However, as I go on to suggest throughout this thesis, to operate completely autonomously is an impossibility. The n-au instead exists within a degree of autonomy as dictated by the social, technological, spatial and economic contexts which impact it.

To be active in the n-au is, as Hayler (2012a) suggests, a 'liberating' way of being in the world. It verges on being anarchistic in its focus – in its rejection of hierarchy, focus on collaboration and active participation and aim for self-sufficiency - despite this never being explicitly stated in Hayler's outline[3]. While the implications of operating within an economy of scarcity come with a variety of issues, the relative autonomy that the n-au strives for looks to act as a counterbalance. Involvement in the n-au, and the social and

[3] Although, Hayler's use of the term *comrades* to refer to and welcome listeners to his Radio Free Midwich show signals a certain political perspective.

cultural benefits it can offer are summarised succinctly by Jorge Boehringer (2016) in his response to Hayler's thoughts, in a short article titled *Liberation Through a Lack of Interest*:

> We engage and commit ourselves to the level of our own concern, and determine our own degrees of engagement and interest in our artistic pursuits, which, after all, is what a whole lot of both post-Romantic and DIY post-punk rhetoric suggests that participation in music and art are all about. The No Audience Underground further suggests a framework for engagement with society as a whole, and a liberating way of being in the world, in which each individual constructively opts-out.

No-Audience Underground as a Scene

In suggesting that it is the work of the n-au's practitioners to actively contribute to and maintain the conditions of possibility in the n-au, it is important to think about how to theorise and frame its structure. Here, I position the n-au as music scene, referring to both the colloquial use of the term by Hayler and his contemporaries, and to the wider adoption of the term within the field of popular music studies. My framing of the n-au as a scene is informed primarily by Will Straw's (1991) writing, where he characterises a scene as 'a 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'. Furthermore, in solidifying his perspectives on the term, Straw (2004) suggests that scenes 'designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them'. Like Hayler (2012c) explains in his conception of the n-au, what he found to link the types of music he was witnessing was 'that almost no-one was interested in them'. They key word in this sentence is *almost*, suggesting that while the number of people interested may be low, there is still *some* interest. Despite being relatively few, the social structure of the n-au is highly interrelated, a network built across proximity and distance. What Straw (2004) describes as the 'supplement of sociability' that defines a scene is a key part of the n-au, denoting the focus on community beyond simply sharing aesthetic preferences, explaining how relationships are built alongside, and often because of, its

marginal musical practice. If it were not for this sociability, the n-au would simply be ‘no more than a network or a sphere of cultural production’ (Straw, 2019: 26). The degree to which individuals are involved in the n-au goes beyond a passive interest, recognising the important role that being an active participant plays in maintaining the conditions of possibility.

The use of the term scene as a framing device follows the work of scholars such as Stephen Graham (2016: 16), whose employ it as a ‘sociological framework’ for the study of underground music, helpful precisely because of its ‘way of conceiving of a global span of interrelated, multiply hierarchized activity’. Equally, the term is often used as a ‘cultural resource’ but those actively participating (Bennet & Peterson, 2005: 2) and, since Hayler (2015b) specifically refers to the n-au as a ‘scene’, we will continue to refer to it as such, using the term to reflect the wider social, spatial and technological interconnection that exists within the n-au

The n-au can further be described as what Andy Bennet & Richard Peterson (2004: 8) term a ‘translocal scene’, that being a scene which connects ‘kindred spirits’ outside of the confines of a single locality, being an ‘informal assemblage’ of smaller, local scenes connected through a shared commonality of style and process. The n-au does not exist in one central place, it has no distinct locus of activity, instead being an assemblage of these localised, smaller nodes which form the whole network. Music is often positioned as fundamentally social in its nature, in that it is ‘not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do’ (Small, 1991: 2). The activity surrounding the act of musicking is personified by individuals who take part, who are actively involved in the process. While I recognise the importance of the social in the cultivation of a scene, it is just one part of a wider assemblage of human and non-human actors active in cultivating the scene. Following Peter Woods & Yecid Ortega’s (2024) thinking, understanding DIY music scenes as posthuman, in that they are ‘entanglements of humans, technologies, spaces, and sociocultural forces’ is how I am positioning the n-au. Their thinking moves beyond an anthropocentric approach, recognising the agency that these ‘technologies, materials, [and] spaces’ have in the emergence of a scene, rather than being ‘merely boundaries for participants to exist in’ (Woods & Ortega, 2024).

Since the central forms of cultural production in the n-au are recording and performance, forms which are primarily technological and spatial in their nature, they rely on material and resources outside of the scene to function. The n-au’s releases are circulated on

cassettes and CD-R's, these material forms signifying a continued association with the alternative economies of cassette culture and the subsequent CD-R underground it has grown out of, whilst also being affordable and accessible. Concurrently, the n-au has increasingly turned to digital platforms such as Bandcamp - and its democratic potential in terms of access - as the technological mediator of its recorded material. As technologies come in and out of favour, the n-au must consider the degree to which they are adopted, each having its own 'agentic forces' in the scene, offering affordances and limitations for participants while somewhat shaping how their actions unfold (Wood & Ortega, 2024). Likewise, the use of space for performance is always changing. Without a space to call its own, the n-au is a guest in someone else's space, a cultural nomad. Organisers in the n-au might favour the same venues for performances for a while, activity occurring in the same place time and again, but the scenes economy of scarcity leaves it with little bargaining power, the n-au's activities sometimes brushed aside for events which pull a bigger crowd. Performances take place in nondescript pub function rooms, anarchist social centres, art galleries and a host of often affordable and accessible spaces in between, making do with what its social milieu can access at any given time, sometimes taking advantage of cheap hire fees, sometimes being priced out and searching elsewhere.

Given the breadth of the n-au's activity, and its overall lack of resource, it must pull from resources across these translocal nodes, done so through the activity of its participants. If the n-au has a 'lack' of material resource as Arnot (2017) suggests, then what I believe it does have instead is an abundance of the social. Through this abundance, the actions undertaken across the n-au enable the 'exchange, pooling and combination of a variety of resources' which allow it to function (Crossley, 2020: 30). However, like Arnot (2017) points out, it is not just a 'material lack' that is prevalent across the n-au, but also an 'economic lack', requiring its practitioners to be resourceful in ways which aren't dependent solely on economic capital. The n-au is very much 'contingency based', improvising with resources which are available at any one point in time, searching for fissures in the wider ecologies of music, recognising the impermanence of such temporal opportunities (Arnot, 2022). I suggest that because of this lack, the n-au primarily relies on working in ways that employ what Michel de Certeau (1984: 38) terms 'tactics', activities that 'gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time', as opposed to favouring power, permanence and solidity. Rather than building a cache of its own independent, autonomous resources, the n-au works within the resources that surround it, making use of opportunities temporally, resulting in relationships which are always being

renegotiated. These resources are mobilised and distributed across its network of interdependency, seeing the social capacity of the scene enable its continued existence.

In its actions, the n-au, like DIY more generally, is concerned with the search for 'self-reliance', of 'independence from the larger systems of governance and capitalism' (Wehr, 2012: 57). As Ellis Jones (2021: 7) states, this independence is important not only for 'artistic autonomy', but also 'to have control over economic and organizational decisions that might otherwise exploit others'. With social, technological, spatial and economic factors impacting the way the n-au operates, the ability for the n-au to continue autonomously is continually challenged. The n-au relies on the manufacturer of the CD-R or cassette tape for materials, the use of a platform to host digital files, the use of a venue to host a performance or even something as fundamental using the Post Office to send parcels, these resources existing outside of the 'ideological construct' of the scene, being part of a wider 'ecology' which the n-au is just one part of (Behr et al., 2016).

Rather than being fully self-sufficient, fully autonomous, the n-au exists in a constantly shifting dynamic with degrees of autonomy. During its 25-year existence, it has reacted to and to some degree been shaped by various social, technological and spatial changes and continues to do so. The question, is how?

Situating the No-Audience Underground

The idea of an underground scene existing at all, let alone one which can exist autonomously in contemporary society, is contested. David Keenan (2015), in an article for *The Wire* magazine, declared that in 2014, 'the underground is finally dead', suggesting that it has become yet another term to be co-opted and commodified by capitalist culture, being nothing more than 'another niche, another marketable pigeonhole'. Whereas Keenan (2015) states that the underground was previously concerned with a form of music that was 'almost sociopathic in its evasion, in its willingness not to be liked', the increased access to such forms has resulted in a scene of shifting aesthetic priorities, veering towards a more populist stance, where 'underground music has become a mere fetish'. In a similar vein, DIY is said to have reached the same fate, with Jones (2021: 2) stating that 'DIY today *is* mainstream', a direct result of the 'democratization' of the

music industry through technological advancement – everyone becoming a self-styled entrepreneur, the radical potential it once held now pacified as part of an individualised enterprise culture. However, both the underground and DIY as terms and as practices are not singular and finite but constantly being reconstituted in relation to shifting contexts. Graham (2016: 10) argues that the underground of today is noticeably different from the underground prior, due in part to the changing technological landscape, but that fundamentally 'an underground not only persists in the digital age but thrives'[4]. Additionally, Jones (2021: 3) reiterates that there is more than one type of DIY that prevails in today's climate and the one that should be sought after and encouraged by artists is the one which is related to the 'coherent tradition of cultural resistance, often undertaken in the name of greater aesthetic diversity, economic equality and access to participation', rather than that which is focussed around individualised brand building. Identifying and locating any contemporary notion of underground and DIY music, and how it potentially differs from prior iterations, requires us to look closely at scenic practices to examine how they have changed over time. Each localised action becomes one step towards the collective reconstitution of how the underground and DIY operate within these changing contexts.

The suggestion that the underground or DIY are not one hermetic thing, but plural and nebulous is demonstrated in the range of studies into music scenes that constitute the field of popular music study and where my research contributes. Like Graham (2016: 4) points out in his research which maps underground music on a wider scale, many scenes share 'radical aesthetics and cultural marginality', but they also have their 'own scene economies', responding to their own set of contexts and situations. By outlining some of the studies which have taken place, we can see how they each contribute a particular perspective to the whole picture.

Looking back to the likes of Sarah Tornton's (1991: 181) *Club Cultures*, undergrounds are positioned as 'nebulous constructions', often referring to 'a place, a style, an ethos and their crowds usually shun definitive social categorization'. Like with the notion of a scene, undergrounds are flexible frameworks for understanding broad cultural phenomena, being assembled and materialised differently from place to place. Thornton's (1991: 181) work looks at how underground rave culture is perceived by its practitioners as a more 'authentic culture', due to its opposition to 'mass-media', its marginality signifying its

[4] Suggesting that today's underground has become 'chronologically distinct' from that of the mid 1990s (Graham, 2016: 10).

value. Thornton's (1991: 27) work highlights how the prevalence of 'subcultural capital' in such scenes, where a practitioner's embodied knowledge, their sense of being 'in the know', is seen as a point of distinction which encourages this authenticity. However, such capital also can encourage hierarchy, of who is or is not in the know, a position which is at odds with the emancipatory, liberating nature of much DIY and underground activity. However, this is not always the case. Furthering Thornton's concept of subcultural capital, Keith Kahn-Harris' (2007: 124) study of extreme metal scenes develops the term 'mundane subcultural capital' as a type of capital which is not concerned with degrees of popularity or coolness, but the practical and organisational aspects of how a scene functions. This form of embodied knowledge comes from a meticulous understanding of the 'institutions and practices of the scene', the application of which see's participants providing a 'commitment to work hard for the scene, as an almost altruistic commitment to the collective' (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 124). This commitment is where we see marginal music scenes being reliant on the work of their practitioners to survive - the very notion of doing it yourself. It may not be as concerned with wider social standing or cultural distinction and is 'produced solipsistically and even boringly', but is ultimately targeted towards maintaining the scene, encouraging the 'possibilities and joys of collective activity' (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 122). This type of cultural capital is always in flux, most often in response to changing social dynamics of a scene and the accessibility and availability of external resources. Knowing how to organise a performance is impacted by changes in available venues, just as by people leaving the scene, taking with them access to certain resources. When scenes change, it becomes essential that this capital is shared collectively between practitioners, not accumulated individually but redistributed, allowing others to build up their own cache of subcultural knowledge to further reproduce a scene.

Aside from social capital, technologies inform shifting dynamics in music scenes which in turn influence the type of mundane subcultural capital required. In his book *Japanoise*, David Novak (2013: 202) observes how music that is difficult to track down, considered 'invisible' due to its relative marginal status, is reliant on replication using outdated formats to mark 'a radical attempt to redefine the social independence of independent music' – the obscurity of the format signalling its perceived autonomy[5]. Whereas the autonomy of the international noise scene was grounded in an 'aesthetics of obscurity' that the technology helped cultivate, the emergence of online resources posed a contradictory situation, one where the fundamental aesthetics are compromised but the

[5] Japanoise being a portmanteau used predominantly overseas to refer to Japanese Noise music – 'Japanese anime became "Japanimation," Japanese pop became "J-pop," and Japanese underground music began to be circulated overseas as "Japanoise"' (Novak, 2013: 10).

democratisation of the scene flourished (Novak, 2013: 202). What resulted was a delicate balance between increasing the breadth of people involved in the scene contrasted with a diminished cultural autonomy from the mainstream music industry. Despite such positions, Graham (2016: 11) suggests that the wider access to underground music facilitated by the internet is not a question of 'unproblematic potential access' but 'the possibility of desiring such access' - the niche, marginal nature and limited appeal of underground music does not change with reduced barriers to entry, it is just that the way we access it has changed. But, with the reliance on these technologies increasingly shaping the way underground music functions, there is the potential for creative autonomy to be diminished. This is where practitioners in DIY scenes must navigate the balance between the 'resourcefulness and refusal' of technologies, between how they use them for their own ends without replicating their differing cultural values they may hold (Jones, 2021: 138). The question then becomes how a scene can maintain relative cultural autonomy whilst navigating the affordances that such connection and access allows?

Alongside shifting technological contexts, spatial concerns feature in work on marginal music scenes, where the availability, or lack of, space has the capacity to cultivate new artistic communities. Cisco Bradley's (2023: 263) work examines a changing avant-garde music scene in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighbourhood, where space becomes integral to the creation of a scene, the affordances of the post-industrial landscape which encouraged an 'aesthetic alchemy' personified in an avant-garde 'cross-genre experimentation'. Having a space to experiment and collaborate helped to facilitate a growing but marginal scene, enabled by the 'informal' DIY approaches taken by artists – which often blurred the lines between legitimacy and legality (Bradley, 2023: 2). However, like with the n-au, this avant-garde activity was always situated within a 'struggle between the forces of capital and cultural production' as the gentrification of neighbourhoods eventually forced marginal artistic practices out, the scene changing as a result (Bradley, 2023: 264). Whereas Bradley's work examines how artists adopt and adapt the material spaces of the post-industrial city, working within the cracks and gaps of capital and the material landscape, Daniel Verbuč's (2022: 229) work examines a scene which exists in a more private sphere, that which operates on a decidedly more 'intimate' level. Verbuč's (2022: 229) work studies DIY house shows in the USA, where the impact of spatial surroundings, and the activities they contain, look to cultivate 'close-knit, affective, inclusive, egalitarian, and mutually supportive communities'. Scenes which are marginal in their appeal must work with what limited space is available, often only

temporarily, be that in abandoned warehouses, semi-legitimate art spaces or in the confines of one's own home.

The examples used here demonstrate the breadth of work which looks to understand the unique intricacies of music scenes. Encompassing the social, technological and spatial dynamics which are at play in DIY music scenes, they all play an important role, enmeshed role in the formation and longevity of musical activity which is always in a perpetual state of motion. The studies here investigate scenes which share similarities with the n-au, both in terms of their aesthetic direction and organisational practices however their musical forms are somewhat distinct from the activities of the n-au. Being neither fully rooted in noise or improvised music and existing somewhat separate from the marginally more popular DIY punk scenes are often points of focus, the n-au occupies a unique position in the cultural landscape and underground, DIY music and warrants deeper exploration.

Bringing the n-au into the scope of academic study is not without issue. In terms of the n-au and the academy, the relationship is somewhat distant, not completely antagonistic but certainly approached with caution. Hayler (2012a) is often critical of the 'flat, dry, saddening' writing of magazines like *The Wire*, where the favouring of 'criticism' in an overly academic tone, he suggests, extracts any joy from the process of engaging with music. Hayler (2012a) is keen to distance himself from 'criticism' and 'analysis' in his writing on Radio Free Midwich, opting instead to review the scene he finds himself in with a sense of positivity, precisely because music in the n-au 'is not music to be marketed via focus group - It is profoundly personal, verging on solipsistic sometimes, and this needs to be respected'. This sense of positive sharing aligns with the n-au's use of 'goodwill' as the prime form of currency among its participants, based on a shared solidarity, where to 'strut about the changing room thrusting your 'opinions' into the face of other team members is childish and inappropriate' (Hayler, 2012a)[6]. However, this lack of critical distance is perhaps where writers such as David Keenan (2015) find fault when suggesting that any semblance of an underground music scene today is dead since 'critics are no more than defanged boosters of their favourite musicians, exchanging blushing, gushing tweets in trade for favourites'. It is therefore essential that any exploration of the practices of the n-au does so with a critical lens to resist this marginal musical scene becoming culturally populist.

[6] See also Joe Murray's nod towards Kathleen Hannah's notion of "non-competition and praise" in the Riot Grrrl scene (Murray, 2019a)

Conducting a critical analysis of the n-au could be said to be taking the same dry tone that Hayler is so distrusting of, however its inclusion in an academic thesis such as this has a mutual benefit to both academic research and the n-au itself, which I will outline in detail in the methodological section of this chapter. While the n-au has been referenced in academic study prior, this is mostly in passing reference to a particular element of its overarching principles and a detailed analysis has yet to be conducted. This thesis is, therefore, is the first piece of academic work which examines the n-au as the central subject with such scope, taking into consideration its nature as a translocal music scene and wider considerations of shifting cultural practice.

Graham (2016) and Jones (2021) have both alluded to the n-au as a typical example of underground and DIY music practice as part of their wider research projects. Graham (2016: 17) highlights the niche nature of the n-au and its music in his writing on underground music, situating the n-au's 'essentially minor commercial interest or potential' as indicative of wider forms of underground music, and therefore being a beneficial framework for understanding how this sort of culture operates. He goes on to highlight how the n-au and, by relation, adjacent forms of underground music, have complex relations with the wider music industry, not existing entirely separate but 'outside or on the fringes of large institutions', in varying degrees of relationality (Graham, 2016: 19). Graham (2016: 18) also notes how a 'collapsing of roles' is common in the 'participatory, tiny, "no-audience" underground' precisely because of its marginality, the relative unpopularity of its forms meaning that participants must do it themselves. Jones (2021: 55) also mentions the n-au in passing, its practices used support the discussion around an increasing focus on representation in other DIY scenes – referencing more Punk adjacent music - and how they can be potentially reductive, resulting in a 'kind of cultural populism on a micro scale'. Jones (2021: 55) argues that 'a radical (and resistant) aesthetics might necessarily be alienating and off-putting', inherently marginal, and therefore the n-au's favouring of 'self-expression' over 'representation' can result in novel, albeit difficult, forms of artistic production. Both researchers suggest that the n-au as a practice is predicated on doing it your own way, getting the work done because there is no viable alternative. However, beyond this suggestion, the question of how this is achieved in the n-au is not answered in their work, indicating a need for further investigation.

In terms of research which focusses solely on the n-au, Theo Gowans, Phil Legard and Dave Proctor (2023: 82) have opened a line of enquiry looking to understand how practitioners

in the scene work to create spaces for performance outside of the norm, experimenting with the use of public space and online platforms in an attempt to 'query what constitutes performance space beyond established venues'. Their work begins to document a scene which is witnessing a point of change, beginning to question its relations with the spatial contexts it exists within and how they may, or may not, impede on the scene's relative autonomy. Much of this is situational, positioned around changes that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the business-as-usual nature of live music and performance. While this situation significantly impacted the n-au – and resulted in an abundance of online gigs within mere weeks of the first national lockdowns – the scene has also responded to changes on a much more granular and gradual scale over its 25-year existence. Further to questions of space and technological shift, their research presents an overarching discussion around the changing aesthetic tendencies of the scene, with the n-au increasingly moving towards a space of reflexivity and responsiveness, approaching 'difficult' music without becoming '"safe" in the pejorative sense' (Gowans et al., 2023: 82). With a shifting social fabric, due to the natural influx and efflux of people in the scene, expectations and attitudes are changing as individuals move towards a more open, inclusive social environment. Their research summarises that the ever changing, 'entangled relationship with the corporate technological sphere' is bound up in a dichotomy between the affordance of such a relationship and how it impedes on creative autonomy, inviting us to question 'how these tensions will manifest in the discourses surrounding the noise scene' (Gowans et al, 2023: 83). This is precisely what this thesis looks to understand.

Alongside this research, we also see projects such as that of Ryoko Akama and Charlotte Roe (2022) who have begun their own, embodied research into the sustainability of DIY experimental music and its precarious future, taking a more grassroots, DIY approach to the task[7]. Their work consists of interviews with practitioners in the n-au and wider experimental music scene to evaluate how they are navigating changing technological, economic and spatial contexts, looking to understand how their practices might possibly 'provide other ways to deal with capitalism' (Akama, 2022: 3). With the research being carried out during a global pandemic, Akama (2022: 2) expected responses of 'anger and desperation' from her interviewees but was surprised by the 'sharp wit, vision and criticism' she received instead. The resilience and desire to continue is indicative of scenes such as the n-au, with Akama (2022: 3) concluding that we need to continue to

[7] Done so outside of the academy, through the organisation ame, based in Huddersfield, which both Akama and Roe work for.

‘become curious about each other and support collectively’ to navigate the precarity of marginal arts and music practice going forward. This is reiterated by Roe (2022: 5) who suggests that to build and strengthen DIY approaches to culture relies on the fact that the larger ‘network grows’, where the ‘networks within it get stronger’. The scene needs to continually grow, not in the vertical, neo-liberal minded sense of exponential growth, but in terms of its breath, developing a richer scene through the constant influx and efflux of individual perspectives. There is something of the pre-figurative in what Akama and Roe are suggesting here, reminiscent of Boehringer’s (2015) suggestion that the n-au, and the way it operates, can be a useful ‘framework’ for engaging with the world in a way which is different from the mainstream, neo-liberal mindset.

These discussions of the n-au are exactly where my research is situated, picking up directly from where Akama and Roe (2022) and Gowans et al.’s (2023) work signs off. While these studies act as primers for understanding the processes that occur in the n-au in navigating changing social, technological and spatial contexts, they are limited in scope. Gowans et al.’s (2023) focus on Leeds only tells one part of the story, exploring on node of the wider network, with a richer understanding of the translocal scene being possible thorough an expanded scope, a point which the authors acknowledge in their writing. While Akama and Roe’s (2022) work does explore the n-au and DIY culture in a broader spatial scope, the breadth of the work itself is narrow, providing an invitation for further exploration to take place. My research, therefore, addresses these invitations for further exploration, exploring the n-au beyond a single location and with greater depth. By examining the n-au as a translocal, posthuman scene, I expand out from where Akama and Roe (2022) and Gowans et al. (2023) begin, undertaking a more granular study than we have already been provided with, developing an understanding of how differing social, spatial, technological and economic contexts across different sites impact the n-au. My research, therefore, adds another map to Graham’s (2016: 6) ‘finite, fragmentary, and nondeterminative’ map of the underground, helping to provide a more detailed overall picture of DIY, underground musical activity in the 21st Century.

Becoming Distracted

Hayler (2015b) typifies the n-au practitioner by saying: 'I know several people who, if shipwrecked on a desert island would be distracted from the business of survival by finding a shell that made an interesting noise when blown into'. This thesis is primarily concerned with understanding the conditions of possibility which allow the n-au to exist, of how a degree of creative freedom and autonomy can be cultivated, to understand what actions and processes must take place to allow for someone to become 'distracted' (Hayler, 2015b).

Being a music scene that has operated since the year 2000 and continues to do so into the present day, my research examines how the n-au's practices have changed and been shaped in response to shifting external contexts over the course of its existence during the 21st century. My research examines the activities of the n-au as they function within the confines of the UK, that being where the terminology was first developed. While instances of n-au activity occur outside of this location, a broader sociological examination of the transglobal nature of this scene is outside of the scope of this thesis. I therefore provide a detailed, sociological examination of the n-au from its point of inception to the current day, locating its activities across the UK as they variously respond to and are shaped by changing contexts. The n-au is not completely removed from the more institutionalised forms of experiential or avant-garde music or broader forms of DIY and underground music that have been studied in the current discourse. Like the underground more broadly, the n-au crosses over with these different zones of practice at various points, existing in an entangled relationships with multiple forms of marginal musical and artistic practice – it is, as Hayler (2015b) keenly points out, a 'sub-section' of these wider worlds. Line ups are often shared at gigs and releases sometimes appear on the same labels, just as artists in the n-au take influence from these broader musical worlds, these moments fleeting and fragmentary yet signalling the confluence of different scenes. However, given its social structures and distinct cultural forms, the n-au still exists as a particular musical scene.

Given that the n-au is underrepresented in academic research, it is necessary to first explore and analyse exactly what it is. Considering that much of what is known about the n-au, in the written form, comes from Hayler's (2012c, 2015b) writing on Radio Free Midwich, it is crucial to provide a detailed critique of his notion of the n-au, situating and contextualising his ideas in relation to the wider study of underground, experimental, DIY music, noting the points where it both converges with and diverges from these other areas of practice. I bring in discourse from across the broad territory of DIY, underground and experimental – and particularly noise and improvised music – to situate the n-au's

practice, again recognising the entangled nature of its practice with the different strata of marginal music.

I develop an understanding of how the main forms of cultural production in the n-au - recordings and performance - function as the principal sites of cultural and social connection and how their autonomy to function is continually questioned. Whether responding to changes in the availability of spaces for performance or navigating a shift from analogue to digital forms of recording and distribution, this activity all occurs because of the interactions between the participants of the n-au, done so despite the n-au's material and economic 'lack' (Arnot, 2017), working with the affordances of ever shifting technological and spatial constraints in a tactical way.

Therefore, the central line of questioning in this thesis is to understand how a marginal, DIY, experimental music scene can continue to operate in a way which maintains a degree of autonomy and self-reliance, given its existence within a series of shifting social, technological, spatial and economic contexts. To answer this central question, I will be addressing four subsequent sub-questions with the thesis structured to reflect this process.

- What is the no-audience underground and how do its practices relate to the wider history of underground, DIY music?
- How do people discover and enter the no-audience underground and in what way do changing technological and spatial contexts impact the way people discover the n-au?
- How does recorded music facilitate cultural expression and community at a distance and how is its production and distribution impacted by changing technological contexts?
- How does performance facilitate cultural expression and community in a space of proximity and how is its ability to do so impacted by changing spatial constraints?

I begin this research in Chapter 1 by developing a critical understanding of Hayler's notion of the n-au. I trace its origins from the scene surrounding The Termite Club in Leeds as a historical and contextual primer to Hayler's initial conception of the term. Following this, I typify the no-audience approach as being determined by loose adherence to six key principles: aesthetic variety, non-hierarchical structure, self-sufficiency, a hobbyist

approach to practice, an indifference to the mainstream and its marginal appeal. I use these principles as positions from which to critique the n-au, beginning by outlining Hayler's thoughts on them, then situating them in wider discourse within cultural studies. Taking a critical approach in this way allows for me to build up a richer picture of the n-au beyond what I have briefly introduced so far. Following the primarily analytical work of the first chapter, I use an embodied ethnographic approach through the remainder of the thesis to analyse the relational nature of the social, technological and spatial contexts of the n-au and how these facilitate or impede the n-au's degree of autonomy.

Following this, chapter 2 examines the influx and efflux of people in the n-au, the drifts in activity that have flowed throughout its existence. Using findings from my ethnographic research, I outline how people come to discover and get involved in the n-au, whether that be through technological means in the use of zines, blogs and social media, or through the development of more marginal music tastes resulting from the recommendation of records from friends, navigating different zones of cultural practice. Just as importantly, I examine how people come to leave the scene, suggesting that this constant entry and exit of bodies is one way the n-au remains in an ongoing process of construction. This chapter revolves around the social context of the n-au and provides a point of departure for further exploration of its cultural forms in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 moves into one of the two main spaces of cultural production, recording. Here I explore how the sounds of the n-au appear in a space of distance. This chapter charts the conventions and rituals of recording as a process which can be both an individual creative pursuit and one which is presents opportunities for collaboration. I examine the use of the record label as a key site of interaction and potential for creative autonomy. In this chapter, I examine the periods of technological change which have shaped the n-au and the way it operates, moving from the cassette to the CD-R then finally to the digital domain, each impacting the operation of the n-au in some way. I observe how people in the n-au have shifting relations with the uses of technology in the n-au, personifying Jones' (2021: 138) idea of the tension between 'resourcefulness and refusal', rounding out the chapter with a detailed critique of Bandcamp, which has become the de facto online home of the n-au.

Following on from this, chapter 4 functions as a transitional chapter between the two main spaces of cultural production. In this shorter section, I outline the discourse surrounding the differences and similarities between recording and performance,

suggesting that they are both equally important in uncovering self-expression in the n-au and, despite some discourse, inherently intertwined. I demonstrate this by introducing the case study of No-Audience Underground Tapes to demonstrate how the entanglement of both recording and performance can operate in the n-au and they exist as co-constitutive spaces, bridging the points between chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 5 moves on to performance, that being where the n-au exists as a space of proximity. In examining performance, I approach the task using a similar method as in Chapter 3, analysing the rituals and conventions of the form. I consider the actions of performance, observing styles and trends that have occurred over the history of the n-au. I then discuss the social and cultural codes and rituals that take place in and around the sites of performance, in the spatial context of the n-au. In doing so, I highlight how there is a distinct shift in the way performances are constructed as aesthetic, social and cultural phenomena. I then examine the sites of performances themselves; tracing how there has been a move from a landscape of external material abundance to that of material scarcity in line with the changing material structure of the wider music industry - all of which impact the degrees of autonomy which the n-au operates in. In the final section of this chapter, I consider the role of the organiser as that of host and how they have a distinct agency in facilitating how the scene operates in these spaces of proximity.

Through the five chapters outlined here, this thesis thus provides the first empirical, in-depth study of the no-audience underground. In doing so, it provides a wealth of new documentary material acknowledging the activities of the under-documented scene, generated through embodied, ethnographic research methods. The research conducted here is situated within discourse surrounding the continued existence and social importance of underground, DIY and experimental music, providing a vital perspective to this field. It develops a rich understanding of the cultural positioning and social capacity of the scene and how its activities are variously entangled within and autonomous from wider contexts, expanding on the work of other scholars who have previously examined its practices.

Researching the No-Audience Underground

My fundamental approach to researching the n-au builds on previous studies which look to the sociological aspects of experimental and underground music scenes, as opposed to primarily philosophical or musicological[8]. While I do engage in some musicological discussion throughout the thesis, describing the specific elements of certain recordings and performances, this is more to illustrate my fundamental points about the organisation of the scene and how it manifests in or is shaped by these elements. Thus, my primary mode of investigation into the n-au throughout the thesis is concerned with the organisation and infrastructure of its activity.

I position myself as a what Thornton (1995: 166) has termed the 'participant observer'. It is important to note that embodying this role comes with some inherent contradictions, emerging as the struggle between the subjective and objective view of the happenings in a particular scene, where one must balance the privileging of what a scene 'says' as a 'participating insider' versus what one 'sees' as an 'observing outsider' (Thornton, 1995: 165). Navigating between these two positions is integral to researching the n-au, where a reflexivity over my positionality must be recognised, fluctuating between being a 'critical insider to sympathetic outsider' (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 5). Engaging in such a research project entailed balancing objectivity and subjectivity, recognising the potential tension between these two positions. In Thornton's (1991: 14) work, she explicitly positions herself as an outsider in the world she is researching, delineated by the specific 'intents and purposes' of being there in comparison to the research subjects, of considering it a work activity, rather than a leisure pursuit[9]. Knowing how to position oneself is key to researching a scene such as the n-au. Verbuč (2022: 15), in his research on DIY house shows in the USA, speaks of the importance of the researcher adopting an extensive embeddedness in a scene which occupies a space of intimacy, allowing for a deeper understanding of the intricacies of the scene, which was here achieved through the act of 'living and touring' with artists and organisers from the scene. There is a shift here towards a more active, involved and entrenched role of the researcher, being not just an observer but an active participant. This approach, of taking an active role in a scene, is archetypal of the form of active participation prevalent in the n-au and therefore an

[8] See, for example, Hegarty (2007), Hainge (2013), Thompson (2017), Graham (2023) whose works attends to the concept of noise form a more philosophical and musicological perspective.
[9] These intents and purposes being her role to observe and analyse club culture for the purposes of academic research.

important consideration for researching the scene. Despite adopting a deeper embeddedness, there are still issues raised with regards to how research subjects viewed the relative outsider's observations, becoming 'suspicious' over the exact 'intentions and activities' (Verbuč, 2022: 16). Being wary of the pitfalls of this positioning, alongside a consciousness around the potential extractive process that research can entail, I needed to think carefully about my position as a researcher in a scene which, as I will detail in a moment, I was already active in.

One amongst many

My intention at the beginning of this research was to follow an approach informed by the non-hierarchical, decentralised, communal nature of the n-au. Rather than conducitng the research with a particular direction in mind, I wanted to understand and foreground the perspectives of the practitioners within the scene, giving space to the collective, subjective voices which constitute the n-au. Verbuč (2022: 16) calls this a 'culturally relativist' approach - understanding the culture from an insider's perspective, rather than that imposed by an outsider. This research process began conducting a series of interviews with practitioners involved with the n-au in some capacity to ground the project. I interviewed artists, label owners, promoters, zine writers and paying punters, all roles which Hayler (2012b) frames as being interchangeable, non-hierarchical and of equal importance to the scene[10]. I spoke to those who had been involved in the n-au for some time, including Rob Hayler, alongside those whose activity was relatively contemporary by comparison. I spoke with those who had contributed to academic discourse on the n-au, including Stuart Arnot, Ryoko Akama, Charlotte Roe, Theo Gowans and Phil Legard, alongside those who were practitioners in the scene[11]. I naturally started in my own home base in the North East of England, gradually expanding out to hear a range of voices from across the UK, keen to hear how experiences of the n-au converged and diverged at different points across this mapping of the scene.

Engaging in these conversations provided a broad map of the activities of the n-au and helped delineate the boundaries of my research. Given the scope of my research – the n-au in the 21st century within the confines of the UK – this is where all of my interviewees

[10] A full list of interviewees can be found in the Bibliography.
[11] While I had planned to meet with both Stuart Arnot and Susan Fitzpatrick, Susan was unfortunately unable to meet on the day due to childcare duties.

were situated. Some of those who I contacted did not respond to my request or declined to participate in the manner of a formal, recorded interview. Some of these voices appear in a less formal way throughout the thesis, not quoted directly but nonetheless informing the direction of the thesis, resulting from conversations occurring in the everyday situations of life in the n-au, unfolding at gigs or though informal conversations online. It is also important to note here than while my intention was to cover as broad a range as possible, in terms of roles, practices and locations of individuals, I did not interview every single person involved, my selection being instead broadly representative of my engaged understanding of the scene.

These interviews were open ended, approached without a list of questions or expectations aside from a brief introduction which set out the project and my general aims. I was conscious of needing to facilitate an open space which would encourage an open dialogue. Largely, my interviewees started at the beginning, recounting how they came to be involved in the n-au. These conversations naturally sparked insight in each of the interviewees to recount their experiences of the n-au in whichever way came to them, following their own lines of thought and their own personal experiences rather than being prescribed by my own subjective stance. My role was to be that of a listener, rather than someone leading the conversation, giving space to the interviewee to direct the discussion. I allowed for silences and pauses in the discussion, giving interviewees time to think and consider their experiences, giving space for their voices to be heard, to be reflective and reflexive. My approach in these dialogues was informed by the practice of improvisation, something which is embedded in much activity of the n-au. Georgina Born (2017: 41) speaks of how improvisation, as distinct from most any other practice, is 'marked by and enables degrees of openness, mutuality, and collaboration', where it can 'necessitate participants' real-time co-creation and negotiation of social-and-musical relationships'. The conversation between interviewer and interviewee was open in the sense that there was no pre-determined structure, it unfolded there and then, in collaboration between the two of us. While there is a relationship inherent in the distinction between the two roles, that of the interviewer and interviewee, there was a conscious attempt to keep this relationship as non-hierarchical as possible. When Derek Bailey (1993: 83) speaks of free improvisation's characteristics as being 'established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it', the same can be said of the interviews, each conversation unfolding through the individuals personal experience in that moment. Improvisers engage in a call and response, playing with and off each other and my interviews were carried out in the same manner. The conversations went the way

they did as a natural unfolding of myself and the interviewee, not pre-determined or shaped by a set structure or desired outcome. Taken as a whole, the interviews represent a structure which has been collectively assembled, one voice not taking precedent but a sum of its parts.

Over the course of carrying out these interviews, common threads were beginning to emerge. Some interviewees broached topics which were specific only to them or their locale, talking about factional separation of the scene, particular demographic constraints or novel approaches to performance they had witnessed. Outside of those, however, a series of similar themes were emerging, not bound by any individual perspective but experienced collectively at a translocal level. Ranging from the positive ways in which the notion of the n-au influenced their own creative practice to concerns over certain aesthetic, technological and spatial issues, these themes are what ultimately shaped the direction the thesis has taken.

In addition to the voices of the interviewees, my voice features in this thesis in multiple ways. Beyond my role and voice as a researcher, I am actively involved in the n-au by means of a multiply embedded artistic practice. I use segments from a series of autoethnographic writings to demonstrate some of the theoretical points I raise and how they may have occurred in my own practice. Appearing at different points in the thesis and reflecting on various elements of practice and experience, these sections are written in a diaristic, colloquial manner, appearing as stream-of-conscious texts presenting quick, sometimes insightful, sometimes descriptive accounts of my activity within the n-au[12]. They follow the processes found in autoethnographic writing, using a self-reflexive writing practice to 'name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political' (Adams et al., 2015: 2). Functionally, these texts work not to position myself as a voice of reason or authority in the n-au, but as one amongst many. Positioned as such, I consider myself yet another interviewee, having given myself the space to compose a series of self-reflecting, internal monologues.

My voice in the thesis does not surpass or supplant the voices of the others included but contributes to the common threads derived from the collective enquiry into the scene. This is intended to reinforce the sense of non-hierarchical structure in the n-au by giving space to the multiple voices involved in the construction of this project, where everyone

[12] These sections are identified by their formatting in italics.

shares an equal importance. However, having said this, the thesis and the argument it presents has been shaped and ordered by my own subjectivity. This is my reading of the n-au, my understanding informed by those I spoke with and the activities I witnessed. Remembering that my voice and my perspective, is just one amongst many is vital in thinking about how research into marginal music scenes is conducted. That the n-au is a translocal scene needs to be mirrored in the plurality of voices which tell its story, acknowledging that differences of opinion exist, aiming towards creating a space where multiple, something contradictory viewpoints can create a space which is polyvocal.

Observing the N-Au

Alongside the practitioner interviews and autoethnographic reflections, I carried out extensive ethnographic fieldwork over the three years of the project. To understand and experience the existence of a scene such as the n-au, it is necessary to be actively involved in it, to be in the middle. Before undertaking this research, I occupied at various, sometimes concurrent times, the roles of artist, audience member, record label owner, writer, radio show host and occasional promoter. The boundaries of these roles overlap and influence each other, all having contributed to the n-au in some distinct way, often informed by and in response to my life outside of the n-au. That my embodiment of these roles prefigured my role as a researcher led to a distinct positioning of myself within the process - I was able to draw on my experiences prior to the research being carried out, alongside what I was witnessing in the present day.

As part of the historical and contextual work for positioning and locating the n-au, I developed an archival practice which collected flyers and ephemera from throughout the history of the n-au's existence. This work has uncovered, and presented, a range of previously undocumented material from this marginal music scene and was integral to building a detailed picture of a scene which could be seen as shifting over time, providing an insight into how its relationality to external material contexts was always changing. Much of this work was made possible by my positioning in the n-au, of having understood its practices and histories before becoming a researcher. Being embedded in the n-au in such a way, I was able to gain a unique viewpoint into the inner workings of the scene, where activities weren't being carried out performatively for the benefit of the outsider documenting them, but occurring in their most natural state, helping to avoid some of the challenges I noted earlier. However, it was also important that I approached my position

with a sense of criticality - I needed to be, as Khan-Harris (2007: 5) terms it, a 'critical insider'.

As Hayler (2020a) is clear to point out, how one interacts with and contributes to the n-au is very much determined by the time and money they can set aside for their 'hobby'. The amount I could contribute to the n-au has fluctuated through the years and continues to do so. During this project, from October 2022 - 2025, the way I interacted with and contributed to the n-au changed. In starting a project which, compared to my previous employment, had a great deal of flexibility in a temporal sense, I was now able to reshape and reconsider how my interaction with the n-au unfolded[13]. Concurrently, the work and leisure aspects of my life had become increasing blurred, one and the same, a situation which I consciously used to benefit both my own practice and the scene in parallel.

My multiply embedded ethnographic practice consisted of attending, playing and organising gigs, interacting with people, collecting flyers, making observations, taking notes, hosting people, recording, buying records and listening. One of the primary modes of engagement with the n-au over this time was what Hayler (2015b) calls the 'paying punter', providing a fundamental and integral contribution to the n-au. I was actively participating in a scene not only in terms of my affective labour but also through my economic engagement with its creative outputs. The flexibility afforded by the undertaking of a PhD with a 3-year stipend allowed me to engage with the scene on a deeper level than was previously possible. Over the course of the project, I attended over 200 performances across multiple towns and cities and in a wide array of spaces and places. I paid my way into these events, watched people perform, bought tapes and engaged in discussions with them afterwards[14]. I was, in effect, building up a cache of social, cultural and sub-cultural capital that would not only inform the thesis, but my life outside the scope of the research. My network expanded far beyond what had been previously possible - I developed new friendships and engaged in numerous informal conversations outside of the scope of my formal interviews which contribute equally to building up the detailed picture of the n-au which is presented here. This activity also formed much of my social life for the duration of the research.

[13] My time was no longer arranged into shifts or regular working hours. I was able to dictate my own working patterns with a much greater degree of autonomy.
[14] In some instances, alongside observing and listening, I would also be performing, sometimes organising, sometimes all three.

What is key to note about this however is that following the completion of the project, this engagement will not cease to exist. It may change somewhat, depending on the material circumstances which I inhabit, but I will still be involved with the n-au, in the same way that I was involved preceding this period of research, before this thesis was even conceptualised. I note this note only for methodological clarity but, as will become clear over the course of the thesis, how one's own positing and response to external contexts is ingrained in their active involvement in the n-au.

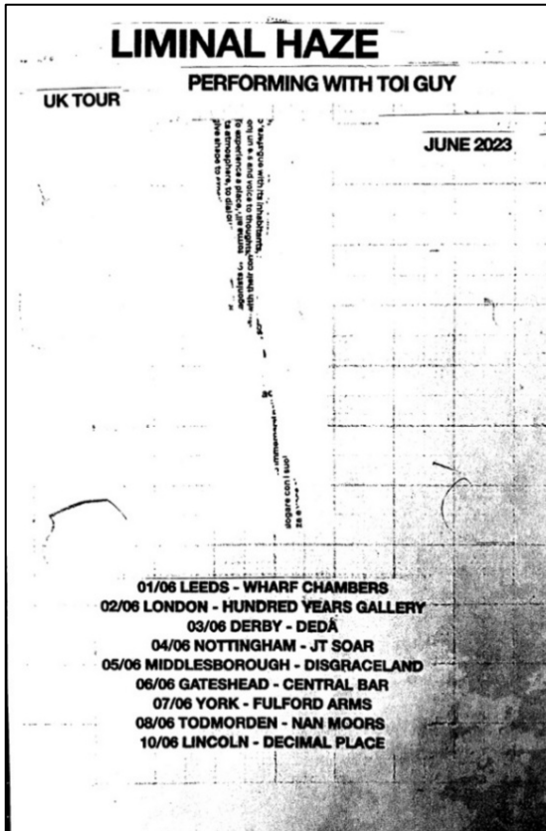


Figure 1. Liminal Haze Tour Poster (June 2023)

Figure 2. Liminal Haze Tour Poster (April 2024)

Aside from the role of the paying punter, I also occupied the role of the artist. With the increased temporal flexibility gained through this project, I was able to reach out and play more gigs, not only in my own locale of Newcastle but further afield. While I was previously limited to when my leisure time was, as dictated by my place of work, I was now able to discern with more agency when this could be. In June 2023 and April 2024, I embarked on tours across the UK as part of my ongoing duo with Ross Scott-Buccleuch, Liminal Haze (Figure 1, Figure 2). This was yet another integral way in which my field work could be carried out, again blurring those lines between work time and leisure time. I was able to perform and attend performances in cities I had not previously visited, understanding the inner working of these local areas of the wider n-au. Not only did I play

in venues I had not previously and met people I would otherwise not have done, but I also shared food with friends, slept at people's houses and stayed up until the early hours chatting about anything and everything - activities which are of vital importance to how the social aspect of the scene functions. I was further embedded in the community, a more involved part of its social fabric. The routes taken on both tours demonstrate the translocal, networked nature of the n-au, where we were hosted by some longstanding names in the scene across various town and cities such as Heinous Whining in Leeds, Singing Knives in Sheffield, The House Organ in Nottingham, TFEH in Edinburgh and Weird Garden in Lincoln. Alongside these, newer names on the scene including Baked Beans on the Doorstep in Glasgow, Industrial Coast in Middlesbrough, Free Music Lessons in Leeds and Tread Into Mulch in London hosted us. My experience on these tours is documented in my autoethnographic reflections, along with images and examples witnessed in these spaces also helping outline the intricacies of the scene. However, beyond the advantages this had for my research in terms of social reach, it would also be an example indicative of the way in which the n-au works with the affordances of temporal and material resources to benefit the scene.

Ways of Working

Given that one of the central notions of the n-au is its claim of self-sufficiency, its degree of autonomy, I had to consider how my position as a funded researcher impacted the n-au and the ethical implication of being positioned as such. This consideration led to the question of what role my own creative practice would play in the research – was it to be situated as a form through which I could uncover something new or was it an object of study?

Initially, the idea of developing an exhibition documenting the activity of the n-au was considered as a way of collating the disparate elements of the n-au into something more cohesive, what would be considered a practice-based outcome of the research. However, during the project, the realisation of this element changed somewhat. It became apparent that using my position as a researcher, both from an economic and temporal perspective, could be framed in a different way to better benefit the wider scene whilst also resulting in a richer research project. Similarly, the restrictions of undertaking a project which was practice-based in the eyes of the institution, meant that I had a diminished ability to be

able to give space to the voices of the participants I was working with[15]. If I was to fully explore the topics raised through my interviews, I needed the word count. I highlight this both for clarity and to point to the shifting and improvised nature of the research and its methodology, of how it altered course over the duration. Not knowing how the final thesis would develop or which trajectory it would take, the initial approaches formulated had to be open to alteration, open to change.

Echoing the way that practitioners in the n-au adopt multiple 'ways of operating' to work tactically within the contexts they are situated, I adopted the same approach within my role as researcher at the University (De Certeau, 1984: 30). During the course of the PhD, I continued my practice as it had existed prior, only adapted to the affordances of this new situation. Other than the roles of artist and paying punter as I have already covered, I adopted the role of organiser, presenting a series of performances on a semi-regular basis in the North East of England. Some of these performances occurred as part of the Liminal Haze tours I mentioned in the previous section, where I was simultaneously an artist, organiser and audience member, all roles blurring into one, typical of the no-audience

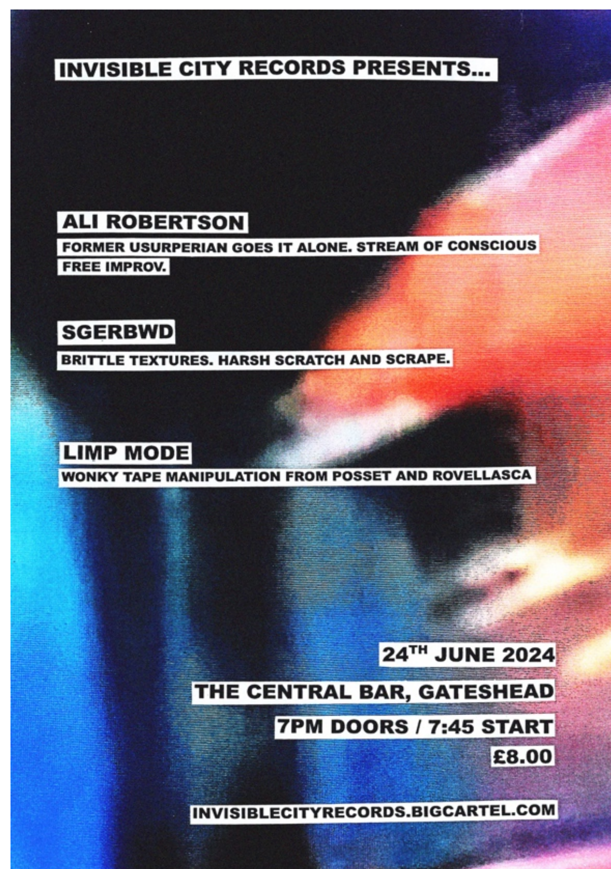


Figure 3. Invisible City Records presents. The Central Bar, Gateshead (24th June 2024)

[15] Primarily with regards to how the word count changed, alongside how the practice was weighted.

approach[16]. Others were because of being sent requests for help organising a performance. Some of these requests were from people I had interviewed as part of this project, like with the performance I organise for Ali Robertson in 2024[17] (Figure 3). Through these actions, the reciprocal nature of activity in the n-au can be observed, alongside the mobilisation and redistribution of resource common across the scene.

I position this process as reminiscent of De Certeau's (1984: 25) 'la perruque, "the wig"', that being the actions of the worker who 'diverts time' from their employment, rather than anything of material value, using it for 'work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed towards profit', work which can 'confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through *spending* his time this way'. I had used the time afforded by the PhD, and the provision of a stipend, to engage in this practice. I had taken the decision to actively shift my project away from being practice-based, instead using this time for the n-au and its community in a different manner, one which would be more in keeping with the practices of the n-au, working tactically with my positionality. Organising a series of performances was the logical way of realising this, whilst also signalling an advancement in where the focus of my practice would be[18]. I designed and assembled posters using the photocopier at the University, printed out countless flyers using my allocated print balance to spread the word about a particular performance. I borrowed cables and equipment from the University tech store to organise these gigs, making use of the technological resources I had temporary access to. In doing so, I worked tactically with the venue I used for most of these performances - The Central Bar in Gateshead - suggesting that if I could do the sound and use my own equipment for these performances, they would waive any hire of technician hire fee resulting in the initial cost of nothing. In reducing the overheads and using my affective and physical labour tactically, all the money taken from ticket sales went straight into the pockets of the artists. I didn't pay myself for doing the work, offering instead my time to the scene. It would have been easy to position this as my research, as an understanding of the practices and processes of the n-au through a series of practical outputs which would have been assessed by the University but instead, I opted to confirm my solidarity with the practitioners of the n-au and situate this practice differently.

---

[16] I was also, for the most part, a cook sound technician and host.
[17] I had interviewed Robertson early in 2023. Robertson then hosted me in Edinburgh at one of his TFEH events in April 2024 and I reciprocated, hosting him at The Central Bar in Gateshead in July of that same year.
[18] Due to my available time before the beginning of the PhD, one of my primary modes of activity in the n-au was through running a record label, Invisible City Records. This activity was conducted at a distance. The affordances of the PhD allowed me to conduct activity that occurred in a space of proximity, in a way which would not have been possible in the context I was working previously.

I believe that this methodological framework, covering the ethnographic, autoethnographic and practice-adjacent elements of the research, is the most appropriate way to examine the n-au. Being embedded in the scene to such a degree allowed for an embodied understanding of how its practices unfold, rather than simply being able to identify them from a distance. Steven Taylor (2023) highlights some of the ontological issues in researching music scenes which have not yet been written into history, that are currently still occurring, concluding that rather than the external researcher defining them, they must instead 'defer to the musicians organic understanding of what they are up to'. I am here as both a musician and researcher, multiply embedded in this scene - I identify myself as being part of this wider scene whilst also acknowledging its existence from my own tacit experiences. However, the n-au's porosity as a concept makes it difficult to pin down fundamentally. Herein lies the 'complex and contradictory' nature of scenes such as the n-au (Verbuč, 2023). Now, we must begin to unpack some of this complexity, outline some of this porosity and understand exactly how the n-au operates.

Chapter 1. Setting the scene

This chapter is primarily concerned with understanding what the n-au is. I begin by providing an outline of the n-au, which tells the story of how the term developed a wider use through Rob Hayler's Radio Free Midwich blog. I then spend some time presenting a historical contextualisation of the n-au, identifying the scene which it emerged from, primarily based around Leeds' Termite Club. Then, building outwards from the main writings of Hayler on Radio Free Midwich, I engage in a critical reading of the n-au's underlying principles. In doing so, I bring in perspectives from those who have written about the n-au beyond Hayler and begin to build a framework which will then follow the thesis through the remaining chapters.

This ultimately situates the n-au within academic discourse for the study of underground and DIY music at a level which has previously not occurred. It builds on what has already been discussed about the scene while also opening a new line of enquiry into both the n-au and the pertinence of DIY cultural activity in the contemporary.

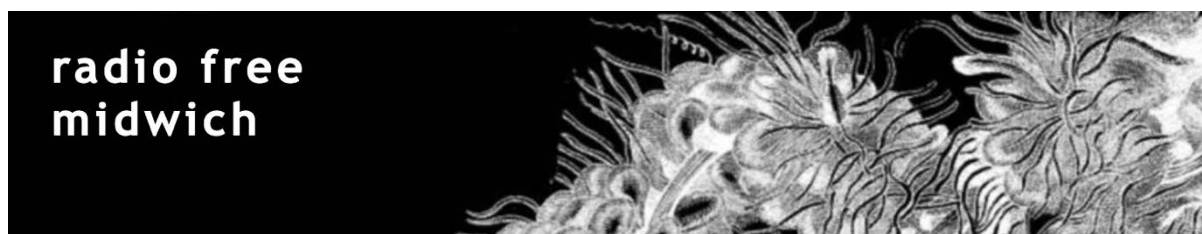


Figure 4. Screenshot of the Radio Free Midwich title banner.

Introducing the No-Audience Underground

In 2009, Radio Free Midwich was launched, a WordPress blog run by Rob Hayler which, he explains, was intended to archive his own output as Midwich and 'various bit [sic] and pieces of interest (hopefully) to those historians of experimental music, the pre-mp3 international CDR underground and various other no-audience activities' (Hayler, 2009) [19]. This initial post hints towards an idea of the scene that Hayler had begun to term the n-

[19] This included releases that appeared on his own label, Fencing Flatworm Recordings, alongside those which featured on other labels such as Matching Head and Celebrate Psi Phenomena.

au. A phrase which originated in local circles, used mainly within spaces of proximity, had found a presence online, those at a distance now made aware of its existence. In this initial description, the n-au in Hayler's eyes was not a phenomenon strictly bound by place, not solely constrained to Hayler's home base of Leeds, but something which was permeating outwards, the result of connection with others throughout the UK and further afield. These activities were, as Hayler (2009) points out, mediated by technologies, evident in the recognition of the 'CDR underground' - a series of interconnected webs of like-minded individuals using the affordances of the format in a way which echoes the earlier cassette underground – which facilitated the scene as a set of relations. Reading through early posts on the blog, we follow Hayler on a journey of personal rediscovery after a hiatus from the scene, with his re-entry bringing about questions; of who is still around, of who has gone, of what is happening now. We are directed to labels which have changed names, are told about websites which are now defunct, following Hayler as he finds out some old friends are still making music, witnessing him rekindle the joy of the scene he had temporarily distanced himself from[20].

During this process of rediscovery, Radio Free Midwich gradually morphs from being an archival project to actively engaging with and sharing sounds that were being made and released at that moment in time, both from Hayler's Leeds locale and further afield. Alongside the active sharing of both new and archival material, Hayler was prone to lengthy ruminations on all manner of issues within this space he had created, ranging from an ongoing critique of the cassette tape as the de facto physical format for a lot of the music he covered in 'wired for sound: back to the cassette' (Hayler, 2010), to considering the impact of the abundance of digital media has had on cultural value in 'the cost of free things' (Hayler, 2011a). It is clear that format and technologies are prominent themes in Hayler's thinking, points around which he can observe the changing nature of the scene. Radio Free Midwich went beyond the scope of the usual review site, bringing a critical lens to the scene and its surrounding culture, despite Hayler (2012a) subsequently suggesting that 'criticism' is not something he does.

The term no-audience underground is used occasionally in the early years of Radio Free Midwich, often as sardonic nod towards the kinds of niche, marginal music and art Hayler was interested in, but it had not yet been explained in any real detail. After a mention of the term by Simon Reynolds in a keynote speech for 2012's Incubate festival, Hayler (2012c) decided it was time to expand upon what he meant by the term, providing us with

[20] Some of those websites which were still active in 2010 have now certainly disappeared.

an 'extended definition' and addressing some of Reynolds' misconceptions in the process[21]. Reynolds had acknowledged the term as being indicative of a particular micro-scene as covered by Hayler and Radio Free Midwich but was critical of the 'no-audience' aspect of its terminology, particularly the idea of creating an artwork or piece of music without an audience in mind, arguing that, for him, 'a transmitter requires a receiver' (Reynolds, 2012). So, in a typically dry, slightly self-deprecating way, Hayler used this opportunity to give us the first in depth outline of what he means by the term no-audience underground.

He begins by giving us the origin story of the term:

> I needed a succinct way of referring to a scene that contained wildly diverse creative endeavours: from blood and-spittle power-noise to the daintiest bowed singing bowl. On reflection, the only thing all these types of racket had in common was that almost no-one was interested in them. Hence my tongue-in-cheek, irreverent bit of shorthand (Hayler, 2012c).

However, beyond this simple explanation for describing a scene based on aesthetic variety and marginal appeal, Hayler (2012c) acknowledges that his 'understanding of what was at first just a self-deprecating joke has deepened' and therefore required further explanation. In response to Reynold's critique of the phrasing, Hayler (2012c) decides to further clarify the no-audience aspect of the term:

> There is no 'audience' as such, in the sense of 'passive receivers', because almost everyone with an interest in the scene is involved somehow in the scene. The roles one might have - musician, promoter, label 'boss', distributor, writer, 'critic', paying punter and so on – are fluid, non-hierarchical and can be exchanged or adopted as needed […] this is not a snobbish clique of insiders obsessively tending to every aspect of their hobby (not a dirty word, by the way, who makes a living from experimental music nowadays?) but a friendly and welcoming group who have realised that if they want it to happen then they have to make it happen themselves.

[21] Reynolds' talk charts the state of DIY culture at the time, with note given to the increasing presence of digital production and distribution.

This description is bolstered by a handful of examples which demonstrate how this might work in practice. The first highlights the label Striate Cortex, detailing how label owner Andy Robinson is not a musician himself but still actively contributes to the scene creating ornate, hand-crafted packaging for releases, this being 'his way of showing his love and appreciation of the artists that create the music that he cares so much about' (Hayler, 2012c) [22]. The second example details the rigmarole of fellow Leeds artist Kieron Piercey organising a performance without a dedicated venue, the event eventually occurring in Piercey's basement, with Hayler (2012c) signing off by saying 'this was the only way the gig was going to happen, so this is the way it did happen. Perfect' – a nod towards the perseverance and determination of practitioners in the n-au. These two examples are intended to demonstrate some of the myriad ways in which someone could actively participate in the scene Hayler had named, both imbued with a strong DIY sensibility and based around the organisational aspects of the scene. These examples also prefigure what I am suggesting as being the two main forms of cultural production in the n-au, recording and performance, further acknowledging their centrality in the scene.

Three years after this initial outline, and after a big upturn in writing on the blog, Hayler returns with a 'remix' of the concept, introducing it by stating that when questioned about the term, he usually directs people to the 2012 article but goes on to state that 'plenty has changed since then, not least my own mind with regard to certain details' (Hayler, 2015b) [23]. So, equipped with that same dry humour as before, Hayler (2015b) takes this second opportunity to expand on the idea in longer form, where he plans to 'rub the notion to a shine on the crotch of my cricket whites' with the hope that 'it still bounces in a usefully wonky manner.' After a lengthy 'appeal to authority', Hayler (2015b) expands on some of the key aspects of the n-au, alongside addressing some of the criticisms levelled towards it, and summarises his thoughts on a what, in 2015, the n-au is[24]:

> So, the term 'no-audience underground' denotes a sub-section of the noise and experimental music scene which is largely self-sufficient due to its members being prepared to take on the roles necessary to get things done in a fluid manner, being receptive to the exchange of goodwill in the absence of money, being driven to create for reasons other than the standard measures of success and being largely

[22] Striate Cortex was a CD-R label which ran from 2010 to 2013, amassing 29 releases in the process.
[23] By this point, Radio Free Midwich featured frequent reviews, alongside occasional think pieces and ruminations on the state of the scene - all the work of Hayler and his growing cast of contributors.
[24] Hayler's (2015b) appeal to authority outlines his own contributions to the scene in various roles including as a promoter, recording artist, performer, record label owner and collaborator.

> indifferent to the mainstream, however you wish to define it. Oh, and the number of people interested is enough to sustain it, more or less, but very small.

The combination of information collected from the two main articles mentioned so far give us much of what has been written about the n-au in terms of it being a framework for engagement with experimental music. Despite comment on the term appearing in various other pieces of writing throughout the blog, these two articles outline Hayler's most succinct conceptualisation of the n-au, acting as main reference points for anyone wanting to know about the scene. Upon a close reading of Hayler's writings, the n-au as he outlines it can be summarised as being a music scene exemplified by six key principles, which I have denoted as being:

- Aesthetic Variety
- Non-Hierarchical structure
- Self-sufficiency
- Hobbyist Approach to Practice
- Indifference to the mainstream
- Marginal Appeal

These six principles, rather than being separate and distinct, are reliant on each other and are interrelated. They produce one another and respond to one another, are not hermetic and individual but fluid and mutable. The non-hierarchical structure is a direct result of the marginal appeal, which is likely down to the niche nature of the genres of music it represents.

Despite Hayler's recognition of the n-au as a distinct scene, its existence is part of a lineage of DIY, experimental music both within the UK and further afield. To see where Hayler's idea of the no-audience underground came from, it is necessary to go to Leeds.

Leeds and Beyond

The early 2000s in Leeds is the year zero of the n-au, that being when Hayler began to witness something distinct happening and give it a name. Given that the n-au is a particular 'sub-section of the noise and experimental music scene' (Hayler, 2015b), it is important to understand what and where the other sections are, to identify where the n-

au developed from. To speak of the experimental music scene in Leeds at the turn of the century is to speak of the Termite Club.

In an article from the London Musicians Collective's (LMC) *Resonance* magazine, Alan Wilkinson (1995: 23) traces the history of Leeds' Termite Club back to its roots, noting how it had looked to bring what had been witnessed in the capital to a Northern city, the club 'conceived to stimulate an otherwise non-existent music scene in Leeds'[25]. Alongside the type of freely improvised music that the LMC was known for programming, Wilkinson (1995: 23) references Hugh Metcalfe's Klinker Club as another key influence, particularly due to its interdisciplinarity, where it was known for 'mixing the music with other creative pursuits'. Thus, inspired by these hubs of activity, in 1983 the Termite Club began. Whereas the LMC was rooted in a particular place, the Termite Club followed a more nomadic existence akin to the Klinker, its events taking place on an ad-hoc basis, mostly occupying function rooms of pubs in the Northern city[26]. There was a distinct run in its history where much of its activity was programmed at the same pub each time, The Adelphi, which was the result of a lenient landlord allowing them use of the sapce. However, as compared to the relative permanence of the LMC, the Termite Club was simply a guest in someone else's space. Wilkinson (1995: 23) notes how the club initially attracted a sizeable audience, in part due to its 50p entrance fee, which encouraged the organisers to 'bring soloists up from the big smoke', with Evan Parker and Lol Coxhill - two big names in the small world of free improvisation - being some of the first. In terms of its programming, D Foist (2016: 98) points out how the committee of the club influenced its aesthetic direction during its tenure, making informed curatorial decisions in attempting to move away from the abundance of mediocre jazz demos they were sent which were 'riddled with twee humour or po-faced preposterousness', in favour of more emergent and animated free improvised, experimental acts of the time.

Whereas the early days of Termite Club were known for the promotion of an almost exclusively improvised music – a stipulation of their funding - with line ups featuring names such as 'Fred Frith, Eddie Prévost, Keith Rowe, John Tilbury, Steve Beresford, Barry Guy, and Tony Oxley', by the mid to late 1990s it slowly started shifting towards noise, industrial and power electronics as their house sound (Foist, 2016: 95). With Buckton and Wilkinson moving on, Neil Campbell and Mike Dando became part of the organising committee, shifting the focus into noisier territory. Here, we see acts associated with the

[25] Wilkinson being one of the Termite Club's co-founders, alongside Paul Buckton.
[26] 42 Gloucester Avenue being the outpost of LMC activity for the first 10 years of its existence (Bell, 1999)

earlier industrial music movement – which acted as a key precursor to the noise scene which followed it – such as Whitehouse, CON-DOM, Skullflower come through the doors, artists whose work were part of a scene personified by a loose aesthetic where “all things gross, atrocious, horrific, demented and unjust are examined with black-humor eyes” (Vale, 1992: 5). This crossover of sounds and audiences, merging the sometimes-disparate noise / industrial and jazz / improv scenes, stands out as a key point in the crosspollinating nature of much underground music and foreshadows what would be a central aspect of the n-au. This period of Termite Club history led Wilkinson (1995: 23) to proclaim that in terms of ‘difficult’ music, ‘Leeds has the most informed audience for this music outside of London’. In the points fringing the 20th and 21st century, The Termite Club was active in a time which Graham (2023: xi) deems the ‘classic’ period of noise music, a point where its stylistic exploration and philosophical precedents were at their most emergent - fertile ground for the cultivation of a scene.

Figure 5. Termite Club Annual Festival Flyer (November 2003)

The Termite Club was not solely focussed on music within Leeds and the UK, instead being a key node in the wider, transnational noise, free improvised and experimental music scene. During this time, we see international acts such as Merzbow from Japan, Schimpfluch-Gruppe from Switzerland and Emil Beaulieau from the USA come to Yorkshire, connecting these transnational points of the larger network (Figure 5). Within this space of geographic and aesthetic variety, a new wave of UK based artists were forming and experimenting with sometimes abrasive, sometimes absurd sound, seeing acts such as A Band, Prick Decay, Evil Moisture, Smell and Quim and Vibracathedral Orchestra existing as part of a wider, UK based current of new experimental artists (Foist, 2016: 98) [27]. These artists were as equally embedded in their immediate locale as they were with the international noise and experimental scenes, which Foist (2016: 99) highlights as being present in the trans-Atlantic collaborations manifest in reciprocal relationships with weirdo magazines such as Bananafish and Muckraker, or with labels such as 'Forced Exposure, Majora, Baby Huey, Siltbreeze, RRR and VHF'. Here we see the likes of Vibracathedral Orchestra's Neil Campbell being part of the Termite Clubs' programme committee whilst also writing reviews in San Francisco's Bananafish magazine and releasing on labels both locally and internationally, all activities which helped to connect the transatlantic dots between strange kinfolks.

Within this hotbed of activity was Rob Hayler, who joined the Termite Club programming committee in the beginning of the 2000s, becoming an active participant in the scene surrounding the club. This, in turn, led to Hayler's recording project Midwich being born, alongside him running the labels Fencing Flatworm Recordings and (oTo). Adjacent to the space of proximity that was the Termite Club, an invigorated recording culture was operating, mediated by the cassette and CD-R. It was here that record labels such as Phil Todd's Betley Welcomes Careful Drivers, Lee Stokoe's Matching Head Dylan Nyoukis' Chocolate Monk or Joincey's A Face Like A Smacked Arse were facilitating the connection between multiple different scenes, almost all of it more low key, DIY and weirder than some of the more prominent names in experimental music at that time. Here we see networks developing between artists from the far reaches of the world, brought together by a particular taste for the idiosyncratic, whilst also acting as documenters of the burgeoning scenes in their respective locales. There are points that link between Stoke or Gateshead and Minneapolis or Washington, evident in a reciprocal string of releases between these UK labels and their long list of associated projects and the likes of Emil

[27] Foist (2016: 102) goes as far as to suggest that Vibracathedral Orchestra were 'to the second phase of the Termite what Hession, Wilkinson and Fell had been to the first' – practically a house band.

Hagstrom's E.F tapes or Jeff Fuccillo's Union Pole across the Atlantic. Fast forward a few years and labels such as Campbell Kneale's New Zealand based Celebrate Psi Phenomena are continuing this transnational exchange, with releases from Rob Hayler's Midwich, Lee Stokoe's Culver, Phil Todd's Ashtray Navigations and collaborations with Neil Campbell sitting alongside New Zealand artists such as Pumice or Kneale's own Birchville Cat Motel. The cross-pollination between artists and labels signals a particularly prolific scene which, like Hayler had pointed out, was a result of the affordances of both the cassette and, increasingly, CD-R format.

By 2006, the Termite Club was facing difficulties staying afloat after a string of rejected funding bids resulted in some committee members being heavily out of pocket due to self-funding performances, ultimately leading to their exit from the Club. Despite ongoing efforts to revive the Termite Club by the likes of Ashtray Navigations' Mel O'Dublshaine - which included new collaborations with Ladyfest, alongside organising performances by a range of international noise artists - by 2010 the club had slowly crawled to a stop (Foist, 2016). During this period of changing activity, things were becoming increasingly stratified in the city as there was now an 'extra-curricular' scene emanating from the influence of The Termite Club, with various gig promoters working in the same space, sometimes crossing over, sometimes sitting separately (Foist, 2016: 109). Despite concerns over a scene which had potentially become fragmented and 'sub-divided', this time saw Leeds moving from being centred around one or two central points to a broader range of names becoming active in organising (Foist, 2016: 109). The saturation of activity at this time spoke equally to an emerging, fertile scene but also a distinct division from the increasingly 'slow moving' and 'less necessary' world of the Termite (Foist, 2016: 109). While the Termite Club operated in a manner which bridged the official and unofficial, sometimes relying on funding from a range of institutions to keep activities going, these other organisers were operating in a distinctly DIY manner in what Hayler had now decided to call the n-au.

Telling the history of the Termite Club provides us with a location for the activity of the n-au, allowing us to understand *where* the scene came from. Neither fully rooted in the free jazz and free improvisation of the early Termite Club days or the noise and industrial music of the latter, much activity in the n-au operates across these disciplinary and genre boundaries, taking from and reimagining these myriad influences. However, this history only provides us a part of the story. Given that the n-au is more accurately intended to

describe the processes and values of the scene, it is integral to unpack what these practices involve.

Aesthetic Variety

> The music I was hearing ranged from the most delicate bowing of singing bowls to hour-long, incense-choked psychedelic happenings to three-minute PA-busting squalls of hideous feedback (Hayler, 2012c).

At its core, the n-au does not explicitly refer to a particular genre of music but rather, as Hayler (2015b) outlines, 'it refers instead to the assumptions and working methods of a group of practitioners'. This explanation comes in response to the challenge that the term no-audience underground could be seen as yet another micro genre, along the lines of 'New Weird America' or 'Hypnagogic Pop' some of the many sub-sub genres which have graced the pages of *The Wire* magazine over the years (Keenan, 2003; 2009). Instead, Hayler insists that the n-au primarily refers to a loose set of working practices, a shared way of doing things, irrespective of genre convention. Positioned as such, the n-au operates within a rich history of DIY practice which, as Andy Bennet & Paula Guerra (2019: 14) argue, is indicative of an approach which allows for 'distinctiveness' and 'solidarity' to be practiced, which is sometimes based around 'common tastes', but not exclusively.

Stuart Arnot and Susan Fitzpatrick (2016) suggest that the n-au exists in a continuous state of 'happy dissensus', where differing musical genres can coexist, everyone's subjectivity collectively resulting in a series of 'individually constructed meanings'. Sounds and genres in the n-au exist in a state of 'incomprehensibility', bound by their relative 'incoherence' in comparison to one another, each distinct in their own way but given space to coexist (Arnot & Fitzpatrick, 2016). Informed by Jacques Rancière's (2010: 69) notion of dissensus, that being 'the putting of two worlds in one and the same world', the n-au is a space where a range of practices and genres can converge, the open mindset of its practitioners to the fundamental process of musicking allowing their relative incoherence to flourish.

Despite the breadth of genre that is said to be found in the n-au, this aesthetic variety is finite, instead denoting variety within a particular area of music. Sharing similarities with what Graham (2016: 13) terms the 'ultra-marginal underground', genres such as noise and black metal, alongside free jazz and electronic music are commonplace in the n-au, styles

which generally sit somewhere at the fringes of popular music, precisely because of their perceived difference for more popular forms. Sounds may take influence from 'rock and metal, "art" musics, jazz, dance music, and any number of folk and "world" musics' (Arnot, 2017). Concurrently, the n-au broaches multiple artistic disciplines, with sound and performance art being commonplace, alongside the appearance of poetry, dance and installation, reminiscent of Dick Higgin's (1998: 222) notion of 'intermedia', works which hold a sense of 'conceptual fusion'. These cross genre works are the result of the heterogeneity of multiple practitioners co-existing and collaborating, with its forms being the product of 'solo acts and regular, occasional and ad hoc ensembles' (Arnot, 2017). It is in this space of incoherence, this space of heterogeneity, that practices such as the flute and percussion combinations of Part Wild Horses Mane On Both Sides, the abstract concrete of Spoils & Relics, the crystalline drones of Aqua Dentata or the vocal mulch of Fritz Welch.

Despite the breadth of practices which could fall under the n-au heading, Hayler (2015b) suggests that the sounds of the n-au can be loosely categorised as 'noise' and 'experimental'. The aesthetic variety in the n-au is therefore relative, being broad only within the confines of these aesthetic categories. However, what is significant about Hayler's use of the two terms is their flexible aesthetic and cultural connotations, their ability to account for difference. The terms noise and experimental are often used as catch all phrases to describe something rich and complex, rather than denoting something strictly bound by convention.

Noise, as a wider cultural term and genre of music, exists in a constant state of shifting dichotomy, always being redefined. Paul Hegarty (2007: 5) speaks to the core idea of noise as being something deemed 'unwanted', this unwantedness being inherently cultural, dependent on an 'other' to designate it as such. Noise is, therefore, a fundamentally relational and fluid phenomena, where it 'occurs not in isolation, but in a differential relation to society, to sound, and to music' (Hegarty, 2007: 5). Harnessing this unwantedness, the contrarian nature of noise has a long history in artistic practice, frequently cited as beginning with Futurism and Luigi Russolo's *Art of Noises* manifesto. Russolo's (1986: 25) manifesto argues for a wider consideration of what should be considered music, looking specifically to the industrial sounds of the everyday as aesthetically rich, using them to break out of the 'limited circle' of what at that point was considered music in search of something which instead offered 'infinite variety'. Unwantedness is here reframed as possibility, something with which we can attempt to

reconfigure our relationship to sound and music, a welcoming of something which was previously unwelcome, a desire for change. This possibility is at the heart of the notion of noise and experimental music and therefore by association the n-au, hence why it is often perceived as being aesthetically diverse. The use of a noise as a descriptor of music in the n-au is important precisely because of its ability to be reconfigured where, as Stephen Graham (2023: 1) suggests, it exists in a continual state of 'becoming', moving from 'order' to 'disorder', always in flux.

While distinct sub-genres of noise are rigid in their definitions and characteristics, the use of the term noise in relation to the n-au speaks more to the notion of noise as being something which is broad in its scope, open to possibility[28]. Marie Thompson (2017: 9) builds on the works of Hegarty and others, framing noise as being something which should aim to go 'beyond unwantedness' to become a form and a process which is 'transformative', being less about the ability to 'diminish and destroy' and more about the ability to 'enhance and create' - considering noise from an optimists perspective. Noise is always in a state of renegotiation in response to its surroundings, a shifting relationality which accounts for change. In talking about his experiences in various localised noise scenes, Novak (2013: 6) surmises the individuated nature of noise in saying that 'a coherent picture of noise sometimes appeared when […] particular views lined up with one another' but 'they inevitably glided apart soon after these rare moments of convergence.' He goes on to poetically write that 'noise became a wave. Its movements resonated with the overlapping hopes, demands and desires of friends and strangers scattered across the world' (Novak, 2013: 6). This positioning of noise, as something mutable and malleable, is the noise of the n-au, what Ray Brassier (2009: 62) calls an 'anomalous zone of interference between genre'.

Like noise, experimental music can be an equally nebulous term. In trying to identify or define it, many routes lead us to back to John Cage's deliberations. Cage (1968: 7) initially rejects the term 'experimental' as a descriptor of his work as a composer, suggesting that an experiment must have 'taken place prior to the finished work', like a sketch would for a painter. However, he begins to think of the notion differently, identifying it as 'an act the outcome of which is unknown' stating that the term is more suited to denote something which is 'not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure' but about foregrounding the uncertainty of the process itself

[28] Harsh Noise Wall, for example, is a sub-genre of noise categorised by work which is rich in timbre and texture but offers little in the way of movement or dynamics.

(Cage, 1968: 7). Hence, we find the use of indeterminacy and aleatoric methods of composition in much experimental music making, inviting chance and uncertainly into the process. Michael Nyman (1999: 4) attempts to give a definition of experimental music noting how it is preoccupied with process, and how these processes reconfigure relationships, often occurring 'between chance and choice, presenting different kinds of objection and obligations'. This is music concerned with process, the how more so than the what, where its potential lies in the ability to consider an 'opening' of the fundamental relationship between sound and music (Gottschalk, 2016: 8).

The terms noise and experimental, employed here, are used as broader descriptors of practice and process, rather than strict genre boundaries. They share commonalities in their ability to reconfigure relationships, alongside their resistance to strict definition. To add a third term which is typical of the n-au and shares the same flexibility as descriptor of practice is improvisation, particularly free improvisation. Despite not being referenced in Hayler's initial description of the n-au, its use as both a signifier of aesthetic preference and practice across the n-au warrant its mention. Mattin (2009b: 168) suggests that both noise and improvisation are inherently 'intertwined', both as aesthetic genres and modes of practice, bound by their marginal appeal and alternative means of production and distribution. Derek Bailey (1993: 83) positions free improvisation as being 'non-idiomatic', in that the 'characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it'. In saying this, Bailey (1993: 83) is critical of the conflation of improvisation, the avant-garde and experimental music, suggesting that the former is distinct from the latter in terms of its relative indifference to want to effect and shift the wider idioms of musical tradition: 'there are innovations made, as one would expect, through improvisation, but the desire to stay ahead of the field is not common among improvisors'. The music of the n-au is situated in a space in between, located somewhere in the intersections between noise, experimental and improvised music – hovering somewhere between the classifiable and unclassifiable.

However, despite the apparent flexibility and heterogeneity of genre in the n-au, there are still criticisms that come with the use of these terms as descriptors of its practice. Noise, as a genre term, is frequently used as a synonym for the 'full noise' approach of the harsh noise sub-genre when used in passing, rather than being used to indicate a freer, looser categorisation of the breadth of possible sound (Thompson, 2017: 167). Whereas noise's potential lies in its ability to account for all audible sound as being worthy of

aesthetic consideration, it has been unable to resist developing idiom and predictability, ultimately becoming identified with an expected set of 'tropes' (Mattin, 2022: 7)[29]. Similarly, within free improvisation, its apparent freedom of expression can be said to be reduced to a particular set of 'sonic signifiers', themselves becoming a type of idiom in an apparently non-idiomatic practice (Fitzpatrick & Thompson, 2015). Players become canonised, approaches become formulaic, the unexpected becomes expected. What Fitzpatrick & Thompson (2015) argue for in response to the homogenisation of these approaches is that musical forms need to become 'adaptive' to the shifting contexts of the world around them, alongside following a similar approach to the ever changing political and socio-cultural landscapes that they are produced within. This adaptiveness is a key element of the n-au, where in order to sustain a space of experimentation and retain a degree of creative autonomy, those in the scene must recognise and navigate the entanglement of the n-au with wider socio-political and economic contexts in search of a more adaptive and adaptable approach.

> Nothing seemed to link these disparate sounds and performance styles other than they could be loosely banded together as 'noise' (Hayler, 2015b).

Non-hierarchical structure

> The roles one might have musician, promoter, label 'boss', distributor, writer, 'critic', paying punter and so on – are fluid, non-hierarchical and can be exchanged or adopted as needed. (Hayler, 2012c)

The non-hierarchical structure of the n-au is based around the idea that individuals are 'prepared to take on the roles necessary to get things done' in lieu of any central organisational structure (Hayler, 2015b). Rather than a distinct separation between roles, practitioners in the n-au frequently occupy multiple roles at once, overlapping and intersecting with one another, occurring in a constant state of flux. You might begin by only attending performances or listening to recordings on Bandcamp. Eventually, you are likely to end up helping to organise a performance or start a label. You might even try your hand at performing or recording yourself. Thus, the argument goes, 'there is no 'audience' for the scene because the scene is the audience' (Hayler, 2012c). The nature

[29] Excessive volume and distortion, alongside recurring thematics of contrarian content including referencing to serial killers, misogyny and general right leaning ideologies.

of such a marginal scene relies on the perseverance and work of its participants to ensure its survival, suggesting that everyone with an interest in the n-au has an active role to play in maintaining it, where 'everyone present bears some responsibility' (Small, 1991: 10).

Mattin (2009b: 173) notes that the self-organisation observed in experimental music scenes 'constantly makes people change roles; from player to organiser, from critic, to distributor' and that this occupation of multiple positions at any one time 'helps people understand each other's roles', building a sense of empathy within it. By undertaking different roles within the n-au, individuals gain a new set of 'reference points', both developing their skills and understanding of the nuances involved in aspect of the scene, building a complex and empathetic view of the whole milieu (Webb, 2007: 32). The potential flattening of the hierarchy in DIY scenes, in particular the artist and audience binary, can be seen as a way of 'demystifying' practice, a way of increasing meaningful participation in a particular scene (Jones, 2021: 8). The crux of the n-au's non-hierarchical approach to organisation lies within the rich histories of the do-it-yourself movement and avant-garde artistic practice. Following on from the likes of Jospeh Beuy's notion that everyone is an artist, the Fluxus intention of merging the distinct zones of art and life, and Roland Barthe's Death of the Author, there has been a long history of attempts to democratise artistic practice which becomes most relevant to the n-au in the DIY movement. Sarah Lowdnes (2012: xiii) suggests that much DIY activity is a result of the conscious shift 'from the dominant "top-down" cultural model toward self-directed and self-realized modes of expression'. These modes of expression are foregrounding cultural autonomy, but rather than being individualist they are 'conceived as community-based alternatives to existing hierarchical power structures' (Lowdnes, 2012: xiii). Encouraging the active participation typical of the n-au comes with an openness to practice and process, of understanding that if no one else is going to do it, so it must be done yourself.

The non-hierarchical structure of the n-au encourages a network of solidarity, based around these equitable divisions of labour. Paul Kelly (2020), of North East based promoters A Better Noise, explains that this type of approach was typical in the scene surrounding Newcastle's Morden Tower, where everyone involved in the scene was 'active', rather than just 'absorbing' the culture passively[30]. Within academic discourse, there has been an increased focus on recognising the role of 'non-musicians' as an essential and equal part of any DIY scene, suggesting that individuals, such as radio show

[30] Morden Tower was a venue steeped in counter-cultural history, being part of a burgeoning alternative poetry scene in the 1960's, which subsequently became a regular fixture for n-au performances in the Northeast of England until its closure to the public in 2013.

hosts and organisers – who may not record or perform themselves - are seen as ‘pillars’ and ‘icons’ for their fundamental role in the scene, beyond the singularity of the artist (Verbuč, 2021). Like Bailey (1990: 44) states of free improvisation, an audience ‘can affect the creation of that which is being witnessed’, and in small scenes such as the n-au, that audience are fundamental in cultivating the conditions of possibility.

Occupying multiple roles in the n-au can be concurrent or follow a snowballing effect, where one gradually ends up occupying a particular role rather than setting out with an explicit intention to do so. Rather than this being seen as growth on a vertical level, what Juho Kaitajärvi-Tiekso (2019: 101) describes as an ‘evolutionist’ view of the music industry where each different role would be viewed as a stepping stone to the next, roles in the n-au are of equal standing, exchangeable, horizontal – they are the means and the ends. To see how this functions in action, we can observe Hayler’s journey in the n-au. During his time involved in experimental music, he has occupied numerous roles which are sometimes distinct and singular, at other times overlapping and inherently interlinked. He has performed and released records under the names Midwich and see monsd, collaborated with artists such as Ian Watson, Neil Campbell, The Skull Mask, Culver, Paul Harrison and Daniel Thomas, ran the record labels Fencing Flatworm Recordings and (oTo), blogged on Radio Free Midwich, organised the micro zine The Barrell Nut, hosted the Radio Free Midwich radio show, been a promoter as part of the Termite Club and, as he points out himself in his ‘call to authority’, ‘had a hand in well over 100 releases on, I dunno, 20 to 30 different labels’ (Hayler, 2015b). So that’s performer, recording artist, blogger, label owner, radio show host, organiser and, no less importantly, a paying punter. Hayler (2015b) is keen to acknowledge that the ‘paying punter’ a crucial role in the n-au, going on to say that ‘it is perfectly possible to be involved and/or show your support just by paying in and digging the show’. This activity has lasted over 25 years, not all of it concurrent and, as Hayler (2015b) points out, has included the odd ‘brief break’.

In discussing hierarchy, we must consider Hayler’s position as the author of the term no-audience underground. With Radio Free Midwich being the place where the term originated and was first outlined, Hayler is conscious of his potential positioning as a gatekeeper of the scene, as a voice of authority, something which could impose an unwanted sense of hierarchy. In a conscious effort to counteract this, the blog has had a history of taking on different contributors over its existence (Figure 6), veering away from being just a singular voice and in doing so, looks to also address the gender balance of a scene which has historically been considered ‘a bit of a boys club’ (Hayler, 2015a).

Hayler's tenure as editor of Radio Free Midwich also came to a stop at one point, handing over the reins to Joe Murray in the interim. Whereas the non-hierarchical structure the scene usually references the multiply embedded nature of roles, a similar approach to minimising the influence of a singular voice is of equal importance. Further to this, Hayler welcomes idea that the concept of the n-au can be applied to different cultural endeavours, and actively encourages this expansion, signing off his manifesto remix with the line: 'should the term I have been defining and defending be of use to you then feel free to make use of it' – suggesting that its usefulness as a framework not exclusive to experimental music (2015b).

Date	Radio Free Midwich Activity
2000	Hayler coins the term No-Audience Underground
2009	Hayler starts Radio Free Midwich (RFM)
2010	Hayler begins commenting on current activity, rather than RFM being just an archival site
2013	Three new writers join RFM: Joe Murray, Luke Vollar and Scott McKeating
2015	Three more writers join RFM: Chrissie Caulfield, Marlo de Lara and Sophie Cooper
2017	Rob Hayler steps down as editor of RFM
2017	Joe Murray steps in as RFM editor
2017	Paul Margree joins as the 'London Correspondent'
2018	Joe Murray steps down as editor of Radio Free Midwich – Pace of activity slows down
2019	Rob Hayler begins the Radio Free Midwich show
2021	The last post on Radio Free Midwich

Figure 6. Timeline of Radio Free Midwich activity.

Alongside broadening the critical voice of Radio Free Midwich, Hayler (2021) looked to reframe his position as a cultural arbiter, and the purpose of Radio Free Midwich, challenging the notion of 'submission' in terms of submitting a piece of music for review on a blog, a term which he suggests carries with it perceptions of inherent 'hierarchy' and 'demand.' To counteract this potential for a hierarchical structure to emerge, Hayler (2021) suggests that what we must do instead is 'share'. This signalled a shift in the focus of Radio Free Midwich which moved from being a source of writing to a radio show, where

Hayler would simply spread the word about releases he had found, broadcasting them to anyone who was keen to listen. Reframing the relationship between artist and blog writer or critic is just one way of attempting to subvert a hierarchical relationship, whilst also being conscious of the need to imagine and construct ways of working which resist replicating the hierarchical power dynamics of the contemporary capitalist system. This is something which Jones (2021: 142) suggests is key for DIY music scenes going forward, commenting that the reliance on dominant technological structures must be approached critically, where a conscious effort to imagine and build alternatives, to 'create new spaces in which to practise actual sharing', rather than simply existing in a space which relies on hierarchy and individuality, is essential[31]. Whether it is the use of social media and streaming platforms or the entire concept of a label or a promoter, moving towards a more equitable, non-hierarchical space in the n-au requires criticality on the part of the practitioner.

Through changing technologies, not least the adoption of digital distribution of recorded music, alongside a hobbyist approach to practice common for many in the scene, people in the n-au attempt to create a space where 'traditional means of gatekeeping are being drained of influence and relevance' (Hayler, 2020a). Despite suggesting that 'Radio Free Midwich is not an explicitly political place' the action to take on new writers and broaden the voice of Radio Free Midwich, while acknowledging and addressing the historical gender imbalances of the noise scene, is an inherently political act (Hayler, 2015a). This begins the increasingly critical stance that Radio Free Midwich and much of the wider n-au are taking – its critical turn - following the trajectory of the wider world of sound practices taking a more conceptual and critical approach, evident in the ways promoters are distancing themselves from the 'anti-reflexive' nature of earlier noise and power electronics scenes that have predated them, existing instead in favour of a more inclusive atmosphere (Gowans et al., 2023: 82). This outlook is in keeping with Fitzpatrick & Thompson's (2015) view that DIY scenes need to become 'adaptive' and constantly changing with regards to their aesthetic, social and political dimensions. Jones (2021: 58) also echoes this sentiment in observing that to 'open up' DIY scenes, regardless of their limited appeal, the act 'reconstituting DIY audiences', by widening participation, is 'a necessary precondition of fuller self-expression' (Jones, 2021: 58). Opening the n-au to new voices and new approaches is key to maintaining a non-hierarchical structure, one

[31] Jones' (2021) research specifically focuses on the use of social media in DIY music scenes but is relevant across streaming platforms, blogs etc.

which is centred around a sense of egalitarianism, with every individual involved playing an equal role in maintaining its conditions of possibility

> there is no ‘audience’ as such, in the sense of ‘passive receivers’, because almost everyone with an interest in the scene is involved somehow (Hayler, 2012c).

Self-sufficiency

> Hence the prevalence of barter and other types of reciprocity that help keep the blood of the scene oxygenated. This is a mechanism that nurtures self-sufficiency in the absence of money (Hayler, 2015b).

To be self-sufficient, Hayler (2011c) argues, means that ‘our “art” and our “scene”, for the want of better words, can groove their own way uncompromised by non-artistic concerns’. Hayler (2015b) notes that, for the most part, activities within the n-au occur without any external funding sources as most people ‘can’t be bothered playing the game and find ways of getting it done regardless’ and even when funding is secured, it is ‘no guarantee the final product will be any good’. Thus, the n-au searches elsewhere to sustain itself, this elsewhere often being embedded within the practices and DIY mentality of the n-au’s practitioners. Being self-sufficient relies on the collective action of the participants of the n-au, personified in this non-hierarchical division of labour, entering a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit agreement to keep things going off their own backs. Some of this activity comes in the form of non-commercial exchange, the n-au operating in some ways as a gift economy which, taking from Marcel Mauss’s theorisation of the idea, Crossley (2023) describes as a way for practitioners in DIY scenes to ‘support one another without direct remuneration but from which they benefit by way of the help and support they receive from others’. If we think of the economic actions of the n-au, much of its activity falls under the scope of what Gibson-Graham (2006: 69) describe as being part of a ‘diverse economy’, that being economic activity which falls outside of the remit of the neo-liberal economic traits of ‘wage labour, market exchange of commodities, and capitalist enterprise’. Recognising that these neo-liberal notions are just one of many ways we can understand economic action, ‘just one particular set of economic relations situated in a vast sea of economic activity’, allows us to consider the action of the n-au as belonging to a wider idea of a pre-figurative politics, based not

around individualism and accumulation but around collectivity and communality (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 70).

One of the primary manifestations of the desire to be self-sufficient in the n-au is in the notion of the trade. Trading in the n-au is commonplace, or as Hayler puts it, ‘trade is, of course, the lifeblood of the scene’ (Hayler, 2011c). The alternative economy of trade or barter has, in this instance, its roots in the cassette culture of the late 1970’s to early 1980’s. With the introduction of the compact cassette and tape recorders to the consumer electronics market, the means of production and distribution of recorded sound were now placed in the hands of the many, rather than the select few. This shift in accessibility and affordability encouraged a subversion of the music industry’s formalisation, building networks of exchange outside of its purview. The appeal of the culture was as much about the aesthetics of the sound as it was about the ‘built-in adventurous listenership and the alternative distribution system’ facilitated by its participants (Bailey, 2012: 88). What the cassette underground represented was a ‘far-flung, seemingly endless web of interpersonal connections, collaborations, and affiliations’, mediated not by the music industry proper, but by a dedicated and passionate network of individuals, spurred on by the affordances of the format itself (Masters, 2023: 62).

In celebration of trading in the n-au, Hayler (2011c) argues that it ‘saves everyone involved money and provides a risk-free way of picking up something new’, being of mutual benefit to both parties: ‘for punters it is a reward for generosity and open-mindedness, for distributors a way of circulating stock’. Record labels exchange their wares between each other, avoiding the need to handle money in that moment, swapping one stack of cassettes or CD-Rs for another. Verbuč (2022: 178) notes that ‘reciprocity’, alongside a closely intertwined ‘participation’, are significant values present in the ‘constitution of local and trans-local DIY communities’. There is a circularity at play here, an assumption that the kindness offered will be returned, even if there is no explicit expectation for it. The physical object becomes an alternative form of currency. Especially with the arrival of the CD-R as a commonly adopted format in the late 1990s to early 2000s, sounds could be recorded and distributed with minimal cost to the artist, furthering the democratic potential located in the cassette culture prior – observable particularly in the surge of new labels such as Rob Hayler’s Fencing Flatworm Recordings, Andy Jarvis’ First person and Paul Harrison’s Fiend[32]. Joe Murray gives us an example of

[32] CD-R’s could be burned on a home computer, equipment which is much less specialised that a cassette deck or duplicator. Likewise, the use of thin plastic sleeves mean a CD-R can be posted using a stamp designed for a letter, rather than the slightly bulkier cassette – another reduction of costs.

how this action of trading can work when writing about his last tour in a quotation featured in Hayler's (2011b) article on the economics of the n-au:

> The trade thing is a bit like 'our way of shaking hands'. It's also a great way to keep the filthy lucre out of the equation. I sold one CD-R on that last tour. Just one; and if I ever find out who bought it I'll give them the next posset slop report just for showing so much faith. But I came back with a stack of CD-Rs, tapes and vinyl the height of medium sized milk jug through trades with other bands, DIY labels and well-prepared punters. They will keep me spinning & smiling until December and I've spread the p-word to a bunch of homesteads and families across the UK. Everyone is a winner.

When a like for like trade is not the primary mode of exchange, individuals in the n-au are more likely to ask for money for physical products more so than seeking renumeration for the labour invested in their creative endeavours, a way to 'make their music available and affordable to as many people as possible' (Murray, 2019). This is again a common occurrence throughout the histories of free music, most prominently echoed in the sentiment of the Los Angeles Free Music Society's tagline: 'The music is free, but you must pay for the plastic, paper, ink, glue and stamps'. Hayler (2019) speaks to the non-monetary forms of exchange when musing on the notion of 'value' in the n-au, specifically within the realm of Bandcamp and the name your price digital download, suggesting that 'in lieu of available cash', what he has instead is 'barter'. Hayler (2019) argues that the conscious act of 'listening' is more valuable than any economic renumeration, ones engagement with a piece of work offering a richer form of value: 'where projects can be profoundly personal and many attract a double-digit audience at most, knowing someone is paying attention can be very gratifying and validating'. If this active listening subsequently results in a piece of music being suggested to someone else, we see a doubling down on his previously mentioned thoughts on privileging 'sharing' as a way of encouraging non-hierarchical relationships in the n-au (Hayler, 2021).

Hayler (2019) goes on to suggest that 'barter reinforces the non-hierarchical nature of our endeavour, attentive listening is profoundly respectful, and nothing helps create and maintain bonds better than sharing your time.' This quote posits that when thinking about self-sufficiency, we need to think of the self as being something primarily social and collective, beyond just self as the individual. In wider discussions about DIY, or do-it-your*self* there is the argument that DIY should more accurately be termed DIT, or Do-It-

Together, emphasising the collective nature of practice (Lowdnes, 2016; Threadgold, 2018). If we are to settle with the notion of DIY and the self as being collective, it should align with how the 'self' is described by Raqs Media Collective (2015: 100) where it is positioned as 'an unbound constellation of persons, organisms and energies', again acknowledging the posthuman agency in the cultivation of DIY scenes. Here, we can view the self as a collection of individuals whose unique and singular knowledges and personal attributes merge with the shared collective values of their peers, something more than the sum of its parts. Being self-sufficient in the case of the n-au, and to a wider degree most DIY activity, points not to the individualist notion of neo-liberal self-perseverance but to commonality, collectively and sociality.

Aside from the alternative economic action of trade, practitioners in the n-au frequently rely on what Michel De Certeau (1984: 37) terms 'tactics' to be self-sufficient. These 'tactics' are practices which make use of temporal gains, distinct from their opposite, 'strategies', which are individualised, concerned with the solidification of power, of occupying space (De Certeau, 1984: 36). A tactic looks to the 'clever utilization of time', rather than an 'establishment of place', to take advantage of opportunities, of rifts in the structure of the surrounding world, to use them for their own purposes (De Certeau, 1984: 39). Seeing tactics in action can be witnessed through simple acts such as someone using their working hours to make flyers, organising performances in their place of work outside of the scope of their employment or a whole host of other activities that would fall under the notion of De Certeau's (1984: 25) '*la perruque*', the notion of 'the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer', of 'borrowing' time. In doing so, practitioners look to keep costs to a minimum by utilising the materials they have to hand, something which Threadgold (2018) speaks of as being particularly indicative of DIY cultures, the result of which allows for the ability to 'free temporal and mental space to be creative'. Without its own sustained resources, those in the n-au must work with the affordances of the resources that surround them, making use of them for periods at a time. Given this, I understand the n-au not to be fully autonomous or self-sufficient but operating with varying degrees of autonomy, always changing in relation to the external contexts and resources it relies on.

Within this discussion of self-sufficiency and tactics, an important point to consider is exactly who can participate in these actions. While the non-hierarchical structure of the n-au suggests a desire for an openness to participation, the reliance on self-sufficient methods brings questions of access and privilege. In Hayler's (2020) explanation of

hobbyism, that being a particular approach to practice indicative of many in the n-au, he suggests that practitioners use the economic capital they have set aside for ‘leisure’ activities to contribute to the scene. This idea comes from a position of relative privilege, of being able to set aside something in the first place, especially considering the current cost of living crisis and wealth disparity in the UK. While the amount set aside can be small, perhaps even just ‘£1.33 each a week’, having the ability to spare even a meagre amount for leisure activities is only possible for some (Wood & Howcroft, 2020). This situates the self-sufficient notions of the n-au within wider debates surrounding the idea of ‘DIY as privilege’, where Richard Phoenix (2020: 3) outlines a manifesto for recognising one’s own privilege within DIY scenes and that doing so is key to creating and sustaining a more equitable environment. Being conscious of inherent privileges is the first step in reconstituting scenes to favour the community, rather than the individual. This is perfectly summed up by a quote from Rebecca Solnit used in point three of the manifesto: “Using privilege to dismantle privilege… one of the best ways to use your voice is to amplify voices that aren't being heard” (Phoenix, 2020: 3).

Tactics are one method of attempting to democratise privilege by redistributing access to resource. Subverting the power of a workplace or a space which is concrete in some way, the n-au practitioner can leverage their position of power to benefit more than just the individual. This could take the form of something as simple as finding someone with access to a photocopier to make flyers or zines for someone else. Similarly, it could be hosting artists if you have space in your home when the organiser does not or borrowing equipment to be able to help someone organise a performance elsewhere, both actions leveraging the privilege of access to resource to create a space for someone else. These might not be your own resources, but if individuals in the n-au consider the pool of available resources as result of the network of active participants in the scene, the breadth is increased. Doing it yourself, or doing it together, acknowledges the inherent privilege and inequity that exists in the wider world and looks to counteract it. To follow Phoenix’s (2020: 3) manifesto, practitioners in the n-au must see the privilege in ‘being able to do it yourself’, and approach this with criticality, looking to understand how they can use this to help others who may not be able to do it themselves.

Hayler (2015b) acknowledges the imbalances of the n-au outright: ‘saying the no-audience underground is self-sufficient is not to say that it is financially balanced’, and despite his argument that work in the n-au should not necessarily expect subsidy, these words must be taken alongside continuing calls for wider ‘societal change’ (Hayler, 2020a). He goes on

to explain that 'we should all have to do less work and have more time for the things we choose to do instead', arguing for reforms such as Universal Basic Income on a wider societal level, and believes that 'connecting through artistic endeavour' is one step towards prefiguring a more collective, free approach to making music (Hayler, 2020a).

> I must stress that this is not a snobbish clique of insiders obsessively tending to every aspect of their hobby (not a dirty word, by the way, who makes a living from experimental music nowadays?) but a friendly and welcoming group who have realised that if they want it to happen then they have to make it happen themselves (Hayler, 2012b).

Hobbyist Approach to Practice

> Driven to create by an urge independent of possible rewards then you can do whatever you want purely for the love of it and only subject to the constraints that we have to accommodate in every other aspect of our lives (money, family, employment etc.) (Hayler, 2012b).

In an article for *The Wire* magazine, Hayler (2020a) argues for the case of the hobbyist in experimental music, proclaiming that 'by accepting what we do is a hobby, we set ourselves free'. Hayler (2020a) places the distinction between work and hobby as the difference between 'what we have to do' and 'what we choose to do'. In saying this, Hayler is advocating for involvement in the n-au which exists outside of the scope for work, making it a hobbyist practice. This is what Bernard Stiegler (2013) describes as 'working outside of salaried work-time' – the role of the amateur. It is, as Andy Abbot (2012: 58) writes, the activity synonymous with DIY scenes which is 'done for the love'.

Central to Hayler's notion of the hobbyist are the economic concerns of the scene, with Hayler's (2012b) stance on activity in the n-a being that 'there is certainly no right to expect there to be money in it' but also the view of value as being beyond simply economic. While Hayler does not suggest that no one deserves payment for their work, he argues that it should not be the sole reason for creating such a work and that no-one in this scene is asked to spend time and money creating the work, so renumeration is not to be expected (Hayler, 2019b). Hayler (2012b) provides us with two ways of dealing with the reality of this situation: 'a) shake your fist at the gods and complain about the unfairness

of your genius going unrecognized and unrewarded or b) take strength from its gloriously liberating implications.' The hobbyist approach to cultural production is thus positioned as a liberating prospect, based around how one positions their actions. Mattin (2009b: 184) comments upon the non-work aspects of involvement in noise and improvised music scenes, suggesting that 'the making of improvised music has more to do with situationist notions of play (ludic desire and instability) than work (more fixed in its productivity)'. The n-au approach can also be seen as an 'approach of No-Compromise to market pressures' where traditional measures of value, typically 'money or fame', are deemed unnecessary in such a scene (Boehringer, 2015).

The hobbyist approach considers time, skill and economic status in how an activity is carried out. Joanna Walsh (2025: 1) explains what it means to operate in a hobbyist manner, as an amateur, in the current age:

> I'm unpaid, or not paid at a professional rate; that I'm enthusiastic, that I want to do it anyway; that I spend time – habitual, spare time – doing it, time away from paid and unpaid work. Ungoverned by formal workplace standards, amateur also means I'm unqualified, unprofessional. That I fail.

Bailey (1993: 98) purports that some artists within improvised music worlds have the view that an amateur approach to recording music is often seen as being 'adversarial' to those who record music for a living. This is similarly the case in Ruth Finnegan's (1989: 13) analysis of folk musicians where, on the face of it, the distinction between a professional and amateur is down to whether it is a 'source of livelihood' and not necessarily based around any notion of skill. However, her analysis goes further to suggest that both stances are inherently subjective, sometimes reflecting economic renumeration, perceived musical skill, social status or a whole host of different subjectivities, existing not as binary opposites but as part of a 'complex continuum with many different possible variations' (Finnegan, 1989: 14). It is perfectly possible that one can occupy both roles, being both a professional and an amateur, existing at both points on the continuum. The notion of the amateur then becomes about how this element of someone's practice is approached, how it differs from the more professional side of their practice, their work. We can see examples of this in the n-au with individuals such as Sophie Cooper, whose day job is part of the programming for Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival alongside ongoing work teaching music, both of which are entangled with her DIY practice of performance and sound installation outside of this. Similarly, Ali Robertson is involved with charity Sonic

Bothy, who work with disabled musicians to create contemporary music, where his usually DIY non-music improvisation is welcomed in a more structured, formal and, more importantly, funded setting.

Formal musical training can be a point of contention in the n-au, the professionalism that is associated with it being antithetical to the hobbyist approach that many take. However, in thinking about activity in the n-au as being part of a spectrum, the two approaches should not be considered as binaries but existing in an entangled form. Even if one is fully versed in the 'conventions' of, say, classical music, how one applies or completely abandons them in practice is what is relevant (Becker, 1982: 29). However, many in the n-au do not have formal musical training, instead building knowledge and technique through autodidactic means – a DIY, 'anyone can do it' approach which is 'implicitly anti-hierarchical' (Jones, 2021: 4). Ask what key something is in, what note is being played, and the answer is likely one of bewilderment. This is where much of the adversarial nature of the hobbyist versus the professional stems from but, if we are to follow Hayler's (2020) thinking about hobbyism as being 'liberating', we can extend this to one's understanding of music. Without knowing the conventions of a particular world – in this case musical theory – the hobbyist is free to make their own rules. We can observe the veneration of the amateur, or hobbyist, in historical avant-garde examples like Cardew's Scratch Orchestra or Bryars' Portsmouth Sinfonia – advocating for the position of the non-professional within a professional setting. Rather than suggesting the amateur approach strips the music of any value, it should instead be read as a more egalitarian approach to involvement and democratisation of the arts.

Simon Fox (2022) argues that by embracing the amateur perspective, by working under the designation of the 'new amateur', practitioners can circumnavigate institutional frameworks and hegemonic artistic practices in favour of an approach to music and sound creation that is more open and democratic, resistant to rules and conventional structures. Fox's (2022) notion shares numerous similarities with the approaches of the n-au, ranging from representing a practice which searches for spaces to operate in 'without specialised training' alongside a 'hybrid approach to practice' while looking to explore the potential formed between 'individual capability and group autonomy' (Fox, 2022). Following such an approach to practice can be one way to attempt to subvert the increasing move to a focus on professionalism in the arts, that which Bennet & Guerra (2019: 7) suggest is "aimed towards ensuring aesthetic and, where possible, economic sustainability" but sits in contrast to the autonomous ideals of DIY culture more broadly.

The idea of the new amateur and the hobbyist exist within a lineage of non-professional modes of practice, occupying a space somewhere within Becker's (1984: 270) notions of the 'maverick', 'folk artist' and 'naive artist', where, he concludes, it is not that one is more distinct or legitimate than the other, but it is how their work exists in relation to the wider art world within which they oscillate that makes them interesting. What each role outlines is the degrees to which an artist has a particular awareness of, or engagement with, the formalised art world and how they interact with the overarching conventions of this more 'legitimate' world. When Hayler (2015b) refers to the n-au as a particular 'sub-section' of a wider scene, it is specifically here that the hobbyist approach to practice exists as a point of distinction, concerned with how practitioners in the n-au frame this area of their overall practice. This is not their job, it is not their main source of income, it is their hobby.

In discussing any approach to the creative process, especially in the current economic and political climate, we must consider the socio-economic factors that influence a practitioner's ability to create a work in the first instance. It is important to understand how following a DIY lifestyle, something which Threadgold (2018) likens to actively 'choosing poverty' is possible to maintain. Hayler's (2015b) idea that one must be 'receptive to the idea of exchange of goodwill in absence of money' places the onus on the individual somewhat. Yet, as we will explore in more detail throughout this thesis, it is through the collective actions of participants in the n-au that resources can be shared and redistributed between the community. Graham (2016: 114) points out that despite marginal and underground music scenes having the ability to partially resist complete subsumption under capitalism, and perhaps even create localised alternatives, even they are not free from being entangled in a world of 'flexible accumulation' and 'precarity'. Critics might suggest that the activities of the n-au constitute a kind of 'folk-political sentiment' and of a potentially 'defeatist' nature, its activities having relatively limited global reach and its emancipatory politics being only a small part of a larger political struggle (Srnicek & Williams, 2015: 46). However, when Hayler (2020a) argues for his notion of hobbyism in the n-au, it comes with the caveat that this activity must sit alongside campaigning for 'positive societal change' encouraging us to 'join unions, campaign for the four-day week, fair wages or perhaps a universal basic income so as to benefit everyone'.

> I must stress that this is not a snobbish clique of insiders obsessively tending to every aspect of their hobby (not a dirty word, by the way, who makes a living from experimental music nowadays?) but a friendly and welcoming group who have realised that if they want it to happen then they have to make it happen themselves (Hayler, 2012c).

Indifference to the mainstream

> The mainstream will never be interested in what we do in any substantive or meaningful way and money eventually fucks up anything it touches so why waste time with the inevitable compromises that engaging with it necessitate?' (Hayler, 2012c).

The underground and the mainstream are often positioned as two binary oppositions. As Hayler (2015b) surmises, 'there is a quaint, folk belief that a true underground should have some connection to the mainstream, ideally antagonistic – that underground culture should wish to change the mainstream, or at least to be a nuisance to it'. Despite this, he goes on to suggest that rather than being antagonistic towards the mainstream, it is 'far more radical to ignore it' (Hayler, 2015b). Are the mainstream and the underground two distinct, definable opposites or is it much more stratified than this binary opposition may suggest? Perhaps here the mainstream is used as a synonym for the wider music industry, one whose processes and values fundamentally differ from those of the n-au and the underground. Nick Crossley (2020: 65) defines the mainstream as music that has either 'commercial success and the celebrity that goes with it' or music that has some kind of 'involvement with major labels.' It would therefore suggest that the underground is something which operates contrary to these approaches. The 'mainstream' is usually pictured as a 'binary opposition', an '*us-vs-them*' used to define by rejection (Thornton, 1995: 145). Like with noise being defined by 'what it is not', the mainstream, or the underground, is usually positioned as an opposite (Hegarty, 2007: 5). In the simplest terms, the mainstream can be defined as something akin to Adorno's (1991: 99) 'culture industry', something which 'transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms', this nakedness being the explicitness with which it carries out the act. The indifference which Hayler suggests we use towards the mainstream being an indifference towards the type of individualised, commercial incentives of the creative industry proper.

Regardless of the ambiguity of the defining characteristics of the mainstream and underground, the use of the terms in common as a cultural resource. If the mainstream is that which *is not* the underground, then what is the underground? Graham (2016: 17) suggests that the term ‘underground’ is used to refer to a multitude of artistic practices which are often ‘fragmented and even dissociated in some ways.’ This fragmentation hinting at something that is not homogenous but is heterogenous, fluid and interchangeable. The underground is an almost abstract space, one that avoids simple definition and is constantly changing, redefining, and reinventing itself as time passes. Thornton (1995: 181) argues that ‘undergrounds are nebulous constructions’ and that they may refer to ‘a place, a style, an ethos’ and that ‘their crowds usually shun definitive social categorization’. Lowdnes (2016: xiv) explains how underground activities are characterised by being ‘initiated by creative practitioners’ and being ‘not wholly commercial’. There is a grassroots, bottom-up approach to cultural production in the underground which is less prescriptive than its mainstream counterparts. The underground is said to be organised around ‘aesthetic and political innovation and radicalism’ but that these central notions of cohesion are ‘fragmentary and incomplete and continually being reformed’ (Graham, 2016: 17).

When someone uses the term underground, they can be referring to multiple things. Keith Khan Harris (2007: 14) suggests that the word ‘underground’ is often used interchangeably with the word scene, usually to refer to the same thing - a social space centred around music. Similarly, Jones (2021: 6) and Lowdnes (2016: xiv) conflate the terms ‘DIY’ and ‘underground’ with one another, acknowledging the crossover in approaches to cultural production which are typical of such scenes. Perhaps this is where Hayler’s argument is coming from, suggesting that spending time ruminating over such essentialist, binary definitions detracts from the true work of the n-au. In the current age of digital distribution and with the democratic potential of the internet, the notion of the mainstream as a singular, dominant culture is becoming questioned, as the move towards a more segmented and personalised form of culture prevails – what was once a broad cast is now a narrow cast. Perhaps it is in this blurriness that encourages critics such as David Keenan (2015) to cry out that now, ‘the underground is finally dead’, in the same sense that the mainstream can be seen as dead. But, despite such a polemical announcement, Hayler (2015b) still refrains from being wholly concerned with such thoughts: ‘What the fuck does the ‘mainstream’ matter? We’ve got things to be getting on with.’

Despite his insistence on brushing off any idea of the mainstream, the n-au does not exist within a vacuum of activity, completely independent or autonomous. While an idealistic view would argue that the n-au should be able to continue to operate without any interaction with the wider music and cultural industries, the reality is much more complex. Where the use of 'tactics' allows for practices in the n-au to potentially survive (De Certeau, 1984: 37), these tactics are likely to be using resources from what could conceivably be demarcated as the mainstream or at least a slightly different plateau of activity – whether that be using a venue which also hosts more mainstream creative pursuits, or using a streaming service which also caters to a more mainstream audience. In speaking of the non-hierarchical structure of the n-au, Hayler (2013) notes that the roles one may occupy are often seen as being 'traditional elements' of any music scene, going on to state that 'running a label, for example, is a fun thing to do and still one of the best ways of organising a cluster of artists'. In this sense, the n-au is part structured in the same way as any conventional music scene, mainstream, underground or otherwise. If the n-au was truly indifferent to the mainstream, these roles would be different. Certainly, there are elements which appear in mainstream music which are not replicated here – there are no booking agents and often the sound technician role will be shared amongst everyone playing, rather than being a specialist individual – but there are still fundamental similarities.

A total indifference to the mainstream would more likely be witnessed in instances of 'outsider art' or 'outsider music' whose practices are so far removed from the traditions and conventions of the mainstream as to be completely distinct and unaware of them (Rhodes, 2000; Chushid, 2000). Whereas Becker's (1984: 233) 'maverick' intimately knows the conventions and structures of an art world and aims to exist outside of them, the outsider is unaware of them in the first place. Practitioners in the n-au may like to consider themselves as having an outsider practice, in terms of being somewhat removed from some of the conventions of the wider music industry, but its participants 'tend to be clever, well read, open-minded, polite polymaths' likely having a deep understanding of the conventions and histories of the music worlds they inhabit or exist alongside (Hayler, 2015b). The n-au borders the line between being an avant-garde practice - in the general sense that it looks to counteract or antagonise the conventions of a current scene - and that of the outsider, its hobbyist practitioners having no awareness of said conventions and thus inventing new and novel approaches to creating sound. Like with the aesthetic variety that exists in the n-au, the relationships individuals have with the wider music and cultural industries is complex and deeply entangled.

Jon Marshall (2013) describes the n-au as being suggestive of practices which ‘uses formerly Avant-Grade aesthetic and performance strategies’ in their work. The notion of the avant-garde, however, has a distinct relation to the mainstream in that its aim is to change the course of tradition, to somehow develop, deconstruct or further the dominant ideologies and norms of culture. This would position it in contrast with Hayler’s thoughts on the n-au’s relationship with the mainstream. Whereas the avant-garde looks to challenge the notion of the dominant logic of art or, for want of a better phrase, the mainstream, Hayler’s (2015b) concept of the n-au as being ‘indifferent’ to the mainstream would negate this. Backing up Marshall’s thoughts on the use of the strategies of the avant-garde, Stephen Graham (2010) invites us to think of underground music and avant-garde music as one and the same, whether that is thorough its pushing of ‘musical aesthetics to the limit of possibility’ or through acting as a ‘counterbalance of mainstream musical discourse, questioning its prejudices and its assumptions, while at the same time providing a forum of participation for those who feel excluded’.

I suggest that Hayler’s notion of being indifferent to the mainstream is paradoxical and that by bringing such a relationship, or lack of one, to the discussion, there is an inherent relationship there. Despite how resistant one may be to acknowledging or spending time ruminating over it, a relationship with the mainstream music industry exists even in the negation of it.

> There’s nowt noble about being a flea in the ear of an elephant (Hayler, 2015b).

Marginal Appeal

> Most UK conurbations of city-ish size can rustle up 20 people interested enough in the type of experimental music RFM covers to turn up to gigs. 10 or less if you are unfortunate, 30 plus if your scene is thriving. Should you wish to perform in this ‘arena’ then these people are your audience: the subset of this crowd who can turn up on that evening (Hayler, 2012b).

The tongue-in-cheek phrasing of the n-au explicitly references the nature of the audience, suggesting that there is no audience for this sort of sound or at the very most, it is of marginal appeal. When faced with questions about the impact of certain situations on the

wider music industry, Hayler (2015b) frequently retorts that those concerns aren't relevant because in the n-au, 'no one is interested in what we do'. Even though the amount of people interested is, according to Hayler (2014c), 'statistically indistinguishable from zero', it is not zero. There is an audience for this scene, it is just relatively small. It is not that *no-one* is interested in what the n-au does, it is *not that many*. Music such as that found in the n-au is always going to be of fringe interest due to its different, sometimes difficult aesthetics, hence its marginal appeal. It is Bailey (1993: 83) who wryly points out that despite differences between improvisation, experimental music and the avant-garde, 'the one thing they do have in common is a shared inability to hold the attention of large groups of casual listeners'. The often-challenging nature of such music, in terms of how it alters or rejects convention, is necessarily off putting. This is a point which Mattin (2009a) reiterates, suggesting that 'when one uses music, not as a tool for achieving something else (recognition, status...) but in a more aggressively creative way, it is going to produce alienation'. Equally, Irwin Chushid (2000: 233) argues, when speaking of outsider music, that 'most consumers simply do not have adventurous taste in music' and that this type of fringe sound 'offers little of interest to the vast majority of your fellow citizens' as many people simply lack the 'curiosity' for it.

The humour embedded in the naming of the n-au is something that exists in countless pockets of underground music. Richard Youngs' ongoing record label No Fans started in the early 1990's, offering a vehicle to release his experimental sound works into the world with a seeming indifference to any idea of having a large audience – it has no fans. In a slightly different vein, Dylan Nyoukis' Chocolate Monk proudly wears the phrase "of limited appeal" on its logo, hinting again towards its marginality. Despite this seemingly limited appeal, Chocolate Monk has amassed almost 600 releases since its inception in the mid-1990s, existing as an ongoing document of the trans-national weirdo music scene over the past three decades. While the appeal may be limited, there is clearly enough to sustain running a label for such a length of time. While it would be easy to dismiss these sorts of self-deprecating descriptions as throwaway gags, the tongue-in-cheek labels show a kinship with those who share similarly marginal tastes. Far from the major label ethos of trying to appeal to, and profit from, as many people as possible, these labels look to cater for the few, the interested, cultivating a small but loyal network of likeminded souls, all while adopting a dry sense of humour about the whole situation. This self-deprecating, sardonic humour is typical of many in the n-au and is no more present than in a cartoon included in issue 12 of Rob Hayler's Barrel Nut zine, penned by Idwal Fisher, where the

self-appointed Bald Heads of Noise celebrate playing a gig to an audience of none (**Error! Reference source not found.**)

Being in a situation where no one turns up to a gig is not unheard of but more than likely there are at least a handful of people around to attend a performance. The opening quote of this section points to the expected audience numbers in the n-au, often sitting somewhere between 10 and 30 people. This is, of course, a tiny amount when compared with even a moderately small rock band and despite these numbers occasionally shifting over time - representing temporal bursts of interest or activity in a local scene - they always end up plateauing in this same region. Hayler (2015b) quips that 'a wet Wednesday night at the Fenton, say, has attracted a remarkably consistent number of paying punters for at least 20 years' - his longevity in the scene allowing him to state this with some conviction[33]. Hayler goes on to note that the limited appeal of the n-au can and should be considered a source of liberation for artists working in the growth cycle of 21st century neo-liberalism: 'Recognizing that this endeavour is only ever going to be of fringe interest is incredibly liberating' (Hayler, 2012b). Boehringer (2015) echoes this sentiment when suggesting that this 'liberating' way of being in the world is personified by the working practices of the n-au and can be viewed as a potential 'framework for engagement with society as a whole'. It is here, in the small community of the n-au, new modes of social, economic and political exchange can be tested and enacted.

The implications of these small audience numbers necessitate much of the previously mentioned processes by which the n-au operates. Hayler (2011b) muses that in the n-au, 'there is no screaming mob of fans to be milked dry of their pocket money with Astral Social Club 2012 calendars, there are no oligarchs wishing to be our patrons and, annoying as it may be when the rent is due, I suspect we sort of like it that way'[34]. Without the support of the masses, or even the few, the n-au must find other ways to function, taking pride in the marginality of its practices. Hence, we have practitioners who rely on using tactics to operate, diverting time and resources from elsewhere into the creative processes of the n-au. With only a few individuals active in a particular locale involved in the n-au, the lack of labour power necessitates a division to get things done, suggesting a more communal, collaborative way of working, reiterating Hayler's notion of the scene operating in a non-hierarchical way,

[33] Hayler is speaking about the Fenton pub in Leeds University district which has been part of multiple overlapping scenes dating back to at least the Post Punk scene of the late 1970s.
[34] Astral Social Club is the solo project of Vibracathedral Orchestra's Neil Campbell.

However, despite the humour ingrained in Hayler's approach of framing the limited appeal so centrally, the concept invites criticism that it can be perceived as a defeatist and isolated stance. Jones (2021: 55) argues that the n-au approach, although seemingly free from the requirement of representation that comes with mass appeal, is not sought after by some individuals in DIY music scenes who instead seek a vehicle for giving a 'voice to their own emotions and experiences' where having an audience who can respond in a meaningful way is vital. In the same vein Reynolds (2012), when critiquing Hayler's concept, states that a 'transmitter requires a receiver', suggesting that if a piece of music is produced without a 'passive listener' in mind, then it has no value. It is certainly the case that some of the music in the n-au exists this way, a form of self-expression as both a means and an end, produced primarily for the individual. However, in most cases the music made by practitioners in the n-au goes some way to reach others, even if they are few. Since music in the n-au is released into the world, either through a particular physical format or on a digital platform, and that it is performed in public, demonstrates that it is not made without a receiver in mind.

Even though the appeal may be limited, interest in the scene comes in waves. Hayler (2012b) states that 'music of this type will always be a fringe interest, ignoring little blooms of hipster popularity every now and again' – suggesting that involvement in the scene in not static but fluctuates over time, even if that interest tends to level out over time. David Toop (2016: 5) notes how in adjacent free improvisation scenes, 'audiences come and go, grow and diminish, flicker back into vibrant life again over generations', the fluctuations speaking not only of the size of an audience but its breadth. Growth is not necessarily just an upwards trajectory. Growing the breadth of an audience, in terms of class, gender, race, allows for new perspectives to permeate a scene. Ben Harley (2021) suggests that 'as people of color, queer folx, women, and members of the disabled community have made their voices heard in such scenes, the scenes have become more inclusive' – a step which is vital given the ongoing rise of a right-wing populist rhetoric across the globe. New voices, new perspectives and new approaches are vital to the continued existence of the scene and, as we will see in Chapter 2, their increased inclusion signifies a point of cultural change in the n-au.

In a scene where attendance and participation are limited, issues around insularity and exclusion can appear in more concentrated forms. Toop (2016: 5) highlights how 'factionalism' in free improvisation is an ongoing constant, in part because 'improvisors are a stoic, stubborn bunch', but also due to the relationships that develop over time.

Factions breed exclusion, strengthen the disparity between the insider and the outsider, even within a scene made up of almost exclusively outsiders. When addressing criticism about his notion of the n-au, Hayler (2015b) points out that a frequent response levelled towards it is that it sounds like a 'clique or club, forbidding to the newbie'. He quickly replies with the suggestion that 'whilst undeniably odd, [people in the n-au] are a friendly and welcoming bunch' (Hayler, 2015b). Hayler (2011b) suggests that 'to be a member of the family all one has to do is express kinship', indicating that the n-au should not be seen as an exclusive, unwelcoming place and that while the music witnessed can be considered difficult by some standards, the structures and processes which surround them should aim to counteract any sense of purposeful exclusion and insularity. However, to say any sense of exclusion or hierarchy is absent would be untrue. There are still closer circles of friendships within the scene which have the potential to enact hierarchies or boundaries within the n-au, even if not intended or explicit. Addressing the perception of insiderdom becomes the remit of the insiders which, as we will unpack further in chapters 3 and 5, is where the agency of the record label owner or promoter comes into play to encourage the sociable and welcoming nature of the scene.

> the only connection between these disparate artists being that not many people are interested in what they do. Is this necessarily a bad thing? No. Sometimes it is helpful to be left alone to get on with it. Is this necessarily a good thing? No. Being on the fringes is no guarantee of quality (Hayler, 2011b).

Summarising the No-Audience Underground

Taking each of these distinct parts of the n-au, we can begin to understand the whole. The working practices of artists in the n-au as outlined by Hayler give us an indication of how an underground experimental music scene functions whilst attempting to retain a degree of autonomy. Ranging from the self-sufficient practices of trading and the use of goodwill as a form of currency to the non-hierarchical division of labour present in the scene, there is a clear sense of an idiosyncratic approach to the production of experimental music in the n-au, deeply embedded within the histories of DIY practice. This framework of activity touches upon anarchist principles - in terms of the rejection of hierarchy and a central power, a focus on mutual aid in the form of goodwill and a focus

on individual and collective autonomy - despite not being explicitly aligned to that mode of thought.

These principles, rather than being separate and siloed are co-constitutive, existing in a state of interplay and relationality between one another. The marginal nature of music in the n-au results in its limited mass appeal, hence its small audience numbers. With a small, yet active, audience and a hobbyist approach to practice comes a limited pool of resources, hence the n-au's continuing search for modes of operating which can, to some degree, be considered self-sufficient. These key principles are the 'assumptions and working methods of a group of practitioners', the crux of the n-au approach to sustaining an experimental music scene (Hayler, 2015b). Rather than being explicit codes of practice which much be adhered to, they act as 'convenient, porous boundaries' that help delineate the n-au as a scene of likeminded practitioners tyring to do it their own way (Graham, 2016: 18).

Undertaking a critical reading of the principles of the n-au has allowed me to locate its conventions within wider discourse around DIY, experimental and underground music scenes. This critical reading has also raised some potential issues with the n-au as a framework for practice, primarily around how it maintains the conditions of possibility in relation to changing external contexts. Specific issues range from the potential homogenisation of genre in an experimental music scene to exclusionary practices being replicated as a resulted of the scene's limited resource pool.

Throughout the remainder of the thesis, I provide an in-depth analysis of the practices of the n-au as informed by my embodied ethnographic fieldwork which will attempt to address some of these concerns. It is at this point that the polyvocal voices of the scene enter the conversation. While this work may not offer definitive answers, what it will do is demonstrate the ongoing reflexivity that practitioners in the n-au hold, where they are developing an increasingly critical stance towards their own practice while navigating an always changing relationship with external social, technological, spatial and economic contexts.

Chapter 2. Discovering the N-Au

Music was something that came to me through friendships, was discovered because of countless recommendations, my understanding and appreciation enriched by following my own curiosity. Never stylistically settled, yet sometimes obsessively focussed, this process of discovery was one that would never be finished. First it was electronic, the likes of Aphex Twin, Boards of Canada and Four Tet being on constant rotation. Then came a time being obsessed with the classic rock that now seems so obvious in hindsight, its idols plastered over the glossy magazines in train stations, seeping into my subconscious. Less an exercise in nostalgia, more a yearning to build a richer history, I'd connect the dots, work out who influenced who, going from one point to another, never tiring. It all seemed to start falling into place when Punk and Post-Punk was uncovered. Not only was the music enthralling, but the DIY ethos it espoused was something that had been missing up until this point. The excitement that came from staying at friends' houses and flipping through their parents record collections was unmatched, discovering records by bands such as Joy Division, The Raincoats and The Fall.

Naturally, I followed the rabbit hole deeper. I wanted to know who'd influenced these bands and who these bands had influenced. Through the Fall I'd get to Can, veering slowly away from the canon of Punk and Post-Punk 'classics' into a weirder and stranger world. In my first job, I ended up befriending a few folks who had an equally obsessive approach to music, instigated by them noticing a 'The Damned' badge on my jacket. Soon, I was handed CD's that led the way to a completely different understanding of music – but one which took a while to finally click. First, it was the likes of Husker Du and Mega City Four, giving a different angle on the '77 punk I already knew about, a natural step. Then, it went off the deep end. I was given CDs by Acid Mothers Temple, OOIOO and The Dead C. Tentative at first, I was looking for what I knew – recognisable riffs and familiar hooks which were, of course, totally absent. Given time, I began to appreciate and crave the abstraction. While doing mundane office admin tasks I was introduced to the likes of Alvin Lucier and The Boredoms, Derek Bailey and Fushitsusha, a whole new world of sound suddenly audible.

I met new people through friends of friends, some with equally eclectic tastes, leading me to find out about the likes of Maeror Tri, Troum and Zoviet France. It was when someone tipped me on to Nurse With Wounds' Soliloquy for Lilith – an album made using feedback loops through guitar pedals resulting in a beautifully undulating series of drones lasting almost 2 hours – that I could no longer turn back.

Interests firmly locked in place; it was only a matter of time before I'd tapped into what was happening locally. I discovered the deep history of experimental music in the North East and found there to be a wealth of activity happening currently. I attended performances put on by A Better Noise and No-Fi in venues such as The Star and Shadow Cinema and The Old Police House. The annual Tusk festival became a firm commitment in the diary. Seeing performance by the likes of Jazzfinger, Posset and Culver left me wanting to find out more about these artists, tracking down some of their releases eventually leading me onto the page of Radio Free Midwich. Before long, I realise I'd stepped foot into something which I then discovered to be the no-audience underground.

Joe Murray (2022), regular contributor and one time editor of Radio Free Midwich, explains how in the n-au there is 'no beginning and no end' and the idea of 'people dropping in and dropping out' is key to its continued existence. It is undergoing a perpetual process of change, always being reconstructed in relation the individuals who are active at any one point in time. It is, as Doreen Massey (2005: 9) phrases it, a space which is 'always under construction', one which is 'a product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions'. What this chapter primarily intends to do is understand exactly how people drop in and out of the n-au and how their involvement signifies the ongoing construction of the scene.

Underground, DIY music scenes are often perceived as invisible, operating 'under the radar', being assemblages of 'prolific but largely undocumented activities' (Chrysagis, 2016). In part, this comes from the marginality of its activity, but also because of a conscious attempt to stay hidden. Despite criticism that any notion of invisibility in the information age is impossible since 'all the sound and imagery and information that used to cost money and physical effort to obtain is available for free', this is far from the case in the n-au (Reynolds, 2011: xxi). A large part of the n-au's activity retains a degree of invisibility, being neither easily discoverable not widely documented at all. Like Graham

(2016: 10) suggests, technological advancements have made ‘accessing and discussing underground music much easier’ but the notion of having to go to the underground, to intentionally seek it out is still very much the case. What has changed is how this is done.

The movement of people in and out of the scene is key to the longevity of the n-au, the changing conditions of possibility facilitated by the participants active at any one time. In this chapter, I explore the specific ways that participants in the n-au came to be part of the scene, with accounts ranging from explanations of their first foray into experimental music to examples of becoming aware of the n-au further down the line. Likewise, we will talk about how people leave the scene, whether that be down to people naturally moving on, having families and changing responsibilities, or through the changing conventions of what is deemed socially and politically acceptable in the scene. In doing so, I build a picture of how underground music operates within changing social and technological contexts, seeing how this has drifted over the course of the n-au’s existence.

No-Audience Underground: A Useful Catch All

Given that the n-au is in an ongoing process of construction, it is not only a historical scene but one currently in motion. Hayler’s (2012c) suggestion that the n-au has been active since at least the year 2000 gives us historical precedence to it having existed, but the lack of contemporary commentary on the n-au invite questions of its continuing relevance. Steven Taylor (2023) addresses some of the difficulties and contradictions in researching an active scene, especially one which could be classified as ‘emerging, rather than something which has passed and is being examined from a historical perspective. My research does both, considering the historic and the contemporary notions of the n-au, in a bid to discern whether Hayler’s ideas still hold relevance today or whether they have changed since his initial idea of the scene. While Taylor’s (2023) work examines a scene which is based around a clear ‘spatial and geographic epicentre’ and is therefore slightly different from the n-au’s translocal existence, the concerns raised around the idea of ‘imposing’ the existence of a scene is relevant here[35]. Even though, in my position as researcher and active participant, I recognise the continued existence of the n-au, my

[35] Taylor’s (2023) work focusses on this case of the White Hotel in Salford, a ‘quasi-autonomous, semi-anarchistic’, DIY music and arts space.

word is not final. The translocal scene must be recognised from a polyvocal perspective. It is therefore essential to assess the relevance, and indeed existence, of the term from the perspectives of other practitioners associated with this scene. It is at this point that the voices of my interviewees enter into the discussion.

Brighton based Duncan Harrison (2022), whose involvement in the n-au dates to the early 2000's, expresses an immediate synergy with the term, suggesting that the 'no audience' aspect of it helps to differentiate it from other, adjacent scenes that could be broadly classified as DIY. This comes when relaying the story of a talk he gave on Dutch sound poet Greta Monach, whose use of the term 'no-budget underground' to refer to the poetry scene she was involved in carries with it the suggestion that a lot of avant-garde work at the time was still being produced in an institution, with a budget (Harrison, 2022). It is also interesting to note Gabriele de Seta's (2021: 103) adaption of Hayler's term when referencing the lack of suitable venues in Hong Kong's DIY music scene, branding it the 'no-venue underground'. Identifying these scenes as having no budget, or no venue, is what makes them distinct from the other work that was being produced simultaneously. The importance being that despite the difficulties involved with having no budget or venue, 'there was still a version of it that was kind of being done without money', it still managed to happen somehow (Harrison, 2022). This is followed by a comment typical of the self-deprecating nature of the n-au, with Harrison (2022) stating that 'I bet you there were still some budgets compared to what we've got'. In its terminology, this underground scene was defined by what it lacked, a budget, giving it a distinct presence when compared with its relative neighbours, those who had at least some budget, some economic resource. The same applies for the n-au, how the focus on a lack of audience, both in terms of its limited appeal and division of labour, set it apart from other music scenes which it exists alongside. That its music is more fringe than other, adjacent DIY music scenes which might feature more popular or accessible forms of music is part of what makes it distinct.

Defining the n-au by comparing it to other music scenes is something Nottingham based Murray Royston-Ward (2022) also brings up, with our discussion beginning by thinking about the 'overlaps' that occur between different scenes. Being rooted in DIY, many elements of the n-au have an immediate synergy with other music scenes, such as the hardcore punk or noise rock scene, however its tongue in cheek focus on marginality is what help to give it a separate, distinct identity. There are crossovers with various other DIY scenes, both in terms of the people involved and some of the music on offer, but the

n-au still manages to feel different in some way, hence its position as an particular 'sub-section' of a larger underground world (Hayler, 2015b). In suggesting this, Royston-Ward (2022) goes on to state that 'I don't really feel like I have very much weight in that scene' and sees himself as 'knocking at the sides of it'. He positions himself somewhat outside of the n-au, stating that 'I don't feel like my work resonates within that scene as strongly as that scene resonates within my work' (Royston-Ward, 2022). The idea of belonging, of feeling part of something, is particularly important when we consider the social dynamic in the n-au. It also raises the question of what we are looking to address in this chapter, of how exactly some comes to be a part of the n-au.

Andrew Wild (2022), who runs Sowerby Bridge based label Crow Versus Crow, is keen to point out that an important element of the n-au as a term is its resistance to becoming another form of 'branding', suggesting that fundamentally, the n-au as a concept is political. This is down to how it advocates for an 'open, accommodating, level playing field' rather than it being a term which becomes just another form of 'marketing' (Wild, 2022). Some of the criticism that Hayler (2015b) faced when developing the notion of the n-au is that it could be seen as yet another micro genre but, he clearly states, the n-au 'does not refer to a genre of music – quite explicitly'. It is helpful to consider this when thinking about some of the criticisms levelled towards the underground more generally, in that it has become just another 'marketable pigeonhole' (Keenan, 2015). Whereas 'noise' or even 'underground' have been criticised as being terms that have been coopted and commodified, commonly down to their contrarian nature and perceived sense of danger, the n-au's wider implications as a framework for practice help to sustain this sense of resistance to easy co-option (Thompson, 2017; Keenan, 2015).

That the term has been adopted and adapted beyond Hayler and Radio Free Midwich points to its importance as a framework for understanding underground music. As I highlighted in the introduction, the term has been used in academia, finding its way into publications, being spoken about in conference papers and used to inspire adjacent research pathways, both by those involved in and outside of the scene. Likewise with De Seta's (2021) work, the directly inspired a reworking of the concept focus on venue scarcity. It has appeared in publications such as Andy Wood's *TQ* Zine, in artists blurbs, on liner notes and in various other pieces of ephemera. During the 2020 COVID pandemic, Edinburgh based Ali and Collette Robertson launched Giant Tank's Potluck as part of Tusk

Festival's online offering[36]. Bringing artists from across the wider noise and experimental music scene together for a dada-esque, cut up and layered series of incoherent and non-linear conversations. What first caught my ear was its pitch perfect description of the n-au, in the typically self-deprecating manner so familiar in the scene:

> In a world where meeting likeminded goofballs for heady avant-noise and free gob-slobber sessions is punishable by instantly transmissible death, experimental musicians are unable to indulge in the promiscuous audio adventures and collaboration that they've become accustomed to. And so, a dearth of new weird sounds leaves pub basement patrons across the globe thirsting for their favourite real out sonic tipples. The dreamers behind the Giant Tank label seek to end the freakdoms famine by uniting disparate lunks through the medium of unconscious overdubs and drunken prattle. If the ongoing pandemic has made you miss the incestuous and interchangeable in the flesh, inter-scene improvisation that the no-audience underground frequently throws up then perhaps you're ready for… [Giant Tank's Pot Luck] (Robertson, 2021).

In around one minute and twenty seconds, Robertson manages to sum up some of the key aspects of the n-au in a typically droll manner – many of which we will explore later in this thesis. There is a gesture to the aesthetic variety and its noise, improvisation and experimental music association, a mention of the collaborative nature of the scene, the interchangeable and intersecting organisation and a brief mention of its key space of activity – the pub function room.

However, despite the appreciation that some have of the n-au, it is not without its detractors. Natalia Beylis (2022) explains that she is a fan of the term, but that her partner (Willie Stewart) is not, who cites the 'self-deprecating' nature of its titling as being unhelpful[37]. This is a common line of thought, and a criticism I have heard countless times particularly in passing conversations about the n-au. Hayler (2015b) recognises this as a somewhat valid critique of the term but, he reminds us, is partly misplaced due to the wider considerations of what it means in practice and that the implication of having 'no audience' should be read 'not as defeatist or negative but as liberating'. Louie Rice (2022), who runs the label and events series Hideous Replica, actually appreciates the

[36] Giant Tank being the Edinburgh based record label and promoter, actively hosting performances and recordings since the early 2000s.

[37] Both Beylis and Stewart, who live in Country Leitrim, Ireland, have a long history in the scene, having previously run the Hunters Moon series of events, alongside Stewart running Nyahh Records. They both play in Woven Skull and are well regarded solo performers and frequent collaborators in their own rights.

self-deprecating nature of its wording, suggesting that it is a healthy stance to take, that 'if you're going to insist on making things that are so uncommercial that the audience is that small, you have to recognise that self-deprecation'.

Owen Chambers (2022), of Bristol based label and promoters Liquid Library, has a similar take, suggesting that the n-au could be read as indicative of work which is 'purposely seeking obscurity', but goes on to say that even though the sounds being made don't have 'mass appeal', they're not being made 'wilfully for no audience'. Having said this, Chambers (2022) still finds the term a 'useful catch all' for describing the scene and makes a point to highlight its efficacy as compared to other pieces of terminology which have been developed like 'New Weird Britain', pointing out how, 'it's not relegated to this country alone, it's not particularly new'[38].

What these differing opinions point to is a plurality of thought. Like with Arnot & Fitzpatrick's (2016) suggestion that the n-au is connected through its 'dissensus' of genre, we can also apply this to the terminology itself where not everyone is in full agreement on whether it is helpful or not but allows for this difference of opinion to co-exist. The flexibility of its use allows people to select which parts of it apply to them whilst also rejecting others, building a healthy discourse in the process. Wild (2022) acknowledges this too, suggesting that the n-au is helpful in that he can pick parts of it that resonate with him, even if some of the parts that Hayler mentions do not, and the beauty is that these differences of opinion are all 'accommodated' in the scene. That the n-au embraces this self-deprecation is done so knowing fine well that it will raise questions, being playfully antagonistic. After all, this is a scene rooted in noise music, and noise is certainly subjective or, as Hegarty (2007: 3) suggests, 'noise is cultural', it is 'not an objective fact'. In Hayler's (2012c) embracing of this 'tongue-in-cheek, irreverent bit of shorthand', he is actively playing on that subjectivity, using it to encourage dissensus, the sort of space that Fitzpatrick and Thompson (2015) feel should be created in the 'free noise' scene, where people are 'free enough to argue with each other about how they are discursively constructed'.

Beyond the notion of the term and what it represents, it is also important to observe the recognition of the n-au as a scene, where its social dynamics are a key part of its

[38] New Weird Britain is a term coined by John Doran in 2017 as a column for The Quietus to described people who were making 'unclassifiable music, putting on unrepeatable cross-disciplinary shows in non-standard venues, mixing music with film, contemporary dance, outlandish costume and performance art'. (Doran, 2019)

existence. Harrison (2022) suggests that one of the key elements of the n-au that he thinks set it apart from other, similar sub-sections of the underground is its social nature:

> The thing that to me means the most and has been most enduring is that it's a social thing. It's about friendship, and it's about communities, and it's about shared ideas. And I'd like to think that kind of plays out in ways that aren't necessarily just in the art.

The friendships that transpire beyond the immediacy of musical activity are the 'excesses of sociability' that help to delineate a scene, where they go beyond a network of individuals based around a common interest into, more personal forms of community (Straw, 2004). Harrison (2022) goes on to explain how the people that I would identify as part of the scene in Brighton hang out more outside of gigs, the sociability existing beyond the confines of the event or performance and that these relationships become most poignant when something happens in 'real life'. There are genuine friendships and support gained from the people who, at one point, may have just been people you would see at gigs on occasion. He explains how the relationships with the people involved in the Brighton experimental music scene have gone from just seeing each other at gigs, to seeing each other all the time, 'watching their kids growing up', seeing himself involved in a way which moves beyond a shared interest in music (Harisson, 2022)[39]. Such relationships are built around strong social bonds, rather than a more passive form of social interaction which would happen in a more transactional instance of networking. Luke Poot (2023) also recognises the strong social element of the n-au, pointing to the local nodes across the UK as feeling 'family-based', sharing social connections irrespective of proximity.

Murray Royston-Ward (2022) recognises this shifting dynamic too, explaining how you often end up 'tracing time' when figuring out social connections, starting from speaking with someone on a forum or seeing them at the occasional gig or festival to seeing them more frequently, sometimes outside of the conventional spaces of the n-au, the social dynamic building outwards. The 'post-gig stuff' is frequently the way it first begins, where 'you cook a meal, you put people up in your house, you chat shit, you drink a beer together or whatever' then, before you know it, 'you're invited to someone's 40th birthday or a wedding' (Royston-Ward, 2022). Jonathan Deasy (2022) recognises this too, the 'hang' that occurs after a performance being a favourite element of the scene, the music acting as

[39] Although this shared interest is certainly what brough them together in the first place and still follows through.

the ‘social lubricant’ that facilitates this connection. Natalia Beylis (2022) suggests that touring or playing gigs in other cities is basically just ‘an excuse to see friends’, the music being just one element of the wider social function of the n-au to its participants.

In these situations, we go beyond the everyday interactions that would happen between sharing recordings or in a performance, moving towards the existence of a deeper sociality between participants. Straw (2004; emphasis added) declares of music scenes that they are the points where ‘*professional* and social activities are blurred, as each kind of activity becomes the alibi for the other’, but in the n-au, it is the *amateur* and social activities which are blurred. Given the n-au’s lack of resource, touring artist are usually not hosted in external accommodation but brought into people’s homes, invited into a private space. Spare rooms, sofas and camp beds on floors are not only frugal resources, a promoter sharing their own space with another person, but significant points of building relationships. It is precisely because of the n-au’s lack of resources that it must rely on its social capacity to operate, building a more involved scene in the process.

Due to the undulating way that these relationships unfold, an awareness of this being a larger, interconnected scene may not be noticeable immediately. Eleanor Cully Boehringer (2022) posits that sometimes being conscious of anything resembling a ‘scene’ comes after the fact, where ‘there's this kind of connection, you figure out the scene based on knowing friends of friends, and this kind of network that goes on which, on the surface, is difficult to pin down’. It is about connecting the dots, seeing similar faces time and again, recognising names on releases or discovering shared associations, uncovering its translocal nature. These are what Andy Wood (2022) describes as the ‘invisible threads’ that link people and places across the n-au, the connections that flow through the scene. You could be staying at someone’s house or talking after the gig, realising you share associations and friends from different cities, tracing the commonalities. Wild (2022) reiterates this, explaining how the process of discovering other artists doing similar things began to open his eyes to the idea of something resembling a scene, where at first it was discovering activity in the nearby town of Todmorden, then finding ‘pockets of stuff that was going on’ in places like Newcastle or Bristol, noting its existence and connection at a grander scale[40]. For some, like Beylis (2022), it is often the attitudes of the people she is around that cultivate those relationships in the first instance, where she is actively searching out for people that have a ‘continuous desire to experiment, and to be creative and to try new things’. Mahay (2022) shares a similar perspective, suggesting that for her

[40] Wild is based in Sowerby Bridge, in West Yorkshire’s Calder Valley.

being involved in this kind of scene is about 'being obsessed with curious people'. This is where the aesthetic and social sensibilities of the n-au's participants begin to merge, the shared interests not only being limited to aesthetic preference, to taste, but also the underlying political and cultural mindset, personified by an ever-present curiosity and desire to experiment.

In thinking about the n-au as a scene, it is important to also recognise the intention with which the social activity is carried out. Wood (2022) believes that many in the n-au are indeed social creatures, but it is often the case that they do not go seeking those social interactions outright, more so they are comfortable when social situations do arise. This belief comes after explaining how his first experience of attending a performance in the n-au was quite an 'isolating' experience, due to the fact he went there on his own, not knowing anyone else initially (Wood, 2022). However, beyond the initial trepidation of walking into a room of strangers, the welcoming nature of many in the n-au tends to dissipate that initial sense of isolation. Hayler (2015b) attests to this also, in stating that 'attending a gig with a single figure audience comprised of people who all seem to know each other can be uncomfortable' but airs a similar experience to Wood when going on to say that 'the crowd, whilst undeniably odd, are a friendly and welcoming bunch'.

Theo Gowans (2022), who promotes events in Leeds under the name Heinous Whining and performs as Territorial Gobbing, considers how the 'antisocial' also plays into the idea of the scene, suggesting that if there is too much emphasis placed on the social aspect of the scene, it can lead to 'burnout'. Gowans (2022) explains how some of his previous experiences in bands had gone from being about playing music first and foremost to it becoming a kind of 'social obligation'. The pressure to be present, to commit time, to turn up ultimately led to an aversion towards the activity itself. Such a situation would be antithetical to the notion of the n-au, where Gowans (2022) explains that his main drive for being involved in the scene is making and recording music as this 'ego cleansing, really personal thing'. While Hayler's (2015) suggestion that in the n-au, people are free to come and go as they please, and that this freedom should be viewed as a form of 'liberation', the reality of social pressures mean this is not quite as straightforward.

What these examples point to is the clear existence of the idea of the n-au beyond Hayler and the social dimension associated with it, confirming my use of the term scene as a framing device for its study. While it may be that many are not outwardly extroverted,

seeking sociality as a prime motive, the n-au's marginal nature means that it must rely on the work of its practitioners to survive, demonstrating its social capacity. These social interactions, no matter how cursory they may seem at first, are the fundamental networks of support and reciprocity which allow the n-au to function. Recognising this, we must now look to understand how exactly one becomes aware of and ultimately involved in the n-au.

Entering the No-Audience Underground

Andy Jarvis (2022), who has been active in the Stoke scene since the late 1990s, sums up succinctly the idea of needing to find the underground, suggesting that 'literally you do need like a gateway in because you can't just stumble on this thing[41]. I think it was, then in particular [1990s], particularly well-hidden because it was a very niche thing'.

To suggest that the n-au is a clandestine network of activity purposefully hidden from view would be incorrect, but its niche appeal makes stumbling across it by accident unlikely. Speaking with my initial interviewees, how they came to be associated with the wider experimental music scene and the n-au was often the starting point of our conversations. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, these interviews were carried out in an unstructured, improvisatory manner. However, when faced with a range of potential directions to take, many of my interviewees opted to start at the beginning, sometimes starting at their first instance of n-au activity, sometimes going all the way back to their discovery of experimental music more generally. If we are thinking about the n-au as a scene which is always in process, in a state of becoming, identifying some of the ways that one can become involved gives us an insight into how these processes begin.

One of the phrases that Wild (2022) used in our discussion of how his practice had evolved since the mid 2000s was the term 'snowballing', referring to the momentum that carries a lot of n-au activity, moving from one role to another, only noticing these changes having happened in hindsight. In the context of my conversation with Wild (2022), this was all under the Crow Versus Crow banner which designates much of his activity, which followed a trajectory from hosting a radio show, to running a label, to organising performances,

[41] Jarvis' activity includes collaborations with earlier proponents of the scene such as Joincey and Phil Todd, then through his own label First Person (2004-2008) and current label Burselm Crypt Recordings.

each role merging into one another and overlapping, occuring simultaneously. The separation of each activity is difficult to delineate, the beginnings and ends blurry, a point which further reiterates the non-hierarchical nature of these roles, where they are often seen as one and the same. Wild's (2022) approach is indicative of a typical DIY mindset, where if you are not seeing what you want in a particular area, it is up to you to make that change: 'we want to see these gigs, no one's doing anything like that. There's got to be an audience for it'.

There is no one way that someone becomes aware of or involved in the n-au, more so each entry point is indicative of a person's own individual circumstances and contexts. These initially singular experiences and perspectives are unique but when brought together, are what build the networked scene of the n-au. However, there are some commonalities that thread across the n-au, whether than be the relevance of social relationships that signal involvement in the scene or the varying use of technology as a mediator in the process.

From Punk to DIY

Given that the concept of the n-au is concerned with processes, as opposed to just musical taste, it makes sense that a more general awareness of DIY culture is often the pre-cursor to involvement in the n-au. Sometimes this will be more directly related to the noise and experimental music that the n-au is known for or through adjacent scenes and movements which share similar practices and approaches, both historically and in a contemporary setting.

Speaking with David Howcroft (2022), of Northumberland based No-Audience Underground Tapes, the Punk movement was his entry point into music and DIY culture. He relays a story about looking for Northern Soul records in a coastal record shop but then being handed a Punk record instead, the discovery subsequently cementing his interest in the movement and being the point at which he got 'more and more into the bedroom culture of DIY' (Howcroft, 2022). While the music may be different from that of the n-au, the attitudes and processes behind the making of the work align. The influence of Punk's focus on democratic approaches to cultural production, with a particular importance given to home taping culture, led Howcroft to create his own home taping club, called Desert Island Discs, which he ran out of his own home, becoming a hub of listening and exchange for anyone with an interest:

> You bring your five discs that you thought you would take to a desert island. You would talk to people about why you chose them, and some conversations take place in between cans of cider. I remember they also used to tape the records. We used to make a recording of them on a little hand thing. Then, at the end, you could take that away with you as your record of your Desert Island discs (Howcroft, 2022).

Following on from this, Howcroft's (2022) experiences of running a record shop in Blyth put him at the heart of those circles of distribution and exchange in a more formal manner, able to acquire music and share his discoveries with other like-minded souls, embedded with a sense of 'doing it for yourself, passing it on', a practice which would directly inform his work with No-Audience Underground Tapes (N-Aut) and TQN-Aut years later[42]. This ethos of sharing is embedded in DIY culture and the n-au, a form of cultural mutual aid where people can exchange sounds with those who don't have them, done in a way which is imbued with goodwill. Following the discourse around early forms of piracy and unofficial distribution, most famously immortalised by the Home Taping is Killing Music slogan, the practices of the n-au look to cultivate their own networks of exchange, precisely due to the fact that 'sharing among friends is one of the main ways that people discover music' (Bottomley, 2015).

Andy Jarvis (2022) explains how in his school days, he was making electronic music informed by industrial culture and, more specifically, the 'independent' nature of Punk music, citing the 'ethos' rather than a particular musical style as being the most important factor for him. This was supplemented by the sharing of 'strange music' on tape through a friend from the local comic shop, music that was 'absolutely unavailable to someone like me', getting copied tapes of acts such as 'Boredoms, Ruins, Sun City Girls' (Jarvis, 2022). Jarvis (2022) is keen to remind me that while some of these tapes were of high quality, sometimes they were 'really bad copies' but had just enough there to get you hooked, the act of sharing these sounds, of being introduced to the underground by those around him leading to a longtime involvement in the scene. I am reminded here of Kenneth Goldsmith's (2020: 78) writing on avant-garde archival project Ubu Web, where the low-quality versions of avant-garde films hosted on the site have the ability to spark a deep interest in the form, and in disciplines of such a fringe nature sharing and access are key to keep material circulating: 'having a sub-par copy beats having no copy at all'.

[42] No-Audience Underground Tapes (N-Aut) and its practices are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Sophie Copper (2022), artist, organiser and one time Radio Free Midwich contributor, highlights how her involvement in music stemmed from the 'usual tropes' of mixtapes, radio and listening to John Peel, but then expanded after meeting people who were interested in weird music at 18, being taken under their wing. Being introduced to the more experimental side of sound by Stoke scene mainstay Joincey opened her eyes to the self-organised, DIY nature of their music, meeting their friends and expanding the network out from there[43]. Copper (2022) explains how she shifted from being interested in bands such as 'Gomez and that indie sort of stuff' to discovering a whole wave of weird music through Stoke's The Music Room nights where she began to see bands such as Ashtray Navigations, being introduced to both their sound and their social circles, opening up a previously invisible scene of small, DIY gigs and weird sounds. Being introduced to this world at such a pivotal age encouraged Cooper to bring what she'd seen in Stoke to Manchester, beginning to put on gigs at 19 and getting involved in the Riot Grrrl scene there, furthering an understanding of the democratic, anarchistic approaches prevalent in those scenes which would later inform her ongoing in evolvement in the n-au.

The DIY mindset has a long association with radical and resistant music such as Riot Grrrl and Post-Hardcore Punk, so it is logical that they are seen as precursors to involvement in the n-au[44]. Natalia Beylis (2022) explains how her involvement in DIY came from that more established, slightly more popular version of it, the 'punk scene where it would have been like, fanzines and, you know, potlucks and like, bike fixing workshops'. However, as time passed, Beylis (2022) grew tired of the music, suggesting that 'I just can't go to the gigs anymore, I got so bored' and started looking for more experimental works, following her innate curiosity. Contemplating how that process developed, she muses that 'it must be something in our brains that makes us like, always want to seek out something new and interesting' and rather than this being an explicitly conscious decision, she explains that it just 'kind of started to trickle that way'. There is a similar story with Stuart Arnot (2022), who explains that he came from the 'hardcore tradition' of DIY, that being 'using spaces that are cheap, using everything that's cheap, charging as little as you can'. After a move to Manchester in 2004, he was keen to start putting on 'weirder' music in the city, the type of bands that no one was putting on at that time, doing it because nobody else was (Arnot, 2022). Arnot's is a more conscious decision than how this is formulated in Beylis'

[43] Joincey is known for a plethora of projects such as Coits, Target Shoppers, Wagstaff, Dogliveroil, Inca Eyeball, Saboteuse alongside his label Face Like A Smacked Arse, all projects whose impact is deeply embedded in the n-au and its early history.
[44] See, for example, Azzerad (2001) on underground, alternative rock music.

experience, albeit still reaching a similar conclusion. Sometimes the type of experimental music being sought after would be at an intersection of multiple scenes, appealing to those who were interested in the stranger, weirder music as well as those who were more into punk and hardcore. These crossovers are integral to seeing the n-au not as a hermetic scene but multiply embedded in DIY, underground, alternative activity more generally.

Both Sophie Cooper and Layla Legard (2022; 2023) speak of their experiences helping programme Ladyfest events in Manchester and Leeds, where the DIY, community driven approaches to organisation became obvious common ground[45]. Laya Legard (2023), who plays in bands Hawthonn and Tristwch Y Fenywod, points out how her involvement in the 'DIY' and 'queer and indie' scenes of Leeds always saw a crossover with the n-au and the associated experimental music scene. Robertson (2022) also recognises Riot Grrrl as being a key point of crossover with the more radical, DIY focussed nature of music, referring to 'Ablaze!' fanzine as being a focal point of discovery, alongside Karren Ablaze's subsequent bands Coping Saw and Whack Cat. While these scenes are certainly not mainstream, they do constitute a marginally more popular strata of cultural activity than the n-au, signifying how individuals move through these various scenes in the ongoing process of discovery, the processes and values being consistent but the aesthetic and cultural forms showing signs of difference.

Rory Salter (2024) outlines how his involvement in the post-hardcore and emo scenes revolving around Bermondsey's DIY Space for London informed his interest in the DIY processes of production and distribution, which would then go on to inform his subsequent label Infant Tree, the point at which his presence in the n-au materialises[46]. Having previously run a label focussing mostly on hardcore and post-hardcore sounds, his tastes began to widen, and more experimental music began appearing on the label. After this folded, his work with Infant Tree fully embraced the experimental side of music, setting aside the previous interest in hardcore, but only in style - the ethics and values were still present. There is a continuation of the routes taken by Beylis and Arnot or Cooper and Legard, where the initial introduction to DIY through a slightly more popular musical form leads the way into the decidedly more marginal forms of experimental music in the n-au. Duncan Harrison (2022) further elaborates on this idea of crossover in approaches between

[45] Ladyfest is a feminist, community driven series of events centring female performers. It first developed out of the Riot Grrrl scene in Washinton, Olympia then grew to having outposts all over the world.
[46] DIY Space for London was a self-organised social centre in South London, open from 2015 to 2020, with a focus on punk, hardcore and adjacent music and culture.

scenes, explaining that originally coming from the punk and hardcore scene, the ethics felt like familiar territory:

> I don't really think there was much about, say, the DIY or the self-sufficiency of what was going on in the weird music circles that was surprising to me, and they all kind of felt like, if anything, an invitation to really shrug off the final veneer that there's a way stuff has to be done.

Harisson's comments here are indicative of a gradual, somewhat inevitable move from the DIY of arguably more popular cultural forms into the stranger, more abstract forms of the n-au. There is an obsessive tendency for many in the n-au, a desire to know more, to understand and uncover weirder sounds, to connect the dots and sink further into the weird world.

For some, being part of the n-au comes after being involved in the wider, transnational noise and experimental music scene whose practices may share similarities but exist within a whole new cultural and social context. Jorge Boehringer (2022), who performs as Core of the Coalman, recounts how his time spent in San Francisco and its associated noise scene opened his eyes to the world of strange music and performance art, sharing similarities with what Hayler is describing in the n-au:

> I always thought a big strength in these fringe / alternative / DIY, whatever we choose to call it scenes is that they can bring many perspectives together. I was really active in the noise community in San Francisco for a long time, especially the one that was centred around bands like Caroliner and Rubber O Cement. There are always a few people organising a lot of the events, it's always a few people doing most of the work. The people who were doing that stuff at that time between like 1999 / 98 and 2007, when I disappeared, were people who were really open to all these different types of experimentalism. Although there was this generally noisy, often harsh experimental music going on, you had loads of people doing things from free jazz perspectives, there are people doing things with laptops, there were loads of people doing all kinds of strange things with costumes and homemade cardboard sets. You know, homemade circuitry. There's a lot and so it was very permeable to people from different ways of working. (Boehringer, 2022)

There was a freedom at play in this scene which was perpetuated by the multiplicity of genre and practice, an assemblage of different styles and processes which cultivated this heterogeneous scene. Like Boehringer (2022) explains, this was a scene which was organised by 'a few people doing most of the work', the epitome of the DIY – or DIT - ethic. Again, this was the result of people who wanted to build something which was absent, create a space for the sort of experimentation they were interested in where previously there wasn't one. Sometimes it just takes one or two people to begin doing something interesting then soon after people will follow, a larger scene emerging out of that initial action. Following a move to the UK in 2014 Boehringer saw his Core or the Coalman project find a home immediately within the confines of the n-au, specifically within the West Yorkshire scene where his new home base of Huddersfield was. He played gigs for promoters like Heinous Whining in Leeds, released records on Sheepscar Light Industrial and Unverified Records. Then, in 2018, Boehringer began organising events in Huddersfield under the title New Weird Huddersfield, bringing local and international acts to the West Yorkshire town, using venues ranging from coffee shops to arts spaces in the process, a continuation of the types of activity he had witnessed in the states.

Within all of these different stories there lies a common thread, that of DIY as being a precursor to involvement in the n-au, an awareness of self-organised activity leading to this sub-section of the experimental music scene. However, given the marginal, underground nature of the type of music found in the n-au, developing a taste for its often purposefully difficult sounds does not happen as a fleeting or casual process but is developed over time, most often initiated by discovering a particular band or scene.

One Gateway Band

Far from being a discrete scene, the n-au hails from a long lineage of experimental music, as we touched upon in Chapter 1. While the scenic elements of the n-au developed out of already established networks surrounding the likes of the Termite Club, a taste for the type of music on offer comes at a much more pivotal point. One of the main ways someone finds a route into the underground is through artists who sit at the edges of these scenes, operating somewhere between a mainstream and underground world. The underground, despite being a 'distinct zone of practice' is often found 'permeating the high and low mainstreams' of popular music and contemporary composition, hence their

practices sometimes overlapping, offering routes into the more obscure zone (Graham, 2016: 8).

Joe Murray (2022) labels Sonic Youth as being such a gateway band, whose experimentation broached the mainstream rock world, giving an accessible route into more underground forms of music. Murray (2022) cites the track Death Valley 69, off their 1985 album *Bad Moon Rising* as being an eye-opening listening experience, the 'dissonance' on offer leading to a continual search for more. From this point on, Murray (2022) reflects, it was all about getting 'as much exposure to music as we can have', reading about other forms of underground music leading to the discovery of the practice of writing away to zines or for records, realising that there was a network out there than one could become an active part of.

Ali Robertson (2023), Edinburgh based improviser and organiser, also brings Sonic Youth up in our discussion when thinking about how his tastes developed from the arguably more accessible world of Alternative Rock into the noise and free improvisation he is known for today[47]. One of the key moments for Robertson was witnessing Prick Decay supporting Sonic Youth on their 1996 tour at Glasgow's Barrowlands Ballroom. Prick Decay being the work of Dylan Nyoukis and Dora Doll, known for their improvised, out there, LAFMS indebted non-music experiments. Robertson (2023) relays that for him, 'a lot of roads led back to Prick Decay' as from there you discover Nyoukis' still running Chocolate Monk label, alongside the likes of Betley Welcomes Careful Drivers and Brighton based Oska, as well as overseas comrades in the form of Union Pole and E.F. Tapes. For Robertson, connections were forming and the musical horizon was beginning to expand. However, before this lifechanging moment, Robertson (2023) mentions finding The Dead C's *DR503* in the New Zealand section of the record shop he would later work in, tipped off to its existence by an interview in the music press with Sebadoh's Lou Barlow, being another foundational moment in broadening his understanding of what music could be. What lay inside of this record was a whole new world of discovery: 'I took it home, put it on and was like "what the fuck is this?!". I'd heard lo-fi sort of stuff before, but this was like "it's just fucking tuneless!" (Robertson, 2023). This acted as an initial look into the ever-deeper portal of the global underground music scene, beginning the continuing journey

[47] Robertson is an improviser working in both solo and collaborative capacities. He was previously one half of long running dada-improv duo Usurper with Malcy Duff and currently performs in the duo Off Brand with Firas Khnaisser. Since the early 2000s, he ran a record label and organised gigs under the name Giant Tank. Currently, he and Khnaisser run a programme of events in Edinburgh under the name TFEH.

into uncovering stranger and stranger music, where with each discovery, more expectations and assumptions are teased apart.

Andy Jarvis (2022) again touches upon Sonic Youth, suggesting that through discovering their work and their influence, ‘it starts to sort of coalesce into this idea of there is two or three worlds if you go to the sub underground’. It was through their fan club mailout that he was made aware of artists such as Keiji Haino and Charlemagne Palestine, which translated into getting bootleg tapes off friends, with one tape having one side featuring Tony Conrad’s *Four Violins*, the other with Charlemagne Palestine’s *Strumming Music*, an experience which he counts as being ‘literally life changing’. This experience speaks to the multi layered nature of underground scenes, where it goes from finding out about international artists at one level to digging deeper, finding out about those who are creating similar music at a local level. Jarvis (2022) goes on to mention another name synonymous with the early 90s New Zealand noise rock scene, Alistair Galbraith, explaining that finding this music and aping Galbraith’s lo-fi recording technique had a direct impact on using a ‘four track recorder’ to make his own sounds. The discovery of this came initially from Nirvana, leading to an awareness of the deeper underground music scene, where ‘it was like this whole idea of a network of people just released in seven inches and, you know, doing their own thing, and it kind of exposed me to the DIY ethic’ (Jarvis, 2022).

Finding a particular artist that opens a whole new world of sound is often the gateway into a more expansive and experimental listening journey. With the above examples, we can see how this works when connecting the dots between the wider, transnational experimental music scene, permeating further into the underground world after initial contact with a more mainstream act. This example understands how, on the macro level, the mainstream, underground and sub-underground worlds which share peripheries can bridge the connection between worlds, where underground artists – Sonic Youth - and sub-underground artists - The Dead C- link to their sub-sub-underground contemporaries – Prick Decay.

Beyond the move from mainstream-broaching acts into the underground and sub-underground, we can see these forms of discovery on an even smaller, more granular, localised scale too, exploring the existence and structures of a sub-sub-underground which, by relation, included smaller and more marginal artists that the relatively broader appeal of some zones of the underground. In my interview with Phil and Layla Legard

(2022), the discussion started by Phil outlining where his discovery and subsequent involvement in the n-au began, tracing it back to his first encounter with noise music in the 1990s. The key moment here was witnessing confrontational noise artist Dachise playing on the same bill as an indie rock band called Sweetcorn in his hometown of Harrogate[48]. What stood out was the immediate disparity between acts, where the rest of the audience were chanting for the indie rock band as Legard stands there in bewilderment at what was being witnessed, with Dachise 'producing a barrage of harsh noise' reflecting on the experience as such: 'I thought that was amazing. It's like something I'd never seen before' (Legard, 2022). This encounter led to Legard trying his hand at making his own noise music, using a 'primitive shareware synth', building a contact mic and using cassette recorders, the results of which would be penned under the name Xenis Emputae (Legard, 2022). The act of witnessing something which opens the mind to more experimental forms and techniques bring a new sense of possibility for cultural production, as new space to experiment. This process is at the heart of the n-au and is no clearer than in Legard's example in terms of how one moment leads to this snowballing effect. You see an artist, their sounds and processes inspire you, you decide to try it out for yourself.

The story continues beyond this point though. After making some recordings, Legard was contacted by American noise musician Jason Campbell with an offer to release on his label Hermetic Museum Recordings. In doing so, the world of noise was further prised open and within it, Legard noticed some names from closer to home. Reading through the Discography of the label, he noticed some of the artists were playing locally, which in turn led to the discovery of The Termite Club, which, as we have already discussed, is a fundamental part of the history of the n-au and experimental music in Leeds. What is particularly notable about this interaction is that it required communication on the other side of the world to discover a scene in the same city. Despite the kind of activity the Termite Club hosted happening in such proximity to Legard, it took his involvement in the noise scene at a distance to uncover it. In the pre, or at least early days of the internet, uncovering this information was much more difficult, furthering the relative invisibility of such practices. But, what this example also demonstrates is the interconnected nature of the noise scene beyond the local or translocal, the hyperlocal and global, and how scenes that operate both at a distance and in proximity are closely interwoven.

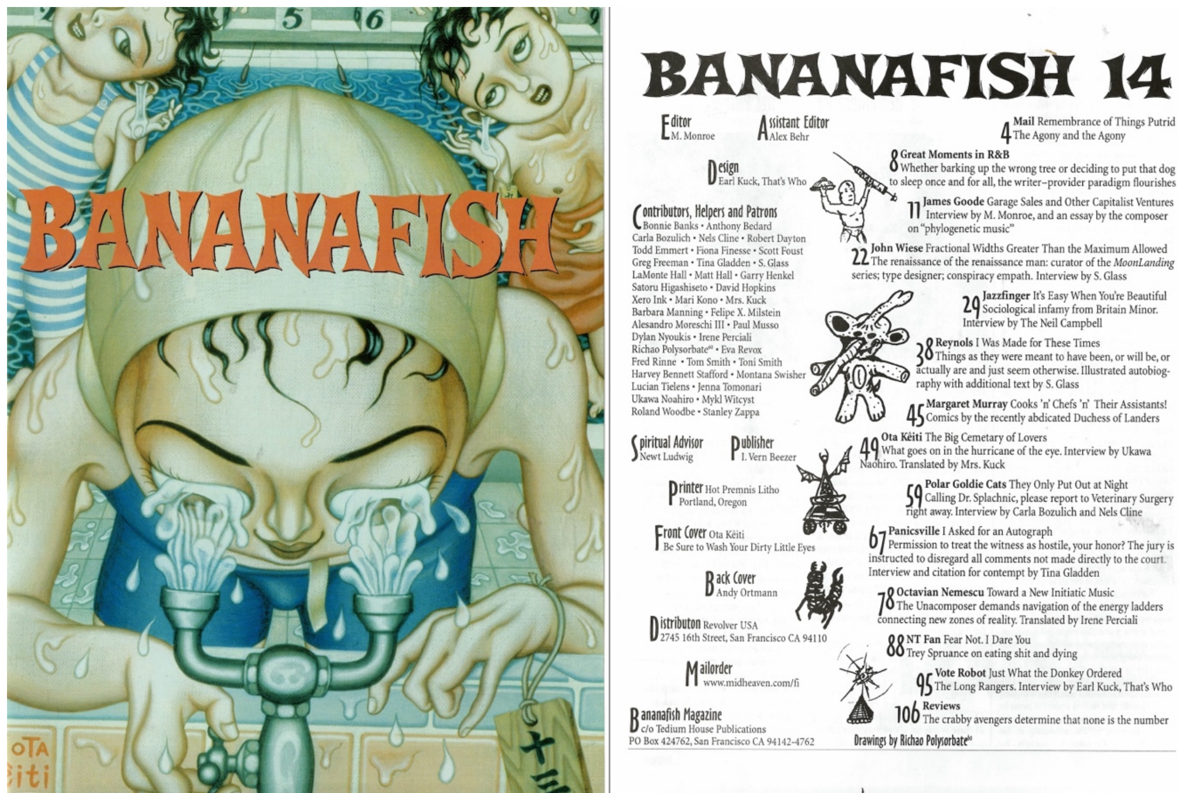
[48] Dachise was the moniker of Paul Knowles up until 1999, who would later go on to record and perform under the name The Digitariat.

Awareness of experimental music is ingrained in a process of discovery, rarely being the first point of contact but uncovered through ongoing interest and need to find out more. It could be a chance happening where a record suddenly clicks, or a deliberate process of trying to make sense of difficult music as a private practice. Such discoveries acknowledge the innate curiosity of many in the n-au, where unearthing something different, something outside of the norm, leads to a desire to explore further. Ranging from the transnational to the translocal and hyperlocal, these discoveries happen at both a distance and in proximity, from the recommendation of a particular record to a chance encounter with a noise artist on a mixed band bill. Despite the suggestion that much underground music is difficult to find, the information is out there, but stumbling across it is not a passive act. So, how does one access that information?

Micro-Media: Zines and Catalogues

The size of a scene is often proportional to the modes of communication and distribution that it relies on, influenced by the relative obscurity of its cultural forms. If we think of the underground as being something which must be sought out, difficult to locate, it was even harder without the hyperconnectivity of the internet. Like many of my interviewees explain, the process of reading about a record in a niche magazine led to a whole world of wonder and sometimes the dawning realisation that the likelihood of ever hearing the sounds described therein would be almost zero.

This is the time where 'micro-media', as Thornton (1995: 211) describes it, such as zines and distribution catalogues were some of the only ways of getting information about music from the far reaches of the international noise and experimental music scene. While Punk and its offshoots are well documented in terms of their DIY approaches to the publication and distribution of information (Worley, 2024), the world of this more underground, experimental music is less so. Some of the more prominent avant-garde or experimental artists could still be read about in magazines such as Forced Exposure, which had a wider distribution network, but what about the truly bizarre and hidden, music from the sub- and sub-sub-underground?



BANANAFISH 14

Editor M. Monroe

Assistant Editor Alex Behr

Design Earl Kuck, That's Who

Contributors, Helpers and Patrons
Bonnie Banks • Anthony Bedard
Carla Bozulich • Nels Cline • Robert Dayton
Todd Emmert • Fiona Finesse • Scott Foust
Greg Freeman • Tina Gladden • S. Glass
LaMonte Hall • Matt Hall • Garry Henkel
Satoru Higashiseto • David Hopkins
Xero Ink • Mari Kono • Mrs. Kuck
Barbara Manning • Felipe X. Milstein
Alesandro Moreschi III • Paul Musso
Dylan Nyoukis • Irene Perciali
Richao Polysorbate[60] • Eva Revox
Fred Rinne • Tom Smith • Toni Smith
Harvey Bennett Stafford • Montana Swisher
Lucian Tielens • Jenna Tomonari
Ukawa Noahiro • Mykl Witcyst
Roland Woodbe • Stanley Zappa

Spiritual Advisor Newt Ludwig

Publisher I. Vern Beezer

Printer Hot Premnis Litho Portland, Oregon

Front Cover Ota Kêiti Be Sure to Wash Your Dirty Little Eyes

Back Cover Andy Ortmann

Distributon Revolver USA 2745 16th Street, San Francisco CA 94110

Mailorder www.midheaven.com/fi

Bananafish Magazine
c/o Tedium House Publications
PO Box 424762, San Francisco CA 94142-4762

4 **Mail** Remembrance of Things Putrid
The Agony and the Agony

8 **Great Moments in R&B**
Whether barking up the wrong tree or deciding to put that dog to sleep once and for all, the writer–provider paradigm flourishes

11 **James Goode** Garage Sales and Other Capitalist Ventures
Interview by M. Monroe, and an essay by the composer on "phylogenetic music"

22 **John Wiese** Fractional Widths Greater Than the Maximum Allowed
The renaissance of the renaissance man: curator of the *MoonLanding* series; type designer; conspiracy empath. Interview by S. Glass

29 **Jazzfinger** It's Easy When You're Beautiful
Sociological infamy from Britain Minor. Interview by The Neil Campbell

38 **Reynols** I Was Made for These Times
Things as they were meant to have been, or will be, or actually are and just seem otherwise. Illustrated autobiography with additional text by S. Glass

45 **Margaret Murray** Cooks 'n' Chefs 'n' Their Assistants!
Comics by the recently abdicated Duchess of Landers

49 **Ota Kêiti** The Big Cemetary of Lovers
What goes on in the hurricane of the eye. Interview by Ukawa Naohiro. Translated by Mrs. Kuck

59 **Polar Goldie Cats** They Only Put Out at Night
Calling Dr. Splachnic, please report to Veterinary Surgery right away. Interview by Carla Bozulich and Nels Cline

67 **Panicsville** I Asked for an Autograph
Permission to treat the witness as hostile, your honor? The jury is instructed to disregard all comments not made directly to the court. Interview and citation for contempt by Tina Gladden

78 **Octavian Nemescu** Toward a New Initiatic Music
The Unacomposer demands navigation of the energy ladders connecting new zones of reality. Translated by Irene Perciali

88 **NT Fan** Fear Not. I Dare You
Trey Spruance on eating shit and dying

95 **Vote Robot** Just What the Donkey Ordered
The Long Rangers. Interview by Earl Kuck, That's Who

106 **Reviews**
The crabby avengers determine that none is the number

Drawings by Richao Polysorbate[60]

Figure 7. Front cover and contents page from Bananafish 14. (2000)

Seymour Glass's *Bananafish* (Figure 7) is one such magazine, a vital resource and entry point into the deeper, stranger world of the transnational sub-underground for those around in the late 1990s to early 2000s. Likewise magazines such as *Oppobrium*, *The Sound Projector* or *Muckraker* existed as a point at which an array of genre's and scenes collided, documenting the outputs of a underground world whose practices were marginal yet no less important. In this era of underground music, the ability to source this kind of music was difficult but, with the obsessive tendencies of many in the n-au, there was often a way to find out about it. Robertson (2023) tells me how working in a record shop allowed him to order in some of the records he had read about in mail order catalogues, under the auspices that they were for the shop but would more than likely end up being bought by Robertson himself, further feeding his curiosity. This record shop also stocked *Bananafish* magazine, which opened a strange hole, a weird portal, through which the most bizarre depths of the experimental music scene were visible. In his Blog writing about the legacy of the first run of 76 releases on American based experimental label Union Pole Tapes, Joe Murray (2024) highlights how *Bananafish* is often deemed a key source of information for those with an interest in this nebulous, sub-sub-underground scene and that the magazine 'led many by the hand to some of the most exciting and interesting music the planet provided through its informed, dense, dada-esque and often

hilarious text'[49]. The magazine covered many aspects of weird music, from the Fluxus tinged non-music of previously mentioned Prick Decay, to the vocal improvisations of Paul Dutton or the abrasive and chaotic sounds of many of the Japanoise bands - the combination of which helped it to become the integral outsider resource that it is now known as today.

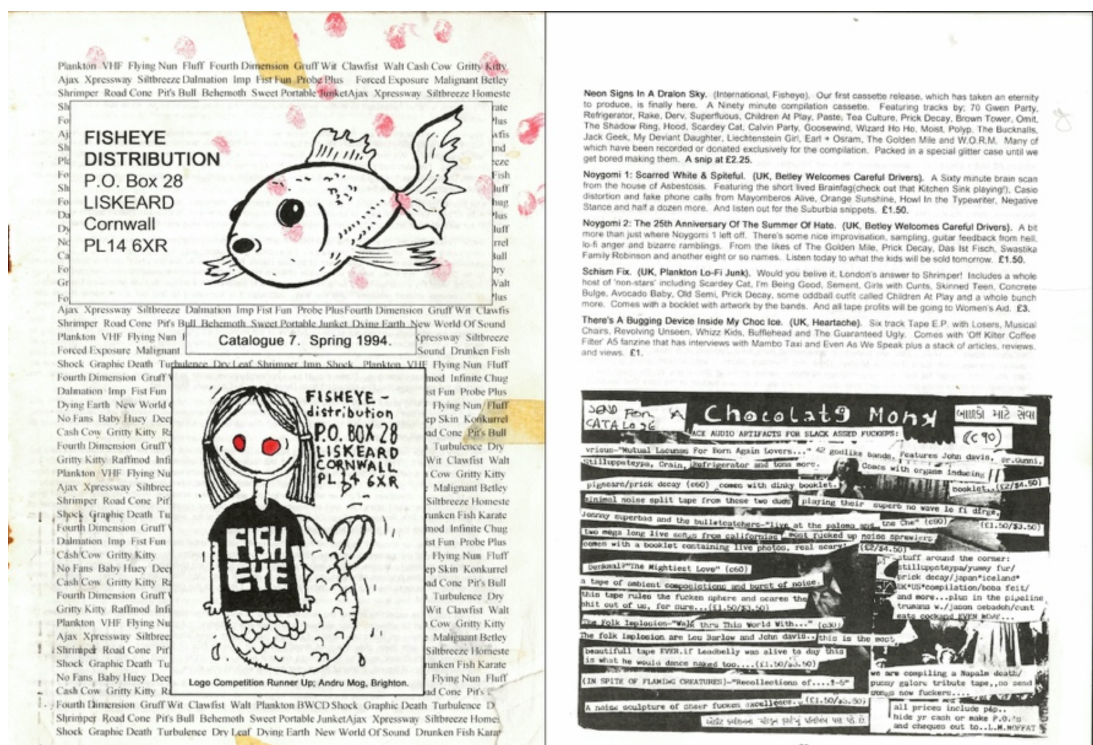
Aside from just the music it covered, the approaches a lot of these artists took acted as inspiration for some of those who would go on to create their own work in the n-au. Whereas Punk's democratic approach was witnessed attempts to lift the veil and demystify the processes of production and distribution, such as in the breakdown of the costs of producing a run of 500 7" records, *Bananafish* covered the kind of music that was home dubbed on tape in miniscule editions by comparison. Robertson (2023) shares his astonishment at the idea that a magazine would feature 'reviews of cassettes that've been released an edition of 12!', leading to the realisation that such small-scale work was not only feasible, but being done: 'I was like "holy shit, people will do that, that's fucking amazing"'. Murray (2022) shares a similar revelation, where friends would introduce him to the idea of writing to artists for records, that whole process opening a whole new world of possibility: 'My Lord! I didn't know you could do that; didn't know it was a thing. That just like this whole new avenue'. Thus, the magazine afforded agency to those with the capacity to become distracted – or curious – and to follow that instinct.

Bananafish was based in San Francisco and even with the resourcefulness of many in the n-au, discovering its absurdist pages could be a difficult task. However, some of the previous mentioned stalwarts of the pre-n-au scene in the UK had connections with *Bananafish* which helped facilitate much of this transnational exchange - those who were plugged in made it their duty to share their discoveries at the translocal level [50]. To further facilitate this process of discovery, we find UK based distributors as being an equally rich source of information in these early days, helping to explain how some of the transnational connections came to be. Jarvis (2022) points to Fisheye distribution as being a key resource of the transnational weirdo noise scene, where reading through the mail order catalogue brought much of this music to his attention, encouraged by the ability to just 'write to people and wait patiently', receiving records in the post, encouraging direct contact with the sources of the work, embedding a sense of sociality in the process.

[49] Union Pole tapes' discography connects a particular corner of USA based free noise with the UK based 1990s weirdo underground with releases by names such as Inca Eyeball, Dogliveroil, Prick Decay, A Band, Coits, Ashtray Navigations, Neil Campbell, Expose Your Eyes.
[50] Dylan Nyoukis was a frequent contributor to the zine, alongside one time Termite Club programme committee member Neil Campbell.

Rather than a zine, this was a mail order catalogue, a painstakingly assembled list of releases for sale, all with a small overview by the author (Figure 8). Joe Murray (2024) highlights how Fisheye acted as an important resource around the turn of the century, opening this whole other world of weird music to him, which was vital as ‘a spotty teen living in a semi-rural-culture-desert’:

> His catalogues were prized editions, crammed with short, snappy write-ups of these mysterious discs and tapes, the occasional top-ten, chart or live review. To hear the papery-flop of the A5 booklet on the doormat was to experience joy. Leafing through the pages with a crumpled fiver to my name – tantalising. To receive a parcel, loaded, taped up and secure? Rapture!



Neon Signs In A Dralon Sky. (International, Fisheye). Our first cassette release, which has taken an eternity to produce, is finally here. A Ninety minute compilation cassette. Featuring tracks by: 70 Gwen Party, Refrigerator, Rake, Derv, Superfluous, Children At Play, Paste, Tea Culture, Prick Decay, Brown Tower, Omit, The Shadow Ring, Hood, Scardey Cat, Calvin Party, Goosewind, Wizard Ho Ho, Moist, Polyp, The Bucknalls, Jack Geek, My Deviant Daughter, Liechtenstein Girl, Earl + Osram, The Golden Mile and W.O.R.M. Many of which have been recorded or donated exclusively for the compilation. Packed in a special glitter case until we get bored making them. **A snip at £2.25.**

Noygomi 1: Scarred White & Spiteful. (UK, Betley Welcomes Careful Drivers). A Sixty minute brain scan from the house of Asbestosis. Featuring the short lived Brainfag(check out that Kitchen Sink playing!). Casio distortion and fake phone calls from Mayomberos Alive, Orange Sunshine, Howl In the Typewriter, Negative Stance and half a dozen more. And listen out for the Suburbia snippets. **£1.50.**

Noygomi 2: The 25th Anniversary Of The Summer Of Hate. (UK, Betley Welcomes Careful Drivers). A bit more than just where Noygomi 1 left off. There's some nice improvisation, sampling, guitar feedback from hell, lo-fi anger and bizarre ramblings. From the likes of The Golden Mile, Prick Decay, Das Ist Fisch, Swastika Family Robinson and another eight or so names. Listen today to what the kids will be sold tomorrow. **£1.50.**

Schism Fix. (UK, Plankton Lo-Fi Junk). Would you belive it, London's answer to Shrimper! Includes a whole host of 'non-stars' including Scardey Cat, I'm Being Good, Sement, Girls with Cunts, Skinned Teen, Concrete Bulge, Avocado Baby, Old Semi, Prick Decay, some oddball outfit called Children At Play and a whole bunch more. Comes with a booklet with artwork by the bands. And all tape profits will be going to Women's Aid. **£3.**

There's A Bugging Device Inside My Choc Ice. (UK, Heartache). Six track Tape E.P. with Losers, Musical Chairs, Revolving Unseen, Whizz Kids, Bufflehead and The Guaranteed Ugly. Comes with 'Off Kilter Coffee Filter' A5 fanzine that has interviews with Mambo Taxi and Even As We Speak plus a stack of articles, reviews, and views. **£1.**

SEND FOR A CATALOGUE Chocolate Monk

25

Figure 8. Fisheye Catalogue 7 (Spring 1994)

These two examples illustrate the role such micro-media had to play in bringing this weird, transglobal music to a wider audience and suggesting that such niche, experimental forms were not only possible but already existed. Despite their existence pre-dating Hayler’s conception of the n-au, they act as important parts of its history, specifically in terms of how they facilitated much of this discovery and encouraged those who held the curiosity to begin to make their own work. They also help us to connect some of the wider dots between international scenes, mapping a broader territory, seeing the points at which they cross over. Rather than the distribution of information from these sources

being a one-way exchange, the reciprocal nature of DIY music scenes can be observed in tracing some of the connections outside of these zines themselves. Seymour Glass, for example, has performed and collaborated with many n-au artists across the UK, evident in releases such as Posset & Glands of External Secretion's *Obedience To Authority*, released in 2019[51]. That this CD-R was released on Chocolate Monk gives us another connection in the networks, where head honcho Dylan Nyoukis can be seen writing for *Bananafish* in the early 1990s.

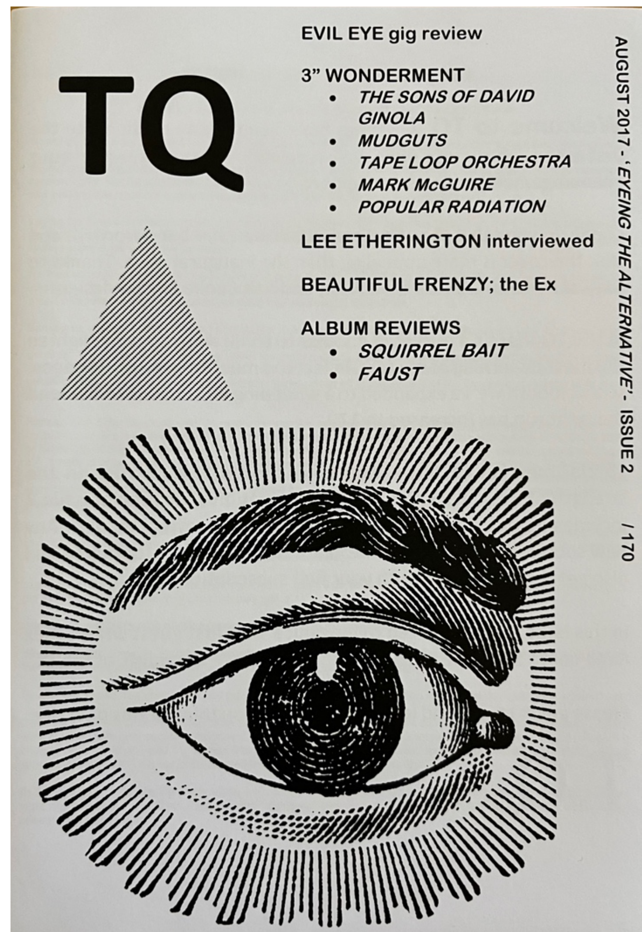


Figure 9. TQ Zine Issue 2 (August 2017)

The historical importance of zines as modes of connection and discovery in underground music scenes is evident in their continued existence in the contemporary climate. Northumberland based *TQ* Zine, for example, is a particularly rich source of n-au activity, reviewing the local outpost of the North East scene whilst also connecting with nodes of activity across the UK and further afield. Wood (2022) explains to me how starting the zine came off the back of a previously unrealised desire to start a blog, where he attended a gig typical of the n-au and decided to start a zine which covered this scene, moving from

[51] Glands of External Secretion being a duo of Seymour Glass (*Bananafish*) and Barbara Manning.

initially writing about music in general to *TQ* becoming '90% no-audience underground'. Even as early as Issue 2 in August 2017 (Figure 9), we can see documents of local n-au activity, with a review of an Evil Eye gig in Gateshead and an interview with No-Fi and Tusk Festival's Lee Etherington, sitting alongside pieces from elsewhere with a review of a The Sons of David Ginola 3" CD-R[52]. Here, the snowballing effect of a burgeoning involvement in the scene by issue 2 of the zine is readily apparent, alongside the fundamental nature of the zine format as a vehicle through which the community and networks of underground music can connect, albeit somewhat anachronistically. During its existence, *TQ* Zine has featured work of many in the n-au across the UK, containing interviews with record labels and promoters and local scene reports alongside the usual collection of reviews of both recorded and live material. Alongside these, the zine has also featured numerous articles covering critical aspects of life in the n-au, ranging from pieces contemplating the notion of value or how the n-au is, or is not, a community. Like Verbuč (2024) suggests of zines, they have a 'life of their own', they build community and connections between people and places, particularly those situated at a distance from one another, these ongoing networks 'constituted through the agency and affect of material media objects'. These critical points of convergence become central points where the geographically separated but philosophically connected individuals of the scene can share space.

Micro media: Blogs and Social Media

Micro-media is not limited to the cut and paste aesthetic of zines or mail order catalogues but develops in parallel with technological change. As we have seen so far, Radio Free Midwich was a prime source of information about the ongoing world of the n-au, actively sharing music suggestions, alongside providing a critical voice in the scene. However, despite Radio Free Midwich's central role as a resource in the n-au, it is not the sole outlet, existing as part of a larger, more stratified ecology of online information which compliments the print world of zines. This broader blogsphere consisted of others whose focus was still within the realms of the n-au but tackling it from a more specific, personal angle.

Mark Wharton's blog Idwal Fisher was the online home of the long running, if slightly sporadic, zine of the same name which covered the noisier side of music in and around the

[52] The Sons of David Ginola being the recording project of Murray Royston-Ward and Kevin Sanders.

n-au, done so with a similarly droll West Yorkshire tone to Hayler[53]. The reviews and texts found on Idwal Fisher usually started with a bizarre anecdote – tales of peculiar charity shop finds or drunken mishaps – with a short nod given towards the music at the end. Records were reviewed and live performance were documented, all done in the chaotic prose that the paper zine became known for. Alongside Idwal Fisher, blogs from relative newcomers to the scene such as Paul Margree's We Need No Swords were documenting the n-au from their own vantage point, covering the ongoing activity of a scene which existed at the intersection of noise and free improvisation, that being the 'free noise' of the n-au (Fitzpatrick & Thompson, 2015).

Despite the active role that these blogs took in sharing sounds from around the n-au, their activity eventually ceased. Radio Free Midwich was last active on June 8th 2021 after a gradual decline in the pace of its of activity, following its shift from the written word to the radio show as its main output during the COVID-19 pandemic, lying dormant ever since. We Need No Swords' last post was in June 2019, with the site now being set to private, its archives hidden from view. Margree (2022) explains that starting the blog was a way back into music after some time away, spurred on by having to work from home much of the time and not being able to attend gigs, this being his way of getting involved. However, as time progressed, Margree (2022) moved into focussing on performing and organising more regularly which, he explains, was a result of having more 'free time' to engage in the scene this way. Idwal Fisher's last post is dated February 14th 2021, the blogspot page still hosted for anyone to sift through, but without any sign of updates, the last post suggesting that Wharton has taken time out to fill some gaps in his Nurse With Wound Collection – leaving his role as critic and becoming an active listener again. The significance of the dates of all three end points, during the COVID 19 pandemic, signal a distinct shift in activity, where people were using the pause to either change direction or cease activity within the scene. Simultaneously, the pause also saw a wealth of activity from those who found themselves with more time on their hands, increasing their level of activity and involvement in the scene, a point which we will explore further in chapter 3.

Louie Rice (2022), artist and record label and event organiser using the name Hideous Replica, laments the cessation of Radio Free Midwich, suggesting that the blog was where he used to both 'find out about new music', but also go to for having his releases reviewed. The uniqueness of Radio Free Midwich, Rice (2022) suggests was that it was

[53] Idwal Fisher ran 8 issues from the late 1990s to early 2000s. This zine was preceded by Wharton's Just Glittering, which ran for 8 issues. Both have been compiled into a facsimile edition by Korm Plastics, published in 2025.

‘really passionately written’, rather than just being a ‘copy and paste job’ like some sites and even though ‘in reality a lot of the people are friends’, this was still approached with a degree of objectivity and criticality. Here, we see similarities with the likes of *Bananafish* - the approach to writing being lyrically rich, full of detail and humour without becoming stifling. This would seemingly be a far cry from the likes of *The Wire* magazine which Hayler’s (2012a) ongoing frustration with often boils down to its ‘reams of forgettable writing so airless, claustrophobic and undifferentiated it makes me want to shred the magazine and throw open a window’.

Aside from blogs as being integral points of information about the n-au, social media plays an active role, even if done so with a level of reticence and caution. Jones (2020) outlines how Facebook as a social media platform is often viewed in terms of the ‘affordances’ it can offer DIY musicians, whilst acknowledging it as a ‘site of contestation’, a trade-off between what it can offer compared with what one has to secede in using it. In the n-au, there was much debate about Radio Free Midwich deciding whether to have a presence on Facebook after opposing it for so long, leading to an in depth dialogue on the merits and pitfalls of using social media, revolving around finding the balance between independence and accessibility, with Hayler (2017) surmising that he would ‘proceed with caution’, since he believes ‘Facebook drains the magic from everything it touches’. Like with much of the activity in the n-au, the relationship with social media relies of working tactically with what it can offer, whilst exercising the caution that Hayler refers to, always being aware of the contradictory nature of its use, of how it can potentially impact the autonomy of the scenes practices.

The use of social media in the n-au has also undergone change, the scene adopting different platforms as technologies gradually come in and out of favour. Sophie Cooper (2022) mentions that many in the n-au were keen users of Myspace during its prime era from 2005 - 2009, suggesting that its ease of use facilitated a burst of self-organised activity: ‘blimey, I used to organise whole tours through that [Myspace] and advertising gigs’. Looking through old posters from within the n-au, there is a point at which Myspace URL’s accompany band names, demonstrating the scene’s reliance on the platform to host some of its music. The platform was known for its users’ ability to embed audio on a profile page, a clear precursor to the adoption of the streaming platforms which are prevalent today. Dunning (2022) also references the benefits if using MySpace in the early days of running a label, allowing easy connection with artists across the world to make a compilations of weird sounds or organise gig across the UK, the process opening him up to

the idea that ‘you could just contact people and they might be interested in doing stuff’. Cooper (2022) then points out that after Myspace had come to an end, things soon switched over to Twitter as the de facto platform for communicating at this distance. Both platforms foreground this type of public, informal, instant communication. When compared with the slower forms of communication of the early noise scene - writing letters to distant kinfolk - the immediacy of communication afforded by such platforms encouraged a widening of participation in a scene which would previously have been much harder to uncover.

Margree (2022) speaks highly of ‘noise twitter’ as the time when the platform was integral for connecting the disparate nodes of the wider translocal scene. The conversational style the platform encouraged was adopted by many in the n-au, #noisetwitter being a tag which invited news of blog posts, snap commentary on scene gossip, exchanges of discarded shopping lists as outsider art ephemera and a wealth of newly formed connections. Thornton (1995: 211) states, that ‘word-of-mouth is considered the consummate medium of the underground’ and that ‘rather than an unadulterated grassroots medium, word-of-mouth is often extended by or is an extension of other communications’ media’. These technologies facilitated this word-of-mouth communication in a way which had not previously been possible, the affordances of social media connecting the n-au across distance. While the benefits of social media have helped to democratise the n-au to a degree, encouraging more people to interact with its activity, it still operates as only one element of social connection, bridging the online and offline social worlds. Like Andrew Wild (2022) suggests, the n-au manages to find a ‘balance between the two’, with the ‘regional and that local scene’ combined with ‘online, hyper connected thing’ operating ‘almost in sync’.

There is a neo-luddite attitude that permeates certain corners of the n-au, what John Richards (2021) positions as a being ‘less techno-optimistic and more techno-sceptic’ in terms of the pervasiveness of technology in everyday life. Adopting such an attitude explains the juxtaposition of the use of certain technologies - social media, streaming platforms, email - with analogue cultural forms, the zine and cassette tape being the most prominent examples of this. Thus, the physicality of material space still acts as a crucial point of connection in the n-au, where much social activity plays out in person, in translocal spaces of proximity. Bristol based Owen Chambers (2022) explains how it was not through Radio Free Midwich that they came to know of the n-au, but through David Howcroft’s No-Audience Underground Tapes, who Chambers described as ‘the person who

bootlegs everything', after having a conversation with him at Gateshead's Tusk Festival in 2017. What is significant about this interaction is that Howcroft's active involvement in the n-au only began in 2017 and his adoption of Hayler's naming for his bootleg label being the point at which discovery of the scene unfolds. The process behind Howcroft's label also encouraged Chambers to document the scene in Bristol, where turnout could frequently be low, explaining that there is a 'secret archive' as the result of 'just recording anything that's going on' (Chambers, 2017). Chambers (2022) goes on to explain that an interest in experimental music was always there, evident in their early solo project Tremolo Ghosts, but was further spurred on by fellow Liquid Library label owner Charlie, introducing Chambers to the world of 'tape' and 'online labels'. From this, it moves to the 'local context', which can be neatly summarised by chance interaction with Robert Ridley-Shackleton, in a situation where they were the only two people in the audience at a performance in Bristol, the final piece of the n-au puzzle for Chambers (2022)[54]. This, it would seem, is a characteristic no-audience encounter, the conversations occurring between the only two audience members at a gig leading to uncovering an awareness of a local scene.

In Huddersfield, Ryoko Akama and Charlotte Roe (2022) discuss with me how they first met, where Roe was interested in working with Akama at her venue Dai Hall, with the striking thing about Roe being the interest shown, the willingness to learn and get involved. Rather than the focus on 'brand building' that a lot of their contemporaries were concerned with, Roe's (2022) primary focus was on experimenting and learning, getting involved in the process rather than creating a product. Here it is not necessarily about any sense of subcultural capital or extensive knowledge of processes and conventions but a desire to learn and experiment, something which we are reminded of in Beylis and Mahay's accounts of being drawn to certain types of individuals. This is a key thread which runs through the n-au. Margree (2022) outlines how his initial entry point into the world of the n-au came after a lengthy absence from music while raising his children, explaining that coming back into having an active involvement with music began with attending an adult education course on sound art, run by fellow n-au practitioner Graham Dunning. Again, there is a push to learn and experiment, a will to be active and get involved that permeates through the behaviours of those in the scene. Individuals are learning from one another, sharing resources and ideas, these attitudes being a fundamental element of the collaborative nature of the n-au and its network.

[54] Robert Ridley-Shackleton is an artist under his own name and runs the label Cardboard Club.

Leaving the N-Au

Being in a constant state of flux, the n-au not only consists of new entrants into the scene but exits too. To speak of a flow is to not only speak of an influx of individuals but the efflux - of people leaving the n-au. Growth is not exponential but fluctuates over time. While there are ebbs and flows in popularity and attendance, much activity still centres around a small, involved, active community. A multiplicity of entrances and exits constantly alters the social fabric of the scene, always in a process of change.

Hayler (2015b) has himself made frequent references to his absence from the scene, sometimes taking months, even years, away, only to slowly bring himself back in. Being that the n-au is deemed a hobbyist pursuit, one of the key aspects of this approach is the freedom with which one can come and go without obligation, being active and contributing at one's leisure. In our conversation, Hayler (2022) reminds me that this is always going to be the case, that in the n-au, 'sometimes there'll be lulls, people have to leave the scene or have to take a break from it or whatever, you know, like I am at the moment'[55]. During the same conversation, Theo Gowans (2022) reiterates Hayler's point about stepping down from being so active in the scene, when he expresses his own desire to curtail the amount of organising he does to do a bit of 'rebalancing'. However, the difficulty of turning people down is also recognised - 'it's hard to say no to people' which suggests how an implicit obligation of activity can develop (Gowans, 2022). There is a contradictory element to this situation, where the freedom to step back from activities certainly exists, but in some instances the social pressure to continue can overshadow it, becoming a commitment – an obligation. Hayler goes on to tell me how even after a chunk of time away from the scene, a return will be welcomed with open arms:

> I know that I'll be back at some point. And I know that it's a very kind of forgiving scene as well. So you just come and go, right? 'It's nice to see ya.' No one's going to turn their back on you (Hayler, 2022)

[55] In the period we spoke (October 2022), Hayler had been away from the scene for a year or so, spending time with family and recalibrating.

Figure 10. Poster for a Giant Tank afternoon gig (16th January 2016)

Many absences result from changes to life outside of the scene as people's ability to contribute their free time becomes limited by other economic, social and familial responsibilities. Like Crossley (2020: 38) explains of music worlds, people's involvement is only one aspect of their being, they are 'multiply embedded: parents, children, employees, neighbours and voters as well as, for example, drummers and Beyoncé fans', where 'identity and beliefs are negotiated between all of these circles of activity'. Robertson (2023) highlights how the changes witnessed in the Edinburgh outpost of the n-au is precisely because of people leaving the scene, explaining that in the pre-pandemic days, he and fellow n-au practitioner Grant Smith programmed Giant Tank gigs in the afternoon to accommodate those with young children (Figure 10) [56]. Allowing people with childcare responsibilities to attend performances, or in this case perform, also comes with hilarious and unexpected outcomes, such as when Dead Labour Process's Euan Currie ended up doing a rendition of Wheels on the Bus to entertain the kids before playing his set of 'wonky tape stuff' (Robertson, 2023). Amenability to the social conditions of those involved in the scene results in both a humours anecdote and a more democratic,

[56] Grant Smith also records under the name Muscletusk.

accessible series of events, responding to the social shifts of these multiply embedded participants.

Robertson's long running involvement in the n-au, beginning with the events organisation and label of Giant Tank in the early 2000s then moving into event organising as TFEH in 2019, allows him to see these waves of activity over time. He has witnessed people come and go, venues appear and disappear, styles and conventions ebb and flow, all while being a constant within these motions. However, this longevity also comes with a desire to pass on the baton, to give space to someone else to take over. In an interview for Finnish zine *Leave Britney Alone,* Robertson (2022a) recognises the cyclical nature of the scene and his desire to move on, but is still waiting for someone to take over:

> I keep attempting to retire from organising and would love for some new young pups to run off with the baton and refuse to give it back [...] I keep getting involved again as there's still things that I really want to see happen in Edinburgh that I'm not sure would without me sticking my nose in.

Andy Jarvis (2022) reflects on the continuous flux of individuals in the n-au, explaining how his initial introduction into the world of weird music, encouraged by being constantly fed cassettes by Phil Todd, led to them recording together for five years but, when Todd then moved to Leeds, that ended. People move on for a multitude of reasons, once the epicentre of a particular local scene then just as soon they have gone. However, in the case of Todd, his activities followed him to Leeds, where he is still active in various projects, most notably Ashtray Navigations with his partner Mel O'Dublshaine[57]. Life inevitably impacts how everyone's involvement with the n-au materialises, their activity in the scene just one aspect of their lives. Margree (2022) notes how in his work - his day job - there are times when he must commute elsewhere, limiting his free time, impacting his interaction with the scene resulting in periods where 'I just couldn't even get my head around any time to go to gigs'. This, however, also comes in waves, suggesting that 'then you can come out of that', resulting in his search for playing gigs himself under the name Ivy Nostrum, as well as organising a series of performances in London's Hundred Years Gallery under the name Tread Into Mulch.

[57] Mel's own solo output is equally well regarded, both under her own name and as Ocelocelot, alongside her short stint at the helm of The Termite Club in its final iteration.

Throughout the existence of the n-au, promoters and artists have left the scene. Some have moved country, some have built families, some have left music altogether. It could be dispiriting to read the list of long-lost promoters, reminiscing about what had come before. However, I believe that to encourage the heterogeneous nature of the n-au, this space of multiplicity, it is important to appreciate these moments of change as opportunities to build new spaces, to see the scene built afresh.

Aside from those whose involvement and subsequent exiting from the scene was influenced by factors externally, some take the decision to change the degree to which they participate in the scene in a conscious manner, the ability to do so encouraged by the horizontal division of labour present in the scene. Joe Murray, for example, has been making kitchen sink musique concrète under the name Posset since the early 2000s in the North East of England. Like others, his ability to be active in the scene has fluctuated over time, often built on the precarious nature of being in a scene such as the n-au itself:

> Again, you know, there's that joke that it's the same 10 pounds passing backwards and forwards, which is kind of right in one way. But the other side of it is actually, no, we've just agreed that we're going to take a loss. We're always going to take a loss. Once we get over that collectively then that's how this works. But you can't do that forever. So yeah, you do stop and you know, you drop out for a bit, and then you come back differently. You might stop going to shows it, but you carry on making music or maybe you move into promotion (Murray, 2022)

The economics of scarcity and the precarious nature of what Threadgold (2018) suggests is the DIY practitioner 'choosing poverty' inevitably leads to periods of absence and burnout[58]. Murray's (2022) idea of individuals in the n-au having 'agreed to take a loss' exemplifies the precarious nature of the scene but also raises questions over participation – of who is in the material position to be able to afford such a loss. The precarious nature of the scene is indicative of the conflicting nature of the n-au and DIY activity more generally, where the wish to retain a degree of autonomy from the wider structures of the creative industries mean individuals must carry the responsibility for supporting the scene. Without sustained support, this can only happen for a limited period before people burn out. This ongoing process runs the risk of perpetuating the inequalities and forms of exploitation that the scene looked to counteract in the first place.

[58] This poverty that the DIY practitioner chooses is, Threadgold (2018) is keen to point out, is often a 'relative poverty' (Threadgold, 2018).

There are also times where those who have been part of a scene for a prolonged amount of time begin to take a critical stance towards their involvement, looking towards how they use their positioning in the scene to allow new voices to come to the surface. In a recent decision taken by Joe Murray, spelled out in a text accompanying the release *I've Had Enough* on net label Why Keith Dropped the S, the North East n-au stalwart reflects on how his position can be used to facilitate the entry of new people into the scene:

> I've been doing this for years eh? Twenty-odd years of grubby Posset actions means I must be [gulp] a 'mature artist' now? So what does a 'mature artist' do? They carry on don't they; until they are too old, sad or mad. Taking up space, space that others could fill. So when I'm saying 'I've had enough' this isn't some old-man rant, waving a fist at the clouds and reminiscing about the old days. It's the realisation that I've had many wonderful opportunities and experiences in this tiny music world. It's time for me to leave space for younger, different and more exciting voices. So there we go, that's the rationale for this release and all future Posset releases: collaboration and restraint. A perpetual reduction. That's the lens to view this late-period dicta guff. But enough of my yack. In the meantime I really hope you enjoy this dive into grey hiss, overloaded murk, vocal jaxx and tape-machine clunk (Murray, 2024c)

As Brandon LaBelle states (2018: 145) when discussing sonic agency, 'in speaking, I take up space, and in doing so I may perform certain privileges of which I may not be fully aware'. Murray's (2024c) decision to change his usual mode of performance, shifting towards a focus on collaborative work is a conscious move towards using his agency as a means to build a more collective space. This point of change, where one person limits their activity becomes an instance where new people have space to enter, where new voices can become part of the polyvocal n-au.

A criticality towards the activities of the n-au is also becoming increasingly present in the shifting political dimensions of the scene. Aside from the conscious stepping back from activity to provide space for new voices and collaborations, some exits from the scene come as part of a changing attitude towards the historically contentious politics of associated music scenes. The early era of noise and industrial music are well known for their approaches to transgressive political material, and while some would argue that this is intended to confront the viewers and present them with their own complicity in the

apparatus of control, the context within which this is carried out has certainly changed (Stephenson, 2016).

Gowans et al. (2023: 75) highlight the controversy surrounding veteran noise act Skullflower which came to light in 2019 as being a 'illustrative' of a situation which demonstrates an enduring move towards a 'diversification of performers and audiences' in the scene. Following a performance alongside Finnish power electronics act Bizarre Uproar in Leeds and the cancellation of their appearance at London's Raw Power festival (both in 2019), The Quietus published an investigative article piecing together a 'jigsaw of evidence', the result of which presented Skullflower's Matthew Bower as a 'lost and angry white man, looking for Europa' (Miller, 2019)[59]. This moment saw an act whose name is deeply interwoven into the histories of the n-au and wider noise and industrial scene called out for his apparent political leanings. Responses across the scene ranged from the expunging of mentions of the band from online records to suggestions that they had always known something was wrong, this article and series of events confirming their suspicions. On the other side, some dismissed the allegations, positioning it as no more than an attempt to fuel an ongoing culture war. Some doubled down on the need for divisive political standings to be able to exist in a space which values autonomy, while others distanced themselves from the name either explicitly or implicitly. The resulting factional divide leading to some individuals separating themselves from being active in the scene. Many people I spoke with referenced the time surrounding this moment as the point at which both they, and the wider n-au, needed to adopt a more critical stance towards its practices – to question the political leanings of some in the scene which resulted in a calling out or distancing of people who they had previously engaged with creatively (Arnot, 2022; Gowans, 2022; Hayler, 2022; Murray, 2022; Poot, 2023; Royston-Ward, 2022).

This moment saw people in the n-au investigating the politics of those in the scene who held what Keith Kahn-Harris (2007: 145) terms an 'anti-reflexive' stance. This is the practice whereby those in music scenes which flirt with controversial political topics – racism, misogyny, sexism and homophobia – whilst keeping a distance from publicly aligning with said topics, 'allowing them to "back away" from the full implications of their actions' (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 151). In Simon Reynolds (2012) keynote speech on DIY music,

[59] This included criticism levelled towards the aforementioned performance on the same bill as Bizarre Uproar, alongside the identification of Black Sun image in one of Bowers blogposts, the questioning of track titles as right wing dog whistles, supposed anti-EU sentiments and having releases on labels which feature right leaning acts.

in which the n-au is mentioned, one of the concerns he raises with the autonomy of self-sufficiency is the ability for right-wing ideas to circulate. Hayler (2012c) rejects this premise outright, suggesting that ‘if you tried that argument on down here, I suspect you’d get either blank stares or would be laughed out of the pub’. This, I believe, is a naïve position to take. With the current rise of right-wing populist rhetoric in the mainstream political landscape of the UK and further afield, these positions have very real, very different implications. No longer seen as an underground, fringe sensibility, the clear nationalistic divisions have become rife throughout the UK, particularly since the Brexit vote of 2016, many in the n-au have taken an active stance in rejecting the previous ‘unreflexive’ or ‘reflexively anti-reflexive’ stances that earlier adherents would have adopted (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 145).

A Drifting Scene

While the influx and efflux of individuals in the n-au have changed with differing technological contexts in terms of *how* people come to be involved in the scene, this flow of individuals also impacts the conventions and rituals of a scene. Howard Becker (1982: 42) states, when speaking of the ‘collective action’ of art worlds, that ‘conventions provide the basis on which art world participants can act together’ and range from aesthetic sensibilities, in terms of overarching sonic idiom, to the cultural practices which occur in the everyday. Rather than these conventions being static and concrete, they are always fluctuating within differing social contexts, being ‘seldom rigid and unchanging’ (Becker, 1984: 31). There are constants just as there are variables in the n-au - as new people become part of a scene, they adopt some of the current conventions whilst bringing in their own, challenging and changing the collective conventions of a scene over time. As participation in the n-au widens, the previous aesthetic and performative actions are challenged, with newer participants looking to develop approaches which are more inclusive overall. Observing these changes in process serves to highlight Becker’s (1982: 303) notion of the ‘drift’ happening, where small, almost imperceptible changes take place, gradually altering the conventions of a scene. New people becoming part of a scene bring changes which ‘occur piecemeal and peacefully, almost unnoticed’, the fluctuations observable only when viewed in hindsight (Becker, 1982: 309). Wild (2022) summarises how these drifts of individuals are typical in the n-au, suggesting that:

> People come and go, people drop out, people take time to do other things. People become more prominent, people have bursts of activity and then sit back. It all just ebbs and flows and naturally shifts in flux, but still kind of just continues on as its defined self again.

To see these drifts in action, it is best to demonstrate with an example which, for this, we will reexamine the Leeds scene. Whereas the Termite Club began life promoting free jazz and free improvisation, championed by club founders Alan Wilkinson and Paul Buckton, there was a definite shift towards the noisier side of experimental music by the late 1990s and early 2000s. This shift was the result of changes in running of the club, with new voices coming in, their aesthetic tendencies and networks of relations resulting in a gradual drift in the conventions of the club. Led for a significant period by power electronics afficionado Mike Dando, this time was what Foist (2016: 102) recognises as being the 'second phase of the Termite', the second wave, with Leeds becoming a hotbed for some of the most extreme names in noise and industrial music[60].

Elements of the earlier free improvisation synonymous with the Club was still present, but it now existed alongside this noisier, more antagonistic and confrontational wave of artists. Despite having degrees of connection and similarity, the conventions of what would previously have been considered two different scenes can be seen to reach points of convergence and divergence. Aside from clear sonic differences, audience behaviour could also be different, with Foist (2016: 100) detailing a few incidents of clashing expectations, ranging from recounting stories of the drunken outbursts of audience members occurring during quiet improvisational performances to a particular instance where the some of the audience are chastised for committing a faux pas during an improv performance, with said people being 'tutted at by the jazz clientele for burbling through an extremely quiet section'. I would argue that it is within this chaos of differing ideals, this clash of expectations, that conventions are changed and scenes develop into something different – where the existing 'pronunciations and cliches' are challenged and replaced anew (Becker, 1982: 303).

Following this initial waves of changes, in the early 2000s, when Rob Hayler and Phil Todd join the Termite Club committee, there is another slow drift in convention with Foist

[60] Mike Dando was known for his intense, confrontational and purposefully antagonistic performances as CON-DOM (Control Domination).

(2016: 103) recalling that the influx of these new perspectives - pointing to Hayler in particular - ‘contributed to the club being a relatively early supporter of beat-led noise crossovers’. New genres begin to be experimented with, leading to amalgamations of style and genre which slowly alter the idioms that may have been present before. Like many long running organisations within experimental music, the Termite Club began to face challenges[61]. With difficulties securing funding, ongoing precarity, general dis-organisation and elements of insularity, the Termite Club eventually slowed to a crawl in the early 2000s. Despite efforts from different individuals to continue its legacy through multiple revivals, the ‘increasingly sub-divided’ Leeds scene, combined with the clubs’ precarious financial position led it to fizzle out completely (Foist, 2016: 109). Nevertheless, as this example is attempting to demonstrate, when one space ceases to exist, another is sure to take its place.

Phil Legard (2022) expresses how after The Termite Club folded in, things in Leeds seemed to be quiet for a while but had then heard whispers of a new burst of activity starting in DIY rehearsal space Chunk, led by current n-au stalwart Theo Gowans:

> That little thing seemed to happen in its own bubble. I remember Neil Campbell coming up to me one time at a gig and saying: “Have you heard about all these kids making noise down at Chunk!?”. Then, quite organically, the older Termite set, and the younger noise set of Theo and Pete Cann and Bobby and Gretchen came together.

[61] Thinking particularly to the LMC’s challenges towards its end, where the organisational structures and factionalism overshadowed the music being promoted (Bell, 1999).

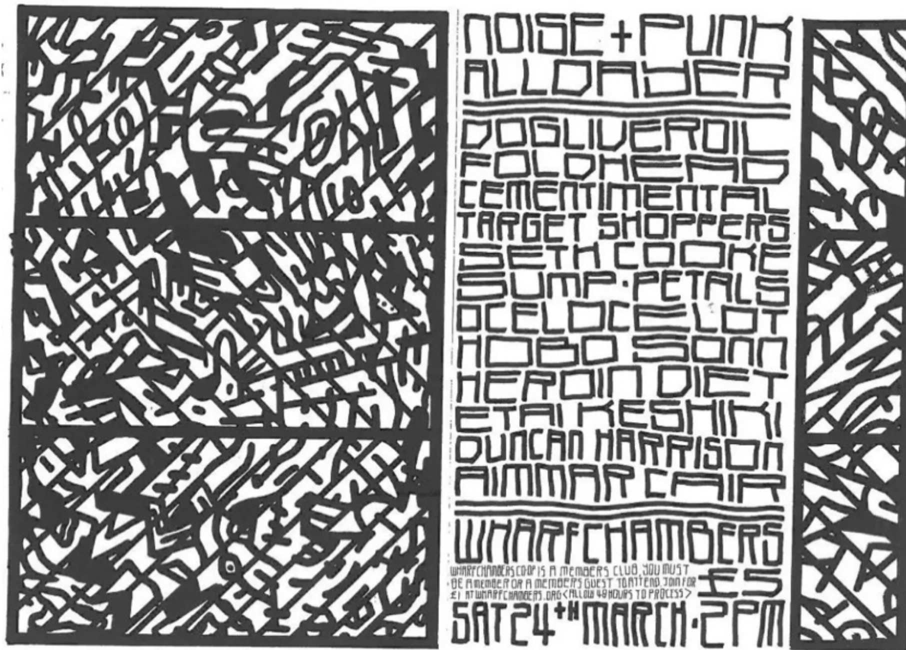


Figure 11. Noise + Punk All Dayer flyer (24th March 2012)

It was in this new period of activity, from around 2010 onwards, that there was a revitalisation of experimental music after the Termite Club folded. Post-Termite Club Leeds had a gap that needed plugging and luckily there were a wealth of people ready to take its place. In this period we begin to witness the second wave of noise and experimental music in the city, this one based around a heterogeneous collection of promoters, rather than everything being concentrated around one space. Gigs and all-dayers from the likes of Crater Lake, Hogwash, Hard Stare and Angurosakuson continued to advocate for anything weird and noisy in the city. Pete Cann's Noise + Punk All Dayer in 2012 (Figure 11) is a useful example to observe this changing scene. The lineup comprises newer acts, represented by the likes of Duncan Harrison, Etai Keshiki and Hobo Sonn programmed alongside mainstays from the Stoke-on-Trent scene of the mid to late 1990s - Dogliveroil and Target Shoppers. Such events show how, rather than one version of the scene directly leading on from another, seeing a clear separation, they are both entangled with one another, artists from the early 1990s performing alongside those from 2012 yet done in a way which avoids the 'retromania' of reunion bands so prevalent amongst the mainstream music industry (Reynolds, 2011)[62].

[62] Hayler's (2012d) write up of the event feels like a quintessential account of the n-au. There are stories of trades, impromptu performances, changing venues, deep conversation and bizarre performances rituals, all bound by the typically diverse range of genre to be expected.

Whereas the activity in the days of The Termite Club was largely nomadic but based around one central organiser, the second wave of experimental music in Leeds consisted of multiple organisers. Despite it still being somewhat nomadic, with pub functions rooms from the likes of Fox and Newt and The Adelphi making occasional appearances, it had found a spiritual home in practice room Chunk – which ceased operations in 2020 - shortly followed by co-op venue Wharf Chambers (Figure 12). Legard (2022) is keen to highlight how the interactions between these new groups of individuals whose activity revitalised and continued the legacies of the Leeds scene, were concentrated around a singular place and the impact that had upon the n-au:

> We're quite lucky that Theo [Gowans – Heinous Whining] has this kind of boundless energy and enthusiasm for putting on shows. I think even when The Termite Club was happening, there wasn't this kind of volume. He's sort of turned Wharf and previously Chunk before it folded… it means that Wharf Chambers is somewhere that all kinds of weird experimental stuff goes through if they're touring the UK, which is, you know, great for us because it means there's always a good show.

Figure 12. Wharf Chambers exterior, Leeds (June 2023)

However, this 'boundless energy' as Legard (2022) calls it, is not an endless supply. At some point, it runs out. As someone's activity slows down, someone else tends to pick it up, hence the ongoing, always in process nature of the scene. There is not a ceremonial handing over of the baton from one individual to another, it happens on a multiplicitous

level, numerous people operating at once. Sometimes it will just be one gig booked which snowballs into organising multiple, recurring events, only realising after the fact. For others, it is a more conscious decision to fill a gap. At the moment, the city is undergoing another drift in activity. Currently, Heinous Whining is slowing down, reducing the pace at which gigs are being organised. Likewise, Crater Lake is on a temporary hiatus while pursuing further academic study. Rather than there being a void in the city, others are stepping, with weird music being continuing to be programmed by the likes of, Anna Peaker, Hard Stare and Free Music Lessons, solidifying Leeds as a hub of activity (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Free Music Lessons listings flyer (2025)

Leeds holds an important position in the rich history experimental music in the UK and the n-au, making it a perfect example to demonstrate the fluctuations of a scene, highlighting some of the variations in activity occurring on the micro, local level. However, Leeds in not unique in this position and many other parts of the n-au have witnessed similar changes in activity, many of which have emerged since the COVID-19 pandemic. In London, both Paul Margree (2022) and Phil Julian (2024) mention a new wave of activity in the capital occurring after the break during the COVID19 pandemic, both in terms of the people who are organising performances, the spaces where these performances are taking places and the people who are attending them.

This is where we see the likes of Zheng Hao's Knots and Ashcircle's Cliff Edge series of events running in Hoxton's Hundred Years Gallery alongside Rory Salter's Infant Tree and James Shearman's nomadic, noise forward Earworm becoming some of the some of the key actors in the current iteration of the n-au in the capital (Figure 14). With these new voices and approaches to programming come new individuals to the scene which, as we will explore in more detail in chapter 5, is essential to ensuring its longevity.

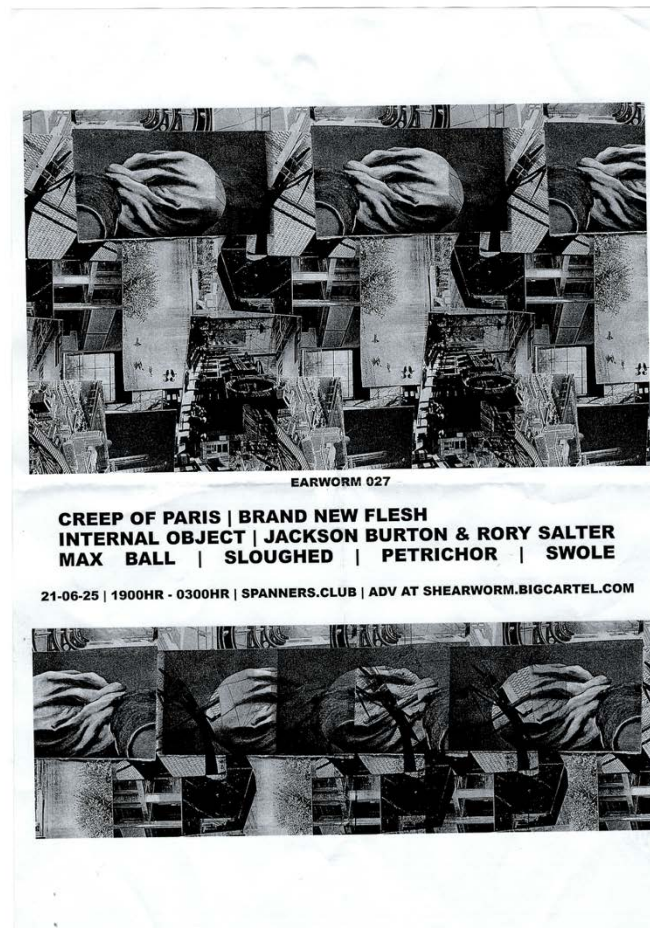


Figure 14. Earworm presents flyer (21st June 2025)

Such drifts in activity are partly due to what Beylis (2022) recognises as the 'ebb and flow' of audiences, the movement of participants in and out of the scene. While the examples I have just explored cover the gradual drifts, there are occasional instances of more visible movement in people's involvement in the scene. This was particularly noticeable after the COVID19 pandemic in 2020 where, after a length of time without in person performances taking place, there was a renewed energy for attending performances. Ali Robertson (2022) notes how in the run of shows he promotes with Firas Khnaisser, the audience for performances after the pandemic had changed noticeably, with people imbued with a

renewed ‘appetite’ for live music after the break of lockdown. What was unique about this, however, was that it was different people who were attending these shows.

> The funny thing is, I see audiences come and go. The pandemic does feel like there’s been some sort of change. I’m getting to know everyone’s names who are coming now but it’s largely a different audience than who was coming along before the pandemic which is quite odd (Robertson, 2022).

Natalia Beylis (2022) witnessed a similar trend in Ireland, highlighting how in the post-COVID world, things seemed to have really ‘opened up’ in terms of new people being involved in the scene. Whereas previously, performances would usually be attended by the ‘same five noise guys’, Beylis (2022) was now coming across ‘all these people in their 20s that all know the same artists, and all know and like the things that people didn't used to’. Whether that is the result of people ‘staying home and getting to explore a lot more stuff’, especially the kind of ‘experimental or outer sound stuff’ that Beylis (2022) plays and promotes is uncertain, concluding that maybe this is another small bloom of popularity:

> I guess my worry is that once something does become fashionable, like I feel experimental music has kind of become a little more fashionable, then it becomes unfashionable again. But then I guess we just go back to the same five people that we've always known.

This surge in popularity is something Duncan Harrison (2022) has witnessed occurring in Brighton too where suddenly there was an influx of younger people at gigs, people he’d not seen before despite having an ongoing awareness of the adjacent scenes to the n-au, leading to the realisation of COVID’s influence on this:

> I realised that it's just because we had this couple of years where they weren't shows. They’ve gone from being not of age to “we’re here now, it’s time for us to be coming to these gigs”. Maybe that would have happened in a much slower way but then gigs happened again and suddenly it's just like, shit, there's like a whole bunch of different people.

However, despite some of the positive experiences some have witnessed, this absence of activity has also had an impact on some of the younger generations’ impetus to search out

for music. Charlotte Roe (2022) explains how fellow ame coworker Joe Christman ponders whether those whose formative years occurred during the pandemic have different approaches to searching for gigs and performance, that ‘being that age [21] and not being able to go out for like, two or three years, really kind of interrupts’, resulting in the case that ‘a lot of young people just aren't in the routine of looking for gigs and going to them’[63].

While I recognise the central importance of people in cultivating a music scene, I must also acknowledge that scenes are not solely constituted through these social processes. Following the thoughts of Woods & Ortega (2024), I concur that music scenes can be viewed as ‘becoming entanglements of humans and more-than-human participants, materials, and forces’. Uncovering underground experimental music has relied on a range of micro media, from zines and catalogues to blogs and social media to facilitate these points of discovery, being enmeshed within the process. Everyday cultural practices, alongside technological, spatial and economic contexts are equally conditional in assembling the n-au. Thus, we must take a step deeper, to observe the everyday conventions and routines of the n-au, to understand how its participants ‘do scene’ (Glass, 2012).

[63] Ame (*Art Music Experiment)* is an organisation based in Huddersfield which focusses on experimental music and art, running concerts, exhibitions, residencies and workshops.

Chapter 3. Recording and Distance

Invisible City Records, the label I started in 2014, was a conscious effort to get involved in the scene somehow. At the time, I was working in retail, my evening shifts always landing on the night a gig was happening, rendering attendance impossible. I was missing out, never able to be present. I felt distanced from the scene that I was so keen to participate in.

I'd been aware of the no-audience underground for some time. My natural curiosity to follow the thread of influences from my early listening habits of Punk and beyond guided me. I'd found local (to me) artists working with tape, creating thick drones reminiscent of the North East's post-industrial landscape. They, in turn, led me to Rob Hayler's writing on Radio Free Midwich and I never looked back. The DIY ethos that the blog advocated spurred on a desire to participate. Before this, I'd hosted a radio show on the now defunct Basic.Fm, sharing sounds I'd discovered, many of which would have fallen into the boundaries of the n-au. When the station came to an end, starting a label seemed like the next logical step.

I had an inkling as to how to begin but wanted some advice. I got in touch with two labels I admired at the time (and still do), Cruel Nature Records and Fort Evil Fruit. Some general questions were fired their way - Where did they source their tapes? Did they dub them at home or get them done 'professionally'? What about artwork? Their responses were admirable, free flowing with advice, ladened heavily with the n-au attitude of just experimenting and having fun, sharing knowledge and encouraging exploration. It seemed all that was left to do was give it a go.

Invisible City Records was set up as a way of "giving back" to the scene, attending to the community when I was unable to be physically present. I wanted to release people's music, give it a home, share it. I wanted to build up a stack of tapes to trade with others. I wanted to produce my own currency, get involved in the sleight-of-hand exchanges that I'd heard so much about. I wanted to be active.

If, to follow Small's (1998: 13) thinking of music being an activity that happens 'between' people, in whatever capacity that may be, then how does this function in the n-au? We have begun to understand how people come to be involved in the n-au, but what happens once they are here? My argument running throughout this thesis is that the activities of the n-au are manifest in two specific forms, recording and performance. It follows that, given the translocal nature of the n-au, those spaces of recording and performance can be roughly mapped to spaces of distance and spaces of proximity, following the relativity of participants location to one another. Despite the n-au being a somewhat small scene at a local level, across distances its reach is considerable. To quote Kenneth Goldsmith (2020: 140) in thinking about those interested in avant-garde, obscure or fringe art forms: 'Taken individually, each of us is small; taken wholly, we're substantial; taken locally, we barely exist; taken globally, we're huge'.

This chapter examines those spaces of distance where recording is the primary form in which self-expression is realised in the n-au, both as an individual and collaborative pursuit. In doing so, I analyse the conditions of possibility that allow the processes and practices of recorded music to function in the n-au and how they have changed over time. Recorded material and its distribution in the n-au exist in an entangled and sometimes contradictory relationship with the wider, more mainstream music industry. While the n-au attempts to sustain a degree of economic and creative autonomy, it is also reliant on systems external to the scene, 'making do' with available resources in a tactical way (De Certeau, 1984: 29).

Far from recording being a singular cultural form, I suggest that it is just one way in which people in the n-au gain access to self-expression. Recording and performance are inherently interlinked, not hierarchical but horizontally contingent. They do, however, present characteristic ways of operating, relying on different processes and different spatial and technological contexts to function. It is therefore important that we analyse them separately to gain as full an understanding as possible.

I begin this chapter by outlining and discussing the conventions and rituals of recording, giving consideration to the intricacies of the sounds themselves and the actions that take place to produce them. I then provide a detailed analysis of the spaces of circulation which encourage the translocal networks of the n-au, from their beginnings with offline tape and CD-R trading networks to a gradual shift towards digital distribution, demonstrated in a detailed case study of the n-au's relationship with the platform

Bandcamp. Within all of this, I recognise the changing contexts that impact the processes involved in recording as a form of cultural production and the networks that support it. The underlying theme of this chapter examines how technologies have impacted the way recording functions in the n-au. However, like with chapter 2, the social, spatial and economic factors also play an important role in determining how this happens and therefore follow through the discussion.

The Conventions of Recording

While Hayler's (2015b) notion of the n-au is primarily about the 'assumptions and working methods of a group of practitioners', the values and processes which underpin a 'way of operating' (De Certeau, 1984: 30), it is primarily intended to describe a world of sound. Hayler (2015b) acknowledges its fluidity and potential as a framework to describe other practices, suggesting that there is nothing that intrinsically links it to the noise and experimental music scene and 'it could just as well be used to describe groups engaged in other endeavours with a similar spirit'. However, fundamentally what Hayler is talking about when referring to the n-au is about a music scene, and this is how we are using his framework.

While much sound in the n-au falls within the musical categories of noise, experimental and free improvisation, terms which carry with them a certain resistance to strict definition, there are still aesthetic conventions in the scene. As Becker (1982: 30) outlines, conventions are those formal or informal 'agreements' as to what materials, forms and actions take place 'to make art possible'. However, rather than these being based around clear idiomatic forms, such as the use of certain keys, scales or song structures as would typically be found in popular music, the unpopular music's conventions revolve around a fundamental desire to do things differently. The aesthetic variety prevalent in the n-au encompasses a broad range of genres and approaches to the production of sound, although relative to these central genres[64]. I have already hinted at

[64] It is rare to find examples of rap and hip hop or commercial pop for example. If they do feature, they are generally skewed somewhat from their original forms, approached in a more experimental manner, made purposefully different.

some reference points to how things might sound or where they may take influence from but in this section, I will develop those thoughts in more depth.

Many of my interviewees recognise the n-au as being synonymous with ‘weird’ music, the weirdo underground and various other iterations of the phrase (Arnot, 2022; Beylis; 2022; Boehringer, 2022; Cooper; 2022; Harrison, 2022; Mahay, 2022; Margree, 2022; Poot, 2023; Robertson, 2023; Royston- Ward, 2022; Wild, 2022). The term is used nonchalantly, often in the same way that terms such as scene and underground have been used, adopted as a ‘cultural resource’ to maintain a sense of ‘identity’ based around a relative ‘distinctiveness’ (Bennet & Peterson, 2004: 2). The term weird is used to describe the types of music found at events, on records, or to refer generally to the sensibility of the music found in the n-au. Like with noise and experimental music, the weird music of the n-au is broad ranging in its approach, speaking more to an underlying ethos than an adherence to strict genre tropes. Whitney Johnson (2017) has written about a so-called weird music, using the term as a synonym for music which is predicated on ‘difference’ and the associated ‘cultural value’ that comes with that distinction. The value predominant in weird music is described as a ‘contrarian desire for abnormality’, music and sound which contains a ‘lauded deviation from a presumed set of popular conventions’ (Johnson, 2017).

The term weird has been used as a more general cultural resource by the likes of The Quietus’s John Doran (2017) in a designation of ‘New Weird Britain’. This term denotes a loose map of musicians who were ‘disentangled from the mainstream music industry, liberated - not crushed – by its collapse’, seen to be ‘opting out’ and instead focussing on the ‘immediate, uncomfortable live moment’ (Doran, 2017). In witnessing this, Doran (2017) describes the music and performance as ‘unclassifiable’, ‘unrepeatable’ and ‘crossdisciplinary’ - it is aesthetically varied, different. The term is a clear nod towards Keenan’s (2003) ‘New Weird America’, which was coined to describe a scene based around the loosely ‘avant-garde sounds’ found not in the USA’s grandiose cities, but in the rural ‘backwoods’. Doran’s (2017) use of New Weird Britain follows this line of thinking, identifying much of this work as existing ‘outside the usual hip metropolitan city centres’. Perhaps that is where we see further references in the likes of Jorge Boehringer’s now defunct promotional efforts in Huddersfield dubbed New Weird Huddersfield, a reference to the towns comparatively rural existence when compared with the behemoth of Leeds on its doorstep. The use of the term is indicative of the spatial context of the music, often occurring outside of the metropolitan centres - in the provinces - like with underground

music bring located somewhat outside of, ‘at something of a remove from the mainstream’ (Graham, 2016: 4).

Figure 15. Leeds Weirdo Experimental Gig Listings poster (August 2024)

The term weird, separated from its spatial context, describes something which is inherently about difference. Different approaches to the use of musical instruments, different genres being combined, different artists appearing on the same label or different types of performance happening in the same space – doing things which would typically be deemed unconventional. Encouraging these different approaches to co-exist requires the active work of the scene participants to bring them together. The often unclassifiable, in-between nature of a lot of the n-au’s sounds - never quite aligning firmly with a particular genre - indicate a music built around this sense of difference, an aural dissonance, a ‘dissensus’ (Arnot & Fitzpatrick, 2016). The terminology is visible on posters and in zines, referred to on chalk boards outside venues, the names of ongoing events series and to build community around this inherent sense of difference (Figure 15). The n-au thus represents a particular outpost of the global weird music scene, the weirdo underground, where difference – in the broadest sense – is expected, celebrated and actively encouraged.

The weird music of the n-au employs an array of different approaches and instruments, from the expected to the downright bizarre. Following Mark Fisher’s (2016) suggestion that the weird is defined by ‘the conjoining of two or more things which do not belong

together', we can see evidence of this conjoining in the collaborative nature of the scene – which we will explore in the next section – but also in the merging of the musical and the non-musical. In this weird space, you might find guitars, bass and drums, the backbone of rock music's repertoire, but in the n-au played using extended techniques, beyond their intended function. Guitars are prepared with a plethora of objects, played with a milk frother or handful of pencils, sometimes left to feed back or strummed with a foot. Bass guitars lie horizontal, providing washes of low-end hum, rather than any structural rhythm or pulse. Drums may be thrashed at, played with free abandon and chaotic energy or used as resonant chambers, activated with buzzing transducers, the snare rattling gently in a feedback loop. Kazoos, jaw harps, ocarinas, nyckelharpas, bells and flexatones are found paired with synthesisers, samplers, saxophones and flutes – all deployed in ways which veer from precisely calculated to completely spontaneous. Equally, traditional instruments are used in nontraditional settings. Hydrophones pick up sounds from inside toilets while coil microphones amplify the hidden buzz of our electrical surroundings. Cassette tapes are cut apart and stuck back together, producing gradually decaying loops of magnetic sound. Toy keyboards are circuit bent to reveal hidden connections and sounds in their electronic apparatus. Field recordings capture everything from the mundane to the sublime, from the deeply mangled and buried to crystal clear presentations of banal everyday encounters. Audio collages are made from disparate, seemingly unconnected sounds to create bizarre, dada-esque passages of head scratching music, playing with the aesthetics of chance. People shout, scream and parse barely legible utterances, amplified or acoustic, layered ad infinitum. The immediate recognisable squeak of polystyrene used as is or mangled beyond identification. Sounds can be dense or sparse, drawn out at length or compressed into miniature form. These musical forms pull from a range of genres and techniques, from musique concrète to electroacoustic composition, free jazz to harsh noise, often straddling the line between music and non-music.

Despite the breadth of instrumentation employed, there are, naturally, some common threads that we see occurring across multiple nodes of the wider n-au, trends and techniques which appear tried and tested - idioms. The cassette is one of the primary commonalities across the translocal scene, not just a culturally significant form of distribution, but as a sonic apparatus itself. The tactility of the format as a recording and performance tool is widely acknowledged across the n-au, a constant over its 25-year history. Using the cassette as the prime sound source can be heard across releases such as Free Magic Show's *Polymorphous*, Hardworking Families' *The Belt Have Turned to Goo* or Stuart Chalmers' *Imaginary Musicks* series. These works use the humble cassette as the

prime sound source, from discarded educational tapes and looped field recordings to the textures of the format itself, the means of production aesthetically seized. Slight nudges of the transport mechanism invite ferric slips to accentuate the found sounds, bringing attention to the tactility of the format, used in an unconventional manner.

The aesthetic properties of tape, held in high esteem by many in the n-au, have been a central focus around which forms of collaboration have come to be. This is no clearer that with the ongoing *Blank Tapes* series from Wigan based label Steep Gloss, active since 2019. The project, currently up to volume 4, invites artists from across the n-au and further afield to submit an audio work composed entirely of blank tape, the emptiness of the format placed centre stage:

> The 10 artists were asked to submit an audio piece, with a duration of no more than 4 minutes, utilising blank tapes as the sole sound source. The pieces were then combined, top-to-tail, exquisite corpse style, to create a gestalt, resulting in the two distinct side long pieces presented here.
>
> The artists were also asked to submit a 'blank' image, leaving the interpretation of which up to them. These images were then printed onto semi-transparent paper, shredded and presented as the art accompanying the tape (Steep Gloss, 2022).

The result is a sonically rich exploration of the humble cassette tape, ranging from subtle pops and clicks to passages of mid-range wash and ominous low-end rumble. Artists from different corners of the translocal scene brought together through the medium, offering their own take on the label's invitation to submit, the results equally indicative of the breadth of practices which exist in the n-au. This can be seen as an anachronistic attempt at challenging the nature of the music industry in the digital age, a conscious decision to continue the legacies of the scenes that have preceded them or, as Howard Stelzer (2025) phrases it, simply 'a stubborn refusal to admit defeat'. Using these tools affords a revered 'sonic poverty' to such music, an act which can be read as a cognisant affront to the highly polished, perfected music production of today's mainstream (Monacelli, 2023: 72).

If the *Blank Tapes* series signifies artists approaches to manipulating and creating within the constraints of an outdated, anachronistic technology, there are artists in the n-au who engage in similar pursuits with more contemporary technological means. Seth Cooke's 2014 album *Four No-Input Field Recordings* places emphasis on the frailty and exploitation

of sonic artefacts present in digital apparatus. Whereas the no-input mixer works of the likes of Toshimaru Nakamura use the means of presentation to explore interior electronic worlds, Cooke's work brings the idea to the means of capture, rather than broadcast[65]. Like works which focus on the cassette, the use of the digital field recorder as an instrument itself, rather than just the means of production doubles down on this reformulation and subversion of convention, approaching the use of tools differently. Whereas a field recorder might be used to document tranquil environmental soundscapes, full of flowing streams and twittering birds, Cooke's focus on the internal negates any sense of serenity, instead alerting us to the hidden chaos of the increasingly technologized world. Piercing waves of digital hiss become a finite exercise in abstraction, a harsh noise wall which questions simultaneous fragility and potential of the technology.

The ongoing fascination with the limitations and possibilities of technology are a continuing thread of enquiry for experimental artists working within the confines of the n-au today. London based Zheng Hao's 2024 album *Harmonium II* released on Bezirk Tapes is another example working with field recorders as sites of sonic production rather the capture. The work is comprised of explorations in feedback, the album produced using the headphones of a zoom recorder placed close to the microphone, the resultant feedback tones then manipulated using a series of modular synthesiser processes. Rather than the minimally processed absurdity of the internal mechanisms placed centre field like we have with Cooke, Hao's work becomes rich in timbre and dynamic, the sonic artefacts of the experiment a point of departure for further manipulation, improvisation and composition, rather than a means and end in themselves.

In terms of the use of objectively non-musical material as a sound source, there are numerous examples of innovative approaches to how they are deployed in practice. Natalia Beylis' 2021 album *Variations on a Sewing Machine* is emblematic of such an act. In this, the sounds of a Singer sewing machine are amplified using a contact microphone and looped into rich passages which highlight the mechanical repetition of the machinery. The simple premise results in a unique musical experience, reminiscent of the early ideas of noise music's push to consider the machinery of the industrial world a potential creative resource, bringing the premise into the contemporary, whilst also inferring a reverence for the machine itself – a symbol of domestic DIY. Making use of materials, whether that be the discarded umbrella springs of Adam Bohman, the delicate glassware

[65] Toshimaru Nakamura is an artist who has been active since the mid-1990s, using only analogue mixers and internal feedback loops to create intricate compositions of tones and drones.

of Andie Brown, the metallic scraps of Yol, the sewing machine of Beylis or the ferric qualities of most anyone in the n-au, there is a definite focus towards De Certeau's (1984:29) idea of 'making do' as being a conscious tactical decision in the n-au, working with whatever material is to hand.

These examples illustrate just some of the processes and approaches to recorded sound that are present in the n-au. While some of the materials may be familiar, the techniques employed and results achieved are varied – they are different, they are weird. Without access to expensive or extensive equipment, the n-au practitioners must make do with what is available, improvising with the situation and the materials to create aesthetically different results. The lack of resources is not considered a hinderance in this instance but an invitation for sonic experimentation. Given the weird nature of this music and its inherently marginal appeal, its production and distribution become necessarily self-reliant, where the work of the practitioners who are actively involved in the scene are responsible for its ability to exist.

The Rituals of Recording

To say that many in the n-au are prolific would be an understatement. But with that prolificacy is an innate humility. People in the n-au are quietly prolific, slowly furrowing away on their own sonic experiments, revelling in the ego-cleansing nature of their weird works. Joe Murray (2016), in writing about a handful of releases for Radio Free Midwich, invites us to think about where this prolific tendency stems from:

> For many N-aundergrounders the release you hold in your hand and wrap your ears round is often the result of months of work and years of practice. But despite the hours that go into that tape, CD-R or download it is rarely a final statement. In fact, one of the key signifiers of N-AU activity is the restless work-in-progress nature of what we do. Those tapes just keep on coming. And why? Because there is more to uncover, more to explore...the individual idea seam may be heavily mined but the practice is part of the work; the work becomes the practice.

This thought brings us back to the very notion of experimental music, work which is concerned with ‘outlining a *situation* in which sound may occur, a *process* of generating action’ (Nyman, 1999: 4). From the idiosyncratic and deeply personal music of the individual to the interplay and exchange of collaborative recordings, their commonalities lie in the specifics of each situation and process. To pull apart those situations can help us to understand how the processes and actions come to fruition.

Individual Expression and Collaboration

One of the overarching themes of this thesis revolves around the need to build and maintain spaces for creative expression and community, and how that can be done with a degree of autonomy. While the collaborative and the connected are essential elements of the n-au, those which foreground the social nature of the scene, we must not ignore the importance of spaces of individual creative expression in the n-au.

Like with cassette culture before it, the n-au is assembled from a series of ‘individuals reaching similar conclusions in different locales’ (Bailey, 2012: 24). However, those conclusions are not always reached, or materialise, at the same time. The will to create, following one’s innate desire to become ‘distracted’ (Hayler, 2015b), can pre-figure any sense or awareness of a scene. There are those whose formative musical experiences are akin to the world of outsider art and outsider music, where their creative production happens without knowledge of anyone else doings similar things, occurring in solitude. Given the nature of much recording work in the n-au and its limited means, it can be created with a high degree of autonomy, each element of the process enacted by the individual. While performance relies on certain social and spatial relations, recording can be an isolated, individual activity. Thus, the epitome of DIY, as in do-it-your*self* is personified here. Therein lies much of its initial appeal to the n-au practitioner.

Whereas earlier ideals of the democratic potential of music such as Punk were personified by the simplicity of its musical form, most recognisable in the famous *this is a chord* drawing from punk zine Sideburns, it still required investment in the way of equipment and social ties to follow the final step of forming a band. What this illustration misses out is a guitar, the amplifier, the microphone, the drum kit, the social ties, the practice room - the materiality of the band. The epitome of three chord punk was the simplicity of its music, the low bar to entry, suggesting that these three chords are all anyone needs.

However, even something as simple as the playing of three chords, keeping some sort of time and coalescing with the rest of the band takes an element of musical proficiency and practice. What about music without chords, without instruments, without structure, what about the weird non-music found in the n-au?

The forms of sound found in the n-au hold a democratic potential in terms of their relative ease of access, alongside their ability to be produced in solitude, without the need for specialist equipment. Perhaps you gather a couple of guitar pedals and a contact microphone, use Opensource software all within the confines of your own laptop or improvise with objects found on the street or in a charity shop. You do not need a drum kit, a guitar, an amplifier, a PA or any of this equipment to start a project. Like the example we used earlier of Phil Legard (2022), sometimes all it requires are some 'freeware synths' and 'contact mics'. The amateur, or hobbyist, approach to cultural production in the n-au becomes realised in the process of making music, of recording. The ability to see the process of recording through with little external intervention is a large part of its immediate appeal.

Theo Gowans (2022), who records as Territorial Gobbing, tells me of how his foray into the world of the n-au materialised from his bedroom recording experiments, making weird noises and leftfield pop music on his own, putting it out into the world almost without a thought of who might receive these strange transmissions – music made simply 'for my own amusement'. After growing tired with the indie band life which his peers were involved in, his curiosity moved towards more experimental approaches to producing sounds, a freer approach to making music. These bursts of activity were born of an inherent will to create which, on occasion, are shared with friends - minute exchanges of individualised creative expression. In describing the process, Gowans (2022) mentions how the practice was seen as being 'ego-cleansing', something which Hayler (2022) is keen to highlight as being a typical trait of much music in the n-au, that much of the music and the way it is created being deemed 'a liberating thing'.

Certainly, within music which contains an element of improvisation and spontaneity, the ability to get lost in the music is a key part of its appeal. The impetus and drive behind creating and sharing this music is not one of calculation, but of an almost helpless abandon to succumb to the creative impulse, experiments which are not executed with anyone specific in mind. Having someone else listen becomes superfluous, a bonus to the main activity. Again, this is fundamental to Hayler's (2015) idea of the n-au, where he

states that the thought that 'someone other than themselves might appreciate their art is great, of course – none of us are without vanity, but not necessary', and that most in the n-au are 'compelled to create', either 'because they have to or they love to or both'. The ego-cleansing potential of music in the n-au is important to consider when we study some of the commonalities of the scene's practitioners. Luke Poot (2023), who records and performs as Lovely Honkey, tells me how one of the things that links all the people he knows in the scene is that they have 'fucking terrible mental health'. Andy Wood (2022) is keen to reiterate a similar point, pointing out that one of the common threads in his experience is that those involved in the n-au have varying degrees of struggle with mental health. Creating music and being involved with communities who share similar experiences can become key forms of solidarity in such instances.

The individual expression of practitioners in the n-au stems from a sometimes-intense fascination with the world of experimental arts and music. Joe Murray (2022) explains how most of the people he has encountered in the n-au have an incredibly rich knowledge of the subject of experimental music, speaking to a type of person which is 'obsessive' about the work. This knowledge is typically auto-didactic, not gained institutionally but through alternate, informal, self-directed forms of study. Duncan Harrison (2022) is quick to agree with this, stating that his involvement with experimental music comes from a fervent passion with the subject matter, where his favourite mode of engagement is the process of 'listening'. If an artist is doing little to promote their work, the impassioned experimental music fan will likely discover it regardless. My suggestion here being that those who have the innate desire to make such strange sound work also have an instinctive ability to seek it out, they are imbued with an intense curiosity for sound and always searching for more. Without making the work purposefully difficult to locate, those who are interested will inevitably find it. Like Ryoko Akama and Charlotte Roe (2022: 41) summarise in their report on the sustainability of DIY culture, 'do interesting things, make them as easy to find as you can, and interested people will find them'.

Beyond the individual creative pursuits in the n-au, collaborative work is of equal importance. In local clusters of n-au activity, collaboration is commonly the outcome of proximity. Being around others who share similar approaches to making music, conversations about collaborating naturally occur. However, at a distance these opportunities are more ambiguous, they must be teased out, enacted by the curious individual. It could be that travelling to make music with people on the other side of the country is unrealistic, both from a cost and time perspective, hence distance playing a

central role. Collaboration at a distance is a fundamental aspect of the n-au and is the point at which action has the potential to move from an isolated, individualised activity to a collective one.

Collaboration, in its live context, in the form of anything more than the soloist, requires a constant negotiation between the individuals present. It is a constant push and pull, a relationship which is continually being negotiated and renegotiated in the moment. Individuals play off each other, listen and respond, make space for one another in that moment – balancing agency and intent. These are spatiotemporal actions, formulated and realised almost immediately. Sometimes there is a rough structure and pre-planning, sometimes it is completely spontaneous. Like Bailey (1993: 112) states, 'the greatest rewards in free improvisation are to be gained in playing with other people […] the essence of improvisation, its intuitive, telepathic foundation, is best explored in a group situation.' Beyond the immediacy of improvisation in the moment, how can this form of music making operate at a distance? The immediacy of the call and response present in live performance becomes reshaped and reformatted at a distance. Distance presents individuals with a new environment within which they can experiment with the processes and forms of collaboration. Far from being simply the recording of a single session, collaboration in the n-au expands on the affordances of temporality. The immediacy of exchange is lost but what is gained is the benefit of time.

Neil Strauss (1992: 132) refers to the 'border-opening innovation' of recording a few tracks to tape then sending to a collaborator to finish during the cassette culture era, creating a 'global band' in the process. With the affordances of digital technologies and the internet, this process is streamlined, democratized. In my ongoing duo with Ross Scott-Buccleuch, Liminal Haze, recording is an activity which always happens at a distance. At the time of writing, we have 9 volumes of recordings. That's 37 tracks in total, around 7.5 hours of music. Not a single piece of that was created in the same room as each other. I live in Gateshead; Ross lives in Wigan. There are 125 miles between us as the crow flies. Exchanging files over the internet, sites such as WeTransfer have helped facilitate our collaboration - technology entangled in the process. How we engage in this process varies each time, working with different approaches to the affordances and limitations of distance. It usually begins with a selection of sounds being sent from one person to the other. These arrive as rough ideas, basic sketches travelling from one side of the country to the other. It might be a particular passage of drone music, left to run for a random length of time or something more dynamic. These recordings do not come with instruction

or direction, they are simply sonic materials for the other to work with, free to be arranged and manipulated in any way the other likes. We are, in essence, improvising with and alongside each other's material but doing so across an extended expanse of time and space. Removed from the immediacy of improvising in person, we are engaging in a process of call and response but over distance.

Instigating a collaboration is typically a straightforward undertaking, whether it is a social media message or an email arriving in your inbox, the line can be as simple as *Let's make a record together*. This initial spark then begins the propulsion of collaboration. We needn't have been in the same room together to suggest the idea; we certainly do not need to be in the same room to make the recording. More than likely, we might not have even met in person. Files can be sent back and forth - what began with postal collaborations being streamlined with file sharing platforms, responding to the changing technological landscape. The ease of exchanging sound allows for a level of collaboration which would previously have been impossible, artists working with the affordances of this highly networked form of communication.

Some artists in the n-au are serial collaborators, working on sounds with a new person at every chance, never tiring of the process. The aforementioned Territorial Gobbing is equally as likely to be collaborating with someone new as releasing a solo record[66]. While this is routine for many in the n-au, external contexts can facilitate an increased desire to collaborate. During the 2020 COVID19 lockdown, the abundance of time prompted many to embrace acts of collaboration, our enforced distancing revealing our desire for proximity even more. Cork based Jonathan Deasy (2022) explains how the pandemic encouraged a burst of activity, the isolation prompting him to reach out for new chances to collaborate, inadvertently opening himself up to a new scene in the process. What is interesting about Deasy's role here is the emergence into the world of the n-au at a time of crisis. While he had been performing and active in the local scene for some time, having this space of proximity removed during the pandemic prompted a recalibration of how things could progress. Deasy (2022) goes on to explain how over a period of a couple of years, he had many releases appear, some of which he had been 'chipping away at for years', others being relatively new, all realised during those unprecedented times. The process here involved reaching out to people beyond his local scene, using the likes of Twitter to start 'bugging people' and meeting them through these channels, ultimately leading to both

[66] Territorial Gobbing's collaborative work has seen releases with artists such as Stuart Chalmers, Malvern Brume, Pressure Cooker Relief Valve, Marija Kovačević and Carnivorous Plants, alongside playing in ongoing duo's such as Garbage Pail Kids and No Disc.

releasing solo material and forging connections across the n-au (Deasy, 2022). One of these connections was with London based improvisor Matt Atkins, which saw them collaborate on 2021's *Like Dust On A Mirror's Surface*, released on Tokyo based CD-R label Kirigirisu Recordings. That is Ireland to London via Japan. This was followed up with 2023's *Circulation of Subtleties*, released on French label Falt, another country to add into this network of connections. The technologies of file sharing platforms, the CD-R, tape and Bandcamp making these collaborations possible, new and old entangled in one.

Figure 16. Matt Atkins & Stuart Chalmers - Random Architecture (More Mars, 2024).

Sticking with Matt Atkins, he is yet another serial collaborator and solo recording artist in his own right[67]. Some of his collaborative works happen in person and is typical of how the close-knit improvisation scene in London operates, being a warren of ever-changing performers and pairings. But other releases take a wider berth, crossing the boundaries of the M25 to realise a notion of collaboration not limited by spatial constraints. Atkins' collaboration with Stuart Chalmers is a particularly interesting one to myself, partly because of how it intersects with my own involvement. Sending files back and forth, as is customary, the pair collaborated to produce 2024's *Random Architecture*, released on Greek label More Mars (Figure 16)[68]. One month after the collaborative cassette is released, I organised a performance for them in Gateshead at The Central Bar after Atkins

[67] Having made music with the likes of Diurnal Burdens, Kate Carr, Modelbau, Turmeric Acid, Slow Clinic, Stuart Chalmers, Zheng Hao, Peter Marsh and Ivy Nostrum alongside being part of the nebulous crackle box based improvising group which includes a roving cast of contributors including Vicky Sparrow, John Macedo, Regan Bowering, Lucia H Chung, James Shearman and Paul Margree.
[68] Note the Bandcamp download code included with the physical tape, a convergence of both the digital and analogue lives of the music.

reached out and contacted me (Figure 17). Having released music by both Atkins and Chalmers myself on Invisible City Records, I was thrilled to be able to host them both for a performance, even more so when I realised this was going to be as a duo. Much to my surprise, that evening was the first time they had met in person. They have improvised across a distance, realised this recording using various technologies, and were about to carry out a similar activity in person, despite only shaking hands for the first time that evening. Whereas the recorded material consists of six tracks, none breaking the six-minute mark, the live collaboration consisted of one 40-minute-long improvisation of minute textural refrains and improvised percussion. This example highlights one of those points where the positions of distance and proximity intersect, where those distances are closed, only to open again after the night of the performance as they head back to their separate homes.

Figure 17. Matt Atkins (L) and Stuart Chalmers (R) - The Central Bar, Gateshead (13th July 2024)

The varied approaches to recording exemplified here give a supplementary understanding of the importance of collaboration in the n-au and how it facilitates connection between individuals, whilst also acknowledging the shifting technological contexts they are created in. The nature of these collaborations, which may begin at the point of performance, then move on to recording, then back to performance – or follow the exact inverse – begin to

reveal how the networked, relation nature of the n-au emerges. However, what is particularly interesting is how these collaborations connect and mobilise different points of the translocal network, the artists converging around certain aesthetic forms.

Recording Tactically

In terms of the physical act of recording, in the n-au it is customarily done without the need for any professional equipment or space, executed with a dearth of resources. Practitioners utilise affordable means and record in temporal slips, occurring in the 'cracks' of capitalism, the spaces in-between the everyday capitalist logic, the exploration of which help signal the 'opening of a world that presents itself as closed' (Holloway, 2010: 9).

Given the hobbyist approaches to practice and the division of labour present in the n-au, many of the conventional roles involved in the production and distribution of recorded music are decidedly absent. There are rarely recording engineers or agents involved in the production and distribution of a work, all roles falling under the remit of the individual. Being involved in the process of recording from beginning to end, artists in the n-au can retain a degree of creative autonomy while at the same time experimenting with and developing skills in the process. In navigating the process of recording – capturing, editing and mastering - there also lies the potential to subvert, or ignore, conventional approaches. Many recordings are made straight to tape or straight to a recorder, no overdubs or major editing present – suggesting the desire for a more authentic, immediate document, the entire process contained within. This can then go straight to being made into a release, the processes streamlined. Alternatively, the process can be more layered, collections of sounds built up over time. This might be a meticulously labelled archive of precise field recordings or undated files documenting passing encounters made on a mobile phone. One might have the intention of capturing a specific sound, a zoom recorder employed and considered, or it could be the result of having a Dictaphone in your pocket on the off chance you might capture a strange creak or tone in the surrounding environment. This is where we get records such as Duncan Harrison's aptly titled 2021 release *Two Channels of Unedited Voice Memos* – a lo-fi collection of everyday occurrences presented as a dada-tinged poèmes simultanés – giving an intimate record of commonplace encounters.

Whether the work of the individual or the fruits of collaboration, recorded music happens within a specific context, within the conditions of possibility. Given the hobbyist approach of the n-au, recording is likely going to be done in whatever is deemed your spare time, the time set aside for leisure activities. Either that, or it is a subversive activity done by stealing time away from the day job. These approaches are integral to how much of the n-au can continue to operate. The adoption of 'clever tricks' and 'knowing how to get away with something' being some of the 'tactics' employed here in the n-au (De Certeau, 1984: xix).

Some practitioners in the n-au seem to be skilled at employing a 'clever utilisation of time', working with whatever temporal gain they can find (De Certeau, 1984: 38). Andy Jarvis (2022) outlines how in the n-au, people find a way to get the work done: 'you've got to adapt, you can't use an excuse, like, 'I haven't got time'' – there is always a way. This comes before relaying a story of how he and fellow Vile Plumage collaborator Darren Wyngarde purposefully make time to record, in the small in-between moments in their busy lives:

> So we both realise we've got no time. He works two minutes away from me. He works at the University, I work at the primary school. So I said I'll give you a lift one day a week and we'll record in the car for five minutes. We did that for eight months. And I've now eight months of five minutes, which works out about three hour's worth of stuff. It took a long time, but I've now got a bank of stuff. So it is about having that desire and forethought of like well how *can* I do it? Not *can't* do but how *can* I? And that's it (Jarvis, 2022).

There is no recording studio needed, no specific time set aside for the activity, it is done in the time which would usually be left to idle chatter. This is a space in-between, a gap, a fissure - the traversing between home and work life. Instead of commuter small talk, garbled Dictaphone works screech and scream as the Stoke-on-Trent landscape passes by the window, every bystander unaware of the actions taking place. The pairs work as Vile Plumage, always penned under pseudonyms Duke Burnett and Peter 'Bunny' Cropwell, is an exercise in noisy abstraction. Take 2022's *Excavation at Hobbs Lane: The Early Days of Community Radio (*Figure 18*),* released as a CD-R in an edition of 75 and a digital download on Burselm Crypt Recordings. Crude, ferric-soaked recordings are lathered with dry humour and deep unease. Kitchen sink realities played out on the rain-soaked streets of Stoke-on-Trent. Voices come in and out, accompanied by the distant additions of the

Burselm Community Radio Players[69]. Greyscale Hammer Horror inflected miniatures about snails for working class weirdos. Musique concrète for the proletariat. To think that these otherworldly radio plays were perhaps partly recorded on the way to work, or while walking the streets huddled in covered shopfronts, just adds to their bizarre charm[70].

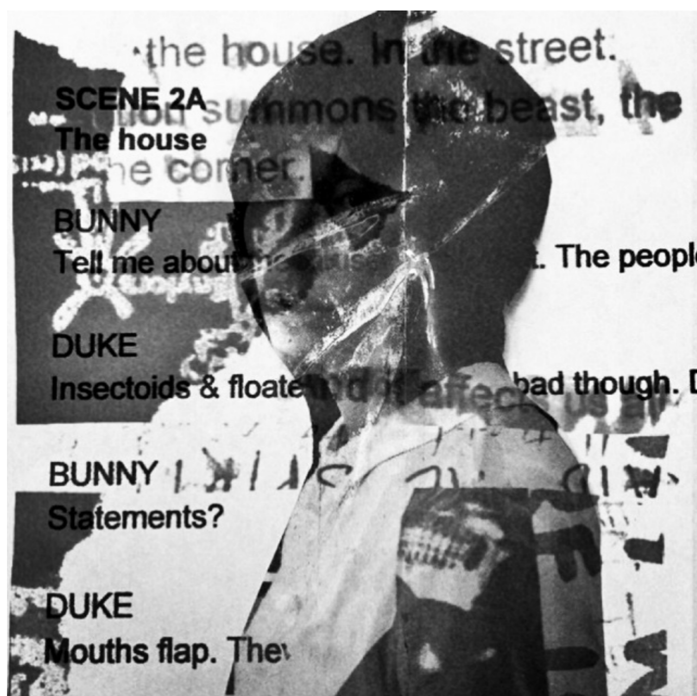


Figure 18. Vile Plumage - Excavation at Hobbs Lane: The Early Days of Community Radio cover (Burselm Crypt Recordings, 2022)

The separation between work and home life becomes momentarily suspended as they record in the liminal space of the car, the sound imbued with this hobbyist approach to practice. Despite Jarvis's recounting of the process in our conversation, these details are nowhere to be seen on the releases themselves. Information is as hidden as the underground nature of the music. The frugality of the means of production and the lack of resource act as creative constraints which, rather than quelling creativity, encourage it in a situation which it would otherwise be absent from. Such processes allow artists in the n-au to regain a degree of autonomy, employing clever use of time and space which otherwise would not be considered conduicve to the practice of recording music. This also goes to show how the type of music found in the n-au is able to work with such spatial affordances – starting a punk band in the car, on the drive to work, would be another story entirely.

[69] Listed on Bandcamp as Fiona Wilson, Joe Murray, Samuel Jarvis, Layla Wilson, Stacey Hammond, Andrew Wild, unknown man in The Bulls Head and Anji Cheung.

[70] Vile Plumage often record while walking through the town, taking respite in covered areas to make recordings.

Finding the time to record is a recurring theme in the n-au. When Hayler (2020a) outlines his concept of 'hobbyism', one of the key points is that engaging with the n-au, in whatever form that takes, is often done in his 'spare' time. Having spare time becomes increasingly difficult when the pressures of family and work lives of participants is increasingly stretched in the current era of what Guy Standing (2011) calls 'the precariat'. When speaking with Stuart Arnot (2022), who records solo as Smear Campaign and Rust Ruus, he tells me how this spare time is difficult to come by, especially since having children, relaying stories of conversations he has had with other artists he knows who have similar issues, the entirety of their output achieved by 'recording for an hour a night when the kids have gone to bed'. If we consider the electronic or tape-based works of many in the n-au, what connects them is their ability to be played in almost complete silence. Routed through a small mixer, pumped directly into headphones, the humble nature of the music can be formed in relative silence. From an external perspective, there is no clue as to what weird and wonderful sounds are being coaxed from these dying machines and being wired straight into the brain.

Thinking about how those in the n-a envisage and take advantage of these moments of temporal respite requires working tactically. Beyond the individual tactical moves that someone makes, how can this begin to work on the collective level? Learning from our communal approaches to finding the cracks and gaps in the current system requires sharing examples and resources, distributing and redistributing what is available - making explicit the tactics which have been used. Rory Salter's 2023 album *On the Floor, by the Door* released by Australian label Index Clean is important in this regard when we are considering exactly how someone adopting the practices of the n-au brings an idea to fruition, how the use of a tactical way of working transpires in practice and, unlike with the example of Vile Plumage, is made explicit. Salter's approach to recording this album explicitly references the specific nature of its creation in its adjoining liner notes:

> The two main ideas behind the music are to make use of domestic and work situations. Most of it was recorded in a new flat I moved into last year. The place had a really interesting acoustic and after so many years of making music in whatever flat I was living in I wanted to do something where you could really hear the qualities of the place where it was recorded and the surrounding area. So, many of the recordings are done in different locations in the flat, and often re-played back into the flat, using different playback and capture technologies. A lot

> of material was recorded whilst performing usual domestic activities and I would spend quite a lot of time running between rooms doing other tasks whilst recording. I named the track 'On the Floor, by the Door' because that's where I recorded it, on the floor, by the front door. In a similar way I've used my workplace in the pieces. I work as a sound technician at a university in the day, and as a sound engineer in the evenings a couple times a week. I've been thinking (and talking a lot of shit) about work and art making recently and I'm really into stuff where the persons found some way to include their day job in their art, in a way to re-purposes the skills, materials, time etc of work. So anyway I did a lot of this, really thinking about practices I've developed on the job and making the effort to borrow some really otherwise unattainable equipment. I thought a lot about space and acoustic-ness during the process so, again, a good deal of it is about me wanting sound to exist within a physical recorded space. Friends also feature quite a bit candidly, and crop up in recordings here and there. I guess there's a desire to get to a point of a 'life' music, where it feels a bit everyday and blurs the line, that's when things are most interesting to me (Salter, 2024).

What begins as a description of the aesthetic material of the work - the sounds of spaces, their acoustic properties and qualities - quickly moves to an outline of the process of its creation. Salter's subversion and reappropriation of the materiality of the workplace – in this instance the affordances of his position as a sound technician within a university - can be understood as a form of stealing from the institution. This works not only in the recorded material but when organising performances, with Salter (2024) stating 'if you need any more tech, anything more specific, I can bring it from here', using the resources of the University outside of its remit. Harney and Moten (2013: 26) remind us that 'one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can' and that in this 'undercommons' we find the place 'where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted'. In lieu of any freedom from work, whether that is though projects such as Universal Basic Income or other abolitionist politics, looking at how our current circumstances can be subverted and resources redirected is a step towards the merging of art and life that Salter is aiming for – a gesture reminiscent of one of the fundamental notions of the Fluxus movement decades earlier. In explicitly referencing the distinction between work and leisure, Salter's practice is located at the interstice between these two spaces. It is simultaneously both and neither. The materiality of the sound bears within it the materiality of its existence, the processes of its production are laid bare, made intentional. Salter is engaging in a form of De Certeau's (1984: 25) 'la perruque',

exploiting the affordances of the technology available at work whilst also diverting time away from work into something which is ‘free, creative and precisely not directed toward profit’ thus regaining a degree of agency in how his time is spent doing what he wants to do.

What is significant about this example is the explicit acknowledgment of this process in action. Working tactically and reappropriating time for one’s own endeavours is not new, but rarely is it presented so transparently it the n-au. The example of Vile Plumage uses a temporal gap between home and work life, but it is never made apparent, the music being all that we hear. Salter’s example goes further, the conditions of possibility being present both in the text provided and in its sonic signatures. The sounds we hear in *On the Floor, by the Door* are occasionally abstract, acousmatic in their presentation - within passages of voice and string, there are pieces of lo-fi ephemera, clicks and buzzes, the origin of which is only suggested. Knowing, as we do, the process though which it was recorded affords us a distinct insight, reframing our relationship to these sounds. The precision in naming the spaces of its construction allow us to realise the relationality and complexity of its connections with the contexts of work and resource.

While recording can be a collaborative activity between two or more individuals, an intimate network of sonic exchange, this system is expanded when these collaborations are distributed to the wider the n-au, bringing the listener into this network of relations. Distribution is therefore entangled with recorded music and thinking about this distribution takes us to a key point of mediation in the n-au, the record label.

Record Labels or Self-Released Audio

Hayler (2012c) states that despite the n-au being seemingly indifferent to the mainstream, ‘adopting some of the methods and vocabulary of the mainstream can be useful – a ‘label’ is still a good way to organise the presentation of music, for example’. The record label has become the de facto meeting point for recorded material in almost any sphere of music or sound, the interlocutor between artist and audience, the mediator of exchange and distribution. It acts as a central node which organises not only the distribution of

recorded sound, but as a facilitator of social exchange. Labels in the n-au are akin to what Robert Strachan (2007) terms a 'micro-label' in that they 'are not integrated within the structures of the media and music industry yet they are engaged with a similar set of practices: the sale, promotion and distribution of recordings'. While they may replicate some of the organising principles of the wider music industry, an important element of the n-au's pre-figurative practice is the resistance to replicating the exploitative tenancies that this mainstream has been known to adopt.

Running a record label becomes a rite of passage in the n-au. Whether you release a handful of CD-R's of your own work, under the auspices of a label created just for that act, or intermittently eke out weird sounds over a decade from a range of voices across the network, the label acts as the central point for this activity. Some labels have lasted years and decades, slowly ticking away without a concern over what happens outside of their remit, never seeming to be affected by external contexts. Others pop up for one or two releases then disappear as quickly as they arrived. The likes of previously mentioned labels Chocolate Monk and Matching Head have been a constant presence in the n-au, having been doing their own thing for the best part of three decades. Not far behind, labels such as Giant Tank, Poot Records, Sound Holes, Beartown or LF Records are quietly working away at their own pace, sometimes taking chunks of time away from being active, at others working their way into a sprint of creative fervour.

Some labels are short lived, have a few releases then fold in, making their small mark on the world for that short period of time, being no less important than any of the longer running names. I am thinking of labels such as Striate Cortex, Luxury Bucket or Discombobulate whose existence was brief but no less significant. Some of these labels exist to document a particular sub-scene or fruitful period in the wider history of the n-au. For example, labels such as Kirkstall Dark Matter, Cherry Row Recordings or Hairdryer Excommunication are almost completely synonymous with sounds which could be categorised under Hayler's (2014a) 'extraction music' banner, that being music which feels like it has been laboriously coaxed out of dying machinery. On the other hand, some labels reflect the breadth of genre in the n-au having no specific aesthetic remit, being a point where the weird, different, dissenual music of the n-au can co-exist. Taken individually, these labels represent the singular tastes of the record label owner, a personally curated playlist of their own sonic preferences. Taken collectively, they embody the broad aesthetic mix that the n-au has come to be associated with.

Like with the recurrent ebb and flow of individuals entering and leaving the n-au, new labels continue to surface, each approaching the task of circulating music in a different way. Hard Return (2025) is a net only label active since 2020 focussing on 'repetitive / persistent music' with a surprisingly diverse offering considering the seemingly constricting ethos, hosting releases ranging from the no-input drones of en creux's *The Water* to the queer power electronics of GENDERISTHEBASTARD on *Pansy Electronics*. Likewise, labels such as Cork's Krim Kram have only been operating since 2022 but have become a prominent melting pot where archival material from international experimental music stalwarts mix with releases from their UK contemporaries. Here, we have the likes of Smegma and Kapotte Muziek sharing space with LDSN & Yakki Da or Creep of Paris. Both Hard Return and Krim Kram have been carving their own distinct territories in the n-au, done so with differing approaches and using differing technologies which completement the whole – one focussed on name your price digital downloads, the other offering releases on a combination of CD's, cassettes and vinyl alongside full streams and paid downloads. The arrival of these labels, and the methods they have taken to working with sounds in the n-au, indicate that underground music is far from dead.

The record label's function is to release music, to give it a home, a space to exist. A label is the point at which recorded material goes from the private to the public, entering the economy of reproduction and distribution. How this is done is always changing, moving with ongoing changes in technologies that impact the recording, production and distribution of this material. Whereas the cassette and CD-R were originally heralded for their democratic potential, their ability to facilitate a somewhat autonomous economy of exchange and circulation, digital distribution has begun to take its place. In the n-au, there is a continual balance to be had in working with the affordances of these changing forms, whether relying on outdated formats can be positioned as a form of 'creative anachronism' to build new narratives or whether it is simply heralded as a form of nostalgia (Demers, 2017).

Beyond the production and distribution of recorded music, record labels act as a node of connectivity, an agent of relationality between the participants of a scene. Some labels operate exclusively on a local level, releasing material from within their sub-section of the wider scene while others operate at more of a distance, connecting different translocal nodes of activity. Given the social nature of the n-au, many labels' discographies can read like a list of close friends, a deep crosspollination which acts as a map of the networks of

the n-au. The reciprocal nature of the scene visible in these shared discographies and further expanded through the act of trading so common in the n-au.

Facilitating the Eternal Network

If translocality is predicated on the absence of a singular locus of activity, where the building of 'affective communities that transcend the need for face-to-face interaction' happens at a distance, then what connects these individual, localised parts of the wider whole (Bennett & Peterson, 2004: 9)? Sometimes it is the social relations that are built over time, finding kindred spirits and sharing an interest in weird music that makes this connection. It is also the record label which functions as an organised element that helps to facilitate this connectedness. The n-au is in essence another iteration of the 'eternal network', Robert Filliou's concept that was taken on by mail art enthusiasts and is described by Chuck Welch (1995: xv) as 'an unusual global village, a village created for people who don't often meet precisely because they cannot meet often'. The record label facilitates this connection at a distance. Like with the wider noise scene, as Novak (2013: 17) highlights in *Japanoise*, it is a result of the distribution of recordings that those outside of the immediate locale can engage with the work, helping to 'characterize intercultural relationships, paths of migration, aesthetic and expressive forms, and ideologies and imaginaries of cultural globalization'.

Record labels provide an insight into the networked nature of the n-au, tracing connections between different actors in the wider scene. Mapping the social, scenic relationships of the n-au can be done by examining the discographies of labels, where artists are seen collaborating and reciprocating, building a network through their shared creative practice. Studying the discography of Stuart Arnot's Total Vermin label, we first see a whole host of different pseudonyms, covering a range of his own projects, whether that is solo as Smear Campaign or in collaborations such as Acrid Lactations or Hard-Pan Trio. This is a label which, according to Idwal Fisher's Mark Wharton (2010) specialises in 'drone, fluxus, nether regions UK underground documentation', becoming a vital resource 'if you need to know what's happening beneath the Wire radar'. Examining the catalogue provides a few interesting paths to follow. Take releases by Usurper or Lovely Honkey as indicative here. One half of Usurper is Ali Robertson, whose Giant Tank label counts Arnot's Smear Campaign amongst its roster. Luke Poot is Lovely Honkey who also runs Poot Records. Poot Records similarly has released work by Smear Campaign, alongside Acrid

Lactations and countless collaborations between them, sometimes immortalised as The Lovely Honkey and his Acrid Lactations, sometimes as Acrid Lactations meet The Lovely Honkey Uptown. Present in all their individual practices is a shared dedication to improvisation and the absurd. Much of the work here could be classified as non-music, noise in the broadest of senses, all wrapped up in a decidedly Fluxus attitude where, as Poot (2023) states there is 'very low balance silliness and a very high bar of joy and reward'. Yet aside from the shared sonic aesthetics and mindset, what I intend to highlight here is the deeply interconnected, reciprocal nature of the n-au, the cross pollination that occurs in such a close-knit scene. This does not materialise as an explicit exchange, a release for a release - a contractual agreement - but is more natural, implicit, ingrained in the idea of sharing in the n-au. The relationships become cyclical, always flowing, welcoming others with each rise, without which the ongoing networked nature of the n-au ceases to operate.

Sarah Benhaïm (2019: 114) outlines how in noise culture, record labels tend to release music 'from with their own circle of friends', in part due to the 'emotional commitment' of the music taking priority over whatever commercial sense may lie there. This is certainly the case in the n-au, like I highlighted with the example of Total Vermin, where an ongoing assemblage of friends, acquaintances and collaborators becomes manifest in the labels catalogue. The small audience numbers for this type of music necessitates the closeness of its participants but also invites critique over how these practices can resist becoming exclusionary. Despite Hayler's (2015b) suggestions that people in the n-au 'whilst undeniably odd, are a friendly and welcoming bunch', there is still work to be done in addressing and rebalancing some of the potentially exclusionary politics of the scene. This is part of Fitzpatrick and Thompson's (2015) concern over entering spaces deemed 'experimental' or 'free' which often raise difficult questions with regards to 'gender relations, boundaries, limitations, and inclusion/exclusion.' While this concern is now a decade old, its questions are still poignant as, like they conclude, 'this work is never completed', it is an ongoing series of relations and exchanges being continually realised and negotiated. This is something Becky Mahay (2022), who records as Wild Rani, is also keen to point out, noting she has been faced with situations of exclusion in the scene, suggesting that the DIY, radical attitude many purport to hold is a façade, and that the idea of 'gatekeeping' and people 'holding the key', deciding who gets to play, is happening. It is important to understand how these imbalances can be addressed and, I suggest, it is both the agency of individual projects and that of the record label that this can begin to take place by advocating for a sense of criticality towards itself.

The affordances of distance allow for thinking of collaboration outside of the confines of the immediate locale. Following the suggestion that the n-au foregrounds a sense of heterogeneity in its work, how can this operate from different sides of the country? The project *BOTHBOTHBOTH*, initiated by Rob Hayler in response to a visual poem by Canadian concrete poet Derek Beaulieu, illustrates both the translocal and transnational instances of collaboration and networking that have come to be synonymous with the n-au, as well as highlighting an intermedial approach to practice (Figure 19). That this project saw its materialisation on the record label that I run only adds to my understanding of the processes behind it. The work consists of eight tracks by artists see monsd and Stuart Chalmers, 3 parts each and two bonus tracks[71]. These tracks are built from recordings taken from 18 individuals, many of whose names feature in the pages of this thesis, responding to a concrete poem by Beaulieu that Hayler and Chalmers stumbled across in the pages of the pamphlet *BOTH BOTH*. As Hayler points out in the liner notes to the release, the impetus to work in such a way was inspired by Beaulieus's decision to make much of his work available in the public domain, as free PDFs on his blog, with the introducing paragraph explaining his reasoning:

> By releasing books as PDFs in to the collective commons, writing can better engage with new, liquid, forms of reading and collaboration. I believe that releasing my writing online for free encourages new and unexpected ways of people engaging and responding with the writing; it will encourage experimentation and reaction. I encourage authors to scan your publications & release them online as a free PDFs. So here you go, I'm giving it all away (Beaulieau, 2025).

[71] see monsd is Rob Hayler's post-Midwich recording pseudonym.

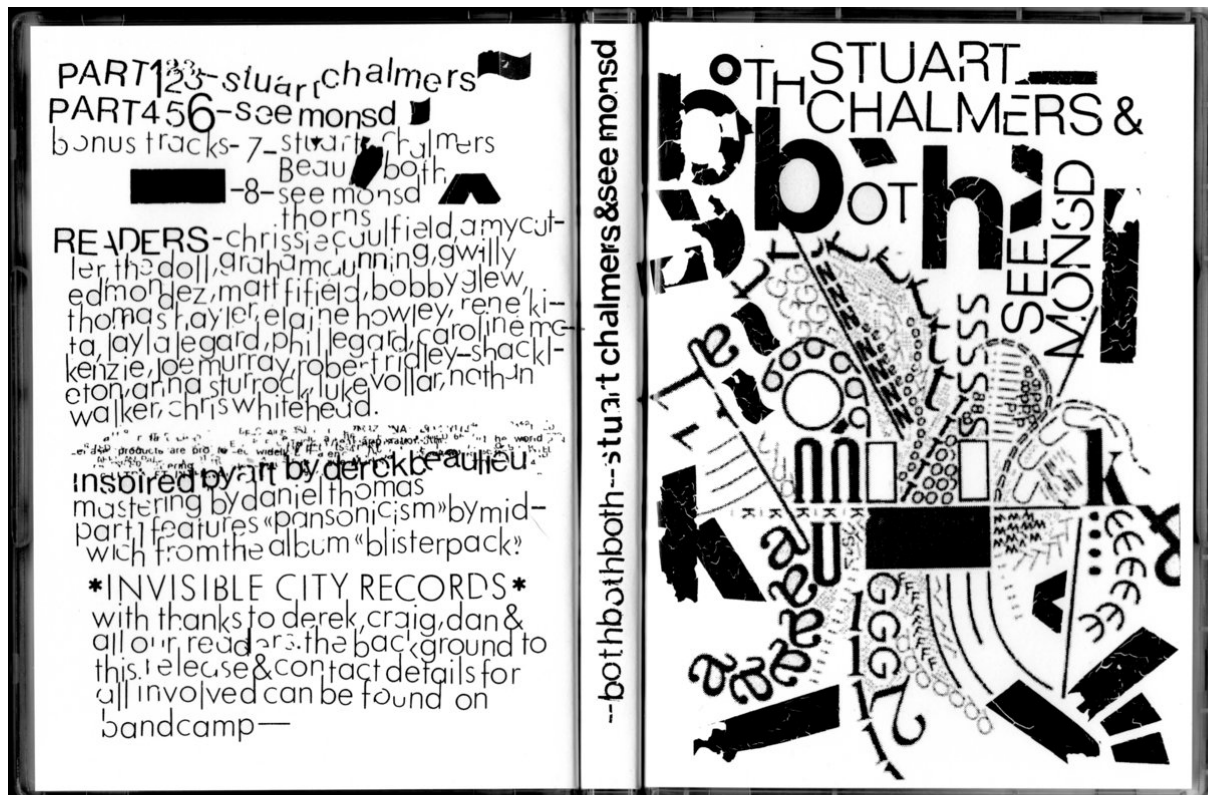


Figure 19. see monsd & Stuart Chalmers – BOTHBOTHBOTH (Invisible City Records, 2019)

Beaulieu's sentiment is acted upon by Hayler and Chalmers to the letter. Even if using it in their duo collaboration would have sufficed, the inclusion of a range of additional voices in the project exemplifies the notion of expanding and continuing the external network. The release itself was made in an edition of 50 copies, over two CD-R's with artwork provided by Beaulieu listing all the contributors, alongside the original poem and additional concrete work[72]. The full list of individuals involved is a microcosm of social activity which represented part of the scene at the time the album was made, with everyone involved having some connection to the n-au. As with almost all Invisible City Records releases, the digital download on Bandcamp was listed as name you price, available at no cost to anyone who was interested. Additionally, the unedited recordings of each contributor were made available (and still are), alongside the original publication by Beaulieu, thus allowing for the continued openness of creative publication, leaving source material there for those who may be interested in working with it, in whatever form that may take.

[72] The full list of contributors is: Chrissie Caulfield, Amy Cutler, The Doll, Graham Dunning, Gwilly Edmondez, Matt Fifield & Anna Sturrock, Bobby Glew, Thomas Hayler, Elaine Howley, Rene Kita, Layla Legard, Phil Legard, Caroline McKenzie, Joe Murray, Robert Ridley-Shackleton, Luke Vollar, Nathan Walker and Chris Whitehead.

In discussing recording at the beginning of this section, I suggested that the ability to collaborate without the limitations of proximity was a key element of collaboration in the n-au. The agency behind the decision to collaborate is enacted in differing ways. In the case of *BOTHBOTHBOTH*, it is two artists who initiate the process of collaboration, but it can also be a record label that holds this potential as facilitator of this process.

Beyond the remit of a single release, the label holds curatorial agency in helping to create new space, where the breadth of those involved in the n-au can grow, its social structure renewed. Speaking to those whose practices include running a record label, there is a growing consciousness about who their record labels are releasing and representing, something which I believe is indicative of the n-au's ongoing critical turn. A conscious shift away from existing solely within that close circle of friends is a way to increase the circumference of that circle. Graham Dunning (2022) tells me how his Fractal Meat Cuts label set out to specifically look for artists who 'either haven't had a release before or who aren't that proactive'. This coincides with a conscious effort to address the historical gender imbalances that have existed in experimental music scenes, the 'boys club' that Hayler (2015a) refers to. Actively searching out for new voices embodies the active mindset of the n-au. Rather than waiting for someone to submit, people like Dunning are using their positions in the scene to encourage the discovery of new voices, moving from a sense of passivity to activity.

Dunning (2022) goes on to explain how he consciously tries to reach out to women and non-binary performers to release on the label but does so in a humble manner typical of the n-au, as he puts it, 'sort of lead by example, and try and keep it quite mixed without making a big deal about it'. Despite the quiet way this is approached, there is still a conscious effort to address an imbalance. Fractal Meat Cuts' discography is thus varied, both aesthetically and culturally. Here we find albums such as Kate Armitage's *Benefits Claimant* - domestic free improv viewed through a feminist lens of de-mystification - or the geographic, sonorous excavations of Amy Cutler's *Örö Tape (Fieldtrips of the Damned)*. Dunning (2022) points out that if he had just relied on releasing music that had been sent to him, 'it would have just stayed all blokes and all white probably'. In purposefully shifting the dynamics of the label to include a wider variety of voices, the label becomes more diverse both in its sonic palette and cultural demographic. Not only that, but in representing a wider proportion of society, how people interacted with the label has changed. In doing so, the demos coming into the inbox began to shift in line with what the label had begun to create: 'I found that when I'd released more stuff by women

and non-binary people, I got more demos from women and non-binary people' (Dunning, 2022).

Outside of individuals actively searching out for different voices, the ethos of a label can also impact who submits music. Like Dunning's (2022) example of a label whose visible output began to encourage submissions from those who were not exclusively white and male, other labels in the n-au have worked within specific aesthetic constraints which look to encourage different approaches to musicking. Wigan based label Steep Gloss has a particular approach to this. Their listing on Bandcamp states its intention clearly: 'A UK tape label specialising in collaborations since 2019. Focusing on unclassifiable, bewildering, abstract, dislocating, sinister, conceptual, absurd, dadaist and melancholy sounds from duos and upwards....' (Steep Gloss, 2025). The label's raison d'être is to encourage collaboration, bringing people together. In rejecting solo works from having a home on the label, Steep Gloss makes space for collaboration exclusively. In purposefully limiting the type of music that the label releases, it actively encourages communal forms of music making, reiterating Small's (1998: 10) idea of music as being something which occurs 'between human beings'. Steep Gloss' approach discourages a singular mindset, creating a space where plurality can flourish. Releases on the label cover in person experiments, collaborative live recordings and transnational chance-based indeterminacy as just a couple of examples. Despite limitation on who can release, there are seemingly no limitations on the aesthetic variety, hosting everything from the dada electro of Garbage Pail Kids to the dense, textural drones of Extra. While any releases by the label feature artists from within the confines of the n-au, its scope moves beyond, seeing experimental artists from across the world contribute and find a home here, highlighting the n-au's variously entangled relationship with the wider reaches of experimental music.

Goodwill as Currency

The notion of the gift is deeply ingrained in the n-au, where looking to the idea of 'goodwill' as being the main currency in the n-au can help to reshape our relationship to the economics of a label (Hayler, 2011). Generosity, sharing and exchange are key to foregrounding goodwill as a currency. Many times, I have been attending a performance when a hand reaches into a bag, pulls out a CD-R and it slides effortlessly into my palm. It is not a grandiose statement of exchange, plain for all to see, but a subtle transfer of

cultural material moving from one person to another. I will highlight how this work in practice with two examples.

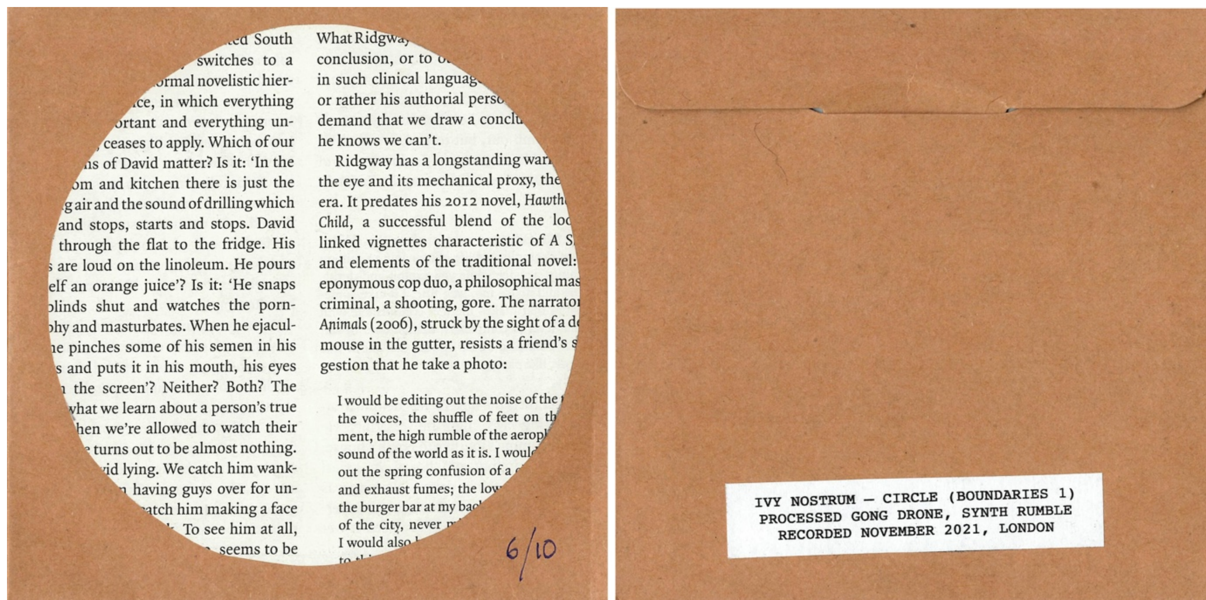


Figure 20. Ivy Nostrum - Circle (Self Released, 2021)

Ivy Nostrum's *Circle* is one such release, produced initially as a gifted CD-R in a run of 10 copies (Figure 20). Observing the back of the minimal cardboard sleeve, we see each one holding a short description of the sounds contained within. The front is pasted with a circle cut out from an issue of the London Review of Books, the disc's cover left blank. Putting this together would have taken about an hour, maximum. A small but considered gesture. This CD-R was handed to me during 2021's Boundaries Festival in Sunderland, passed to me unexpectedly by a friend I had not seen in a number of years[73]. After the festival, I slip the disc into the CD drive and bask in an hour's worth of heavily processes drones. There is no expectation of reciprocation but simply an act of giving.

Another example of this type of gift is in the work of Posset. I could pick from many releases here, as his primary form of disseminating his record work is as a gift. Walking into a gig, a hand reaches into a shoulder bag to pull out a CD-R prepared for that evening. Whether it is housed in a stamped cardboard sleeve, a rough photocopy in a plastic wallet or a foldout A4 sheet meticulously detailing the impetus behind each track, Posset's work encapsulates his goodwill with an embodied lo-fi sincerity. Coincidentally, 2024's *Eyes Like Macioce* was handed to me during that year's Boundaries festival, a serendipitous connection between these two examples (Figure 21). The CD-R is a

[73] Note the date - November 2021. This was, for me personally, the first series of performances I had attended after the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

compilation of sorts, a collection of recordings which were yet to find a home. Presented here, they demonstrate the ongoing nature of recording as a means of documenting a practice which is always a work in progress. They become snapshots of a particular period, reflecting the surrounding socio-cultural contexts alongside any momentary aesthetic fixations that may permeate the sounds.

Figure 21. Posset - Eyes Like Macioce (Self-Released, 2024)

In a world where almost everything is shared via the always on mode of social media, this type of sharing feels different, more personal, subversive. It would be easy to dismiss this as an insular practice, by way of its limited distribution. Surely, if you're not one of the 10 people to get a copy of *Circle* then there is no chance of hearing it. Thankfully, that would be incorrect. Interestingly, both *Circle* and *Eyes Like Macioce* live a double life in the physical and digital world. Both releases are also available via the artists respective Bandcamp pages. Further, both are listed as name your price downloads, allowing anyone anywhere in the world to download these pieces of music. If the act of giving, of gifting music from one person to another is inherently relational, it occurs in two distinct ways through these two concurrent forms. Whereas the CD-R goes from hand to hand, in a place of proximity, the digital download appears as a gift at a distance. Anyone can accept this gift; it does not have to be directed towards a particular person. Therein lies the democratic potential of the digital domain - its ability to build connection over distance. While there is no explicit expectation of reciprocity in this act of sharing, it can encourage a reframing of how art and music can circulate. By giving music away for free and doing so in a personal, individualised exchange, there is an attempt to reverse the alienation which

occurs in commodity exchange. Finally, the exchange present in these two examples highlight the very notion of doing it yourself. Recorded, produced and distributed by just one person, without the need for even something as fundamental as a record label, personifies the 'anintermediated' nature of underground practice (Graham, 2016: 12). Without the need for any external mediation, the act of the gift simultaneously provides an opportunity to retain a degree of creative autonomy for the individual artist. However, it must also be noted that Posset has no social media presence and discovering his music must come down to the curiosity of individuals – it must be sought out. Therein lies a lot of the paradoxical nature of such marginal music.

Aside from the gift, goodwill can be manifest in the trade. Hayler (2011) states that 'trading is of course the lifeblood of the scene'. Trading is historically associated with many democratic forms of culture, with specific attention being placed on the cassette culture and mail art movements. Joe Murray (2022) explains the specifics of the trade in the n-au: 'I think our trades are very much artist to artist, there's that purity to it that I really like. It's like, we know there's no money kicking about, but you know, I like your stuff, you like my stuff, hey, let's set something up.' Labels and artists often exchange releases, a like for like swap without the need for money to be involved, the cultural works bearing their own non-monetary value in these moments. However, as idealistic as this may first appear, these cultural artifacts have an economic value attached to them, even if it is not outwardly recognised as such. This invites us to question how the process of recording and distribution can be economically viable in the n-au.

Material Economies

> *I spent around £30 on blank cassettes and cases. 30 in total. I bought some labels in bulk and designed the artwork on my computer using Inkscape, the Open-Source alternative to InDesign. I used my barely functioning inkjet printer to print both the labels for the tape and the artwork for the first release on Invisible City Records. While not exactly keeping a rigorous record of the costs being accrued, it's safe to say the first release cost me around £50 to £60.*
>
> *After the first few releases, I began sending the artwork off to a local printing company as my printer was just not up to the task. The price for printing was only*

marginally more if printing more than one release worth of J-Card's so I'd save them up, get as many printed at once to keep costs low. I would sell the tapes for £4.00. 20% of the copies would go to the artist as their payment for the work. The rest would be sold, given away or traded. If I sold all remaining copies, I would have broken even, just about, with enough money to go towards helping fund the next run of tapes.

This is the formula I used in all 10 years of running Invisible City Records, give or take. At some point, prices slowly crept up. The cost of tapes was increasing so the prices had to reflect this as otherwise I just couldn't make it work. My wage from my retail job wasn't exactly lining my pockets with spare cash. I would mostly release things in a run of 50. There would always be (except for those releases which were fundamentally analogue only - the exception to the rule) a digital download which was name your price. My firm belief was that no one should be restricted from listening because of their economic situation. If you wanted to buy a cassette then you could, but I didn't want to limit who could access the music. Over the years, I probably spent hundreds, if not thousands of pounds on the label. I don't think I ever "made" any money. That didn't matter at the time though.

I was able to save costs sometimes. When ordering tapes, there'd be a few blank cassette shells put in the box to help secure the parcel. These were kept aside until I had enough for one run of tapes, meaning I only had to order the tapes themselves next time. A small saving, but a saving nonetheless. When working my "day job", I'd make use of the laser photocopier, much better than the one I owned, using it to print the tape labels and sometimes the artwork. I would hoard used envelopes to send out orders, hoping that they bore an unfranked stamp to save even more[74]*.*

At some point, my ability to keep on top of dubbing tapes was waning. I made the decision to get tapes produced "professionally". In hindsight, this was the point where it started to fall away from me – alienation setting in. While it cost a little more, my time was freed up. Running the label was becoming burdensome so

[74] Whereas unfranked stamps could be occasionally found on envelopes and reused, the QR coded stamps that the Royal Mail introduced in February 2022 making this practice unviable.

easing up on the time taken for each release would, in theory, make it easier for me to run.

However, as more time passed, I realised I was feeling increasingly distant from the process of running the label. I'd passed on the means of production and in turn, fallen out of love with the process. At some point, you have to admit defeat. I could see the DIY ethic of the label getting further away from me and decide that at that point, I'd have to hit pause. I've not yet hit play again.

The DIY ethic in running your own label has been said to serve as a 'demystification of the [music] industry' where the affordability and accessibility of the means of production allow for a democratisation of the process (Spencer, 2008: 286). These ideals of demystification and democratisation were embedded in the Punk movement, where the simplicity of its musical form encouraged broad access, furthered by artists and labels providing explicit outlines of how someone else could do it themselves, personified in Scritti Politti's 1980 publication How to Make a Record. Sarah Lowdnes (2016: xxv) draws attention how many of the most prominent 'independent' labels - like Factory Records, Dischord and Rough Trade - attempted to redefine how a label could operate, creating a space where 'the interests of the artistic community took precedence over wholly commercial concerns'. This non-commercial mindset translates to more marginal scenes; these ideals being realised on a micro scale. Writing about a handful of DIY 'noise' labels, Sarah Benhaïm (2019: 113) points out how many of these record labels are considered a 'leisure activity separate from professional sources of income' - a hobby - and that most of them are 'all run by one person'. The fringe nature of record labels in the n-au and their lack of any real resource sees them relying on affordable, yet functional, means to produce and circulate material. This, for the most part, comes down to the formats used.

Recorded music, from its very first instance, is mediated and contained in a format, from the initial wax cylinder to the mp3. While much underground music, as compared with its mainstream counterpart, exists in an 'anintermediated' form usually occurring as a 'participatory set of relations' between individuals it is still mediated to some degree by a format (Graham, 2016: 12). Speaking with Hayler (2022) about how he came to conceptualise the n-au, he is keen to point out that much of the activity he had witnessed was encouraged by the availability of a particular recording format, the lowly CD-R:

> Something that was really important but isn't talked about enough was the sudden availability of cheap CD-Rs. I think CD-Rs really kind of pushed it all forward because tapes were out of vogue at the time. And it was just very, very easy to buy a bundle of 50 CDs. You could print out covers at work or whatever. And so, I decided to start a CD-R label, which was called Fencing Flatworm Recordings.

There is an ever-changing, deeply embedded relationship with the technologies of production and distribution at play in the n-au, realised in the adoption and rejection of a particular format. Despite the prevalence of the cassette in the scene, the CD-R is noticeable for starting what I would call the second wave of this format led influx of self-organised and self-released activity in the noise and experimental music scene around the turn of the century, the time that Hayler (2009) dubs the ‘pre-mp3 international CDR underground’. Picking up from where the cassette left off, the increased affordability, accessibility and ease of distribution of the CD-R being the three main factors which helped it to become the true underground format. For little up-front cost, a stack of blank CD-R’s and plastic sleeves can be bought, the audio burnt to disc using a home computer, then slipped into your pocket and given out to whoever passes by. No real specialist equipment is needed, no pressing plant required. You can slip 20 or so CD-R’s neatly into a jacket pocket, ready to be handed out at the gig amongst like-minded weirdo’s or posted across the world in a slim, letter sized package with the cheapest stamp attached. If cassette culture paved the way for a democratic approach to the production and distribution of self-released audio, the CD-R opened it up that little bit further, the lower cost of production facilitating a rejuvenated scene.

Despite the prominence of the CD-R in the n-au, the cassette is one format that continues to fall back in favour, having seen surges of popularity and disfavour throughout the history of the n-au. Hayler (2010) is quick to critique the n-au’s fixation on the cassette, where he has seen himself falling out of love with the format he once held in high esteem, especially due to resurgences in its popularity outside of the n-au, remarking that ‘once something is so mainstream as to be in The Guardian it is officially over’. Such a position aligns with critics like David Keenan (2015) who, in pronouncing the underground dead, critiques the commodification of the cassette, where it has shifted from being ‘a bulwark against complete co-option,’ to just another commodity of hipster culture, a ‘mere fetish’.

Stuart Arnot (2022) explains how part of the way he was able to run his label Total Vermin was due to his proximity to Stockport based supplier Tapeline, being able to pop by and chat about tapes, getting them delivered to his home, all the more worthwhile as then ‘it was only 9 pence for a tape’. Ask anyone in the n-au about Tapeline and they’re likely to have some experience. It provides blank tapes and shells to those who want to dub releases at home, available in an array of colours and lengths, from the standard black tape with plastic shell to a multi coloured combination housed in a clamshell display case. Alternatively, if you want to offload the means of production elsewhere, Tapeline will take care of the whole process for you. Simply send them your digital files and artwork, wait a few days then a fully dubbed and assembled run of releases arrives at your door. Ross Scott-Buccleuch (2021), in an article for TQN-aut’s pamphlet *DIY Music Guide*, outlines how running a cassette label in the contemporary climate is a balance between ‘time and cost’ - of the cost of dubbing tapes yourself versus the temporal benefit of getting them made somewhere else. Using a hi-fi separate bought from eBay and dubbing tapes at home keeps costs low but is expensive in terms of the time required. Since many in the n-au are producing these releases in their spare time, the ability to keep up becomes difficult. Unlike the CD-R, tapes are duplicated in real time. Sure, you can daisy chain a few cassette decks together, but each run of duplications still lasts the entire length of the tape. If you are making a run of 50 C90 cassettes that could be potentially 75 hours’ worth of dubbing. On the flip side, sending tapes away to be ‘professionally duplicated’ saves time but cost more money up front (Scott-Buccleuch, 2021). Whereas the initial impetus of cassette culture and the CD-R underground was, either explicitly or implicitly, about seizing the means of production as much as one reasonably could – of doing it yourself with a degree of autonomy - the rising costs associated with doing so have impeded this independence. The radical potential of the form has been lost in the move to producing a mere commodity. For a scene whose premise is based on creative experimentation and difference, quite often the modes of production and distribution are relatively orthodox.

As interest in outmoded technologies ebbs and flows, it becomes increasingly difficult to source hi-fi separates to dub tapes at home or even source cheap blank cassettes themselves. Like with the use of tape as an instrument, the cassette tape as a format has gained popularity in both underground and more mainstream spaces, the once forgotten technologies now becoming desired for their nostalgic charm – a surge in prices following. On the other hand, the increased appetite for the format has seen growth in the number of companies offering dubbing services. Can using a cassette as a format retain the

independent spirit it once has or is it now relegated to the depths of yet another formerly subversive material becoming a populist nostalgia fix. For some, tape is what they have always known, not an aesthetic choice but a necessary one. For others, they have arrived at the format without any of that initial nostalgia. Kieran Curran's (2016: 36) research into Scotland's contemporary cassette culture also points out tapes increasing association with 'cool capitalism's exploitative tendances', where some of his interviewee's question why those who weren't brought up with cassettes opt to use them now. Perhaps this is an instance of what Joanna Demers (2017) terms 'creative anachronism', where rather than the format being a nostalgic choice, the use of the cassette represents a path for navigating the future: 'if elements of the past, such as 1980s tape culture, are used as starting points for fictions, the tenor of the activity changes to burgeoning creation'. Despite these continuing surges of popularity, Benjmain Duester (2025) argues that the cassette will always continue to exist in DIY music scenes, left to 'reel on unperturbed by occasional celebrations and raised eyebrows'. In the n-au, there are those who are following this line of thought, the use of the tape regaining its marginal status, actively resisting any push to professionalise the practice – keeping it a subversively amateur affair.

Figure 22. Food People / Human Heads (Cardboard Club, 2022)

Labels such as Robert Ridley-Shackleton's Cardboard Club proudly display a no-fi aesthetic in every release. Tapes are imbued with his own distinct take on the lo-fi approach to cultural production. Aping the visuals of early cassette culture, Cardboard Club releases have stark, black and white photocopied artwork, with the text being handwritten in his distinct house scrawl (Figure 22). Flimsy paper inserts are reproduced cheaply, photocopied en masse and cut (almost) to size. Marker pen emblazons the coloured cassette shells with the releases title. There are no paper labels that have been run through a LaserJet printer, no desire to duplicate with precision. Like Monacelli (2023:

104) argues, lo-fi is not just an aesthetic choice but a practice bound up with the processes of its creation, ‘a practical critique of the material conditions’ which create it. Where much popular music is produced to exacting aesthetic guidelines, such practices can be read as an attempt to subvert the perfection that comes with them. While it would be easy to consider these choices as simply design, the quick and easily reproduceable covers speak to the action of democratic approaches to production and distribution. Equally, there is an aesthetic preference here for the black and white, lo-fi graininess of the photocopier. These aesthetic choices are, I believe, a step beyond the mere aestheticization of the format, looking to tape as a symbol of resistance, attempting to reimbue the format with its original intention of ‘action’ over ‘design’ (Bailey, 2012: 26).

Figure 23. Carnivorous Plants – Stretch Out Over An Empty Place and Hang the Earth Upon Nothing (Liquid Library, 2022)

We can observe other ways of subverting the creeping professionalisation of DIY in another Bristol label, Liquid Library. Many of their releases come as standard – housed in a cassette shell with a printed J-card - but some feature distinct approaches to packaging and presentation. Carnivorous Plants’ *Stretch Out Over An Empty Place and Hang the Earth Upon Nothing* seems to be standard at first glance - scribbled crayon and pencilled marginalia surround a found magazine image, all hosted on a brown paper backing. Slip it out of the case and we realise the paper is actually half a manila envelope cut down to size (Figure 23). Not only is this an economically affordable way of reusing waste material, but it has also its own outsider charm. The label prides itself on being ‘always low cost and always low fidelity’, releasing ‘music for whatever the opposite of the masses is’ (Liquid Library, 2025). Some releases are CD-R’s, each with individually collaged covers. Others are crude drawings on the back of old flyers. These releases are instilled with the

hobbyist approach to cultural production, the use of recycled materials acting as an affront to the lure of professionalisation, a resistance to a normalisation and aesthetic flattening of the form.

With both Cardboard Club and Liquid Library, their use of lo-fi production methods goes beyond a simple nostalgia for the analogue, demonstrating how the adoption of a format such as a cassette can retain a degree of creative autonomy in the era of its rising commodification. Rather than the alienated labour that comes with the increased professionalisation - personified in the offloading of production to external manufacturers, the process becoming increasingly separate from the means of production - these artists and labels are revitalising how the use of the format can be a site of cultural resistance to the mainstream.

Aside from the materials of production, the modes of distribution are equally challenging in the contemporary climate. In a post-Brexit UK, restrictions and sanctions on international trade have directly impacted the way the record label functions. Even though a record label in the n-au is miniscule compared to the wider ramifications of trade restrictions on the economy of the UK, it is not immune. Whereas the affordances of the postal system once heralded new, democratic forms of participatory, networked art the increasing restrictions on how this is used are making such opportunities more difficult to navigate. Prices of postage have been increasing steadily, now reaching a level where they are almost equivalent to the cost of the production of a cassette. Even sending something as innocuous as a CD-R in the post is becoming a costly endeavour. Considering distribution of recorded material makes up much of the transnational noise and experimental music scene, changes in customs have made these processes a lot more difficult. More rigorous restrictions on labelling and documentation for sending objects overseas has impacted even the most amateur label. It used to suffice just ticking the “gift” box on a customs form when sending to the USA or elsewhere outside of Europe, but now that same form applies within Europe. Stories of extortionate import duty, countless rejected packages and lengthy delays make the initially expansive network afforded by the postal system progressively fragile as a part of the n-au’s economy. The autonomy of running your own label is reliant on and respondent to the wider contexts which allow it to circulate.

With the increased bureaucratic structures of the system, the n-au amateur begins to be forced to comply, assimilated into the record label as business mindset. This impact has

been twofold. First, these structures have seen a push towards the professionalisation of labels in the n-au, veering further away from the democratic, self-reliant ideals of the DIY approach. Where once it may have been about releasing the strangest and weirdest sounds for a small group of peers has now turned into an administrative ordeal - a lot of work for a hobby. Secondly, because of this, the increased concern over doing things right to avoid any potential sanction has been enough to goad small labels into simply calling it a day to avoid the stress. Post-Covid, a growing number of labels have ceased operating, the likes of TQN-Aut and Verz deciding to call it a day. Similarly, the restrictions on being able to produce and distribute physical material has seen a move to labels becoming digital only, any semblance of autonomy left in the use of a physical format not being worth the inconvenience. If the independent nature of the formats which have served the n-au thus far become unsustainable, where does the label in the n-au go as an alternative?

Bandcamp and its Alternatives

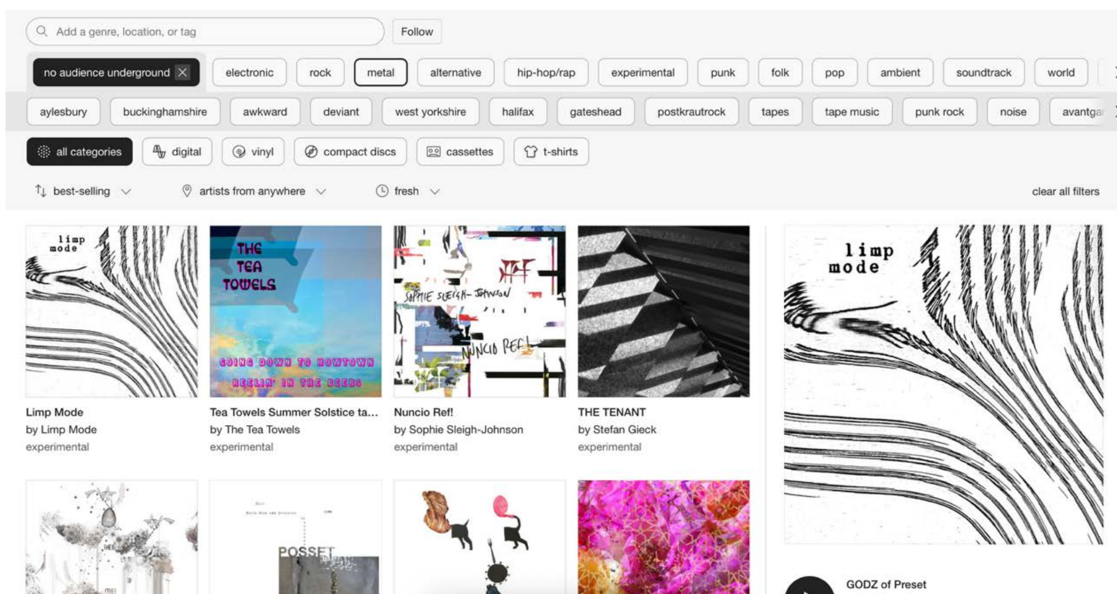


Figure 24. Screenshot of a search for the term 'No-Audience Underground' on Bandcamp (2025)

One of the most significant changes to the distribution of recorded work in the history of the n-au is Bandcamp. Riding the waves of technological change, the n-au has gradually moved from relying on the cassette tape, then to the CD-R, then to the digital format. Bandcamp is, at the time of writing, the de facto home of digital music in the n-au, the third wave of technology adopted by the scene (Figure 24). Hayler (2013) sums up his

thoughts on the platform, suggesting that ‘via services like Bandcamp any sound at all can be made available to anyone on the planet with an internet connection, at no unit cost to either the artist or the listener, within minutes of it being completed’. There is a democratisation of the means of distribution that, on paper, are held firmly in the hands of the individual practitioner. By accepting the democratic potential of digital distribution, the use of Bandcamp was the logical next step in a scene which foregrounds, as Murray (2022) phrases it ‘just getting the work done’.

Bandcamp is far from the first digital platform which has had uptake in the n-au and is by no means the sole place in which n-au recordings can be found, but I would argue that most practitioners, whether that be artists or record labels owners, have some relationship with the platform, fluctuating between wholly adopting and outright rejecting it. Like Hayler (2019a) points out, ‘there are problems – of course – but that does not stop Bandcamp being the most interesting thing to happen to music distribution since the mainstreaming of digital piracy in the 90s’

Beginning life in 2008, Bandcamp’s platform had a largely artist centred approach as compared with the more mainstream alternatives. While competitors such as Spotify were solely based around a streaming model of distribution, Bandcamp combined elements of this with a more traditional shopfront, where fans could purchase digital albums alongside physical merchandise, all from an individual page directly organised by the artist or label. From an artist’s perspective, Bandcamp allows you to upload your music from a .wav file alongside album art, liner notes and credits. You can set the price for the digital download and upload any physical merchandise to go alongside the digital file[75]. In return for use of its service, Bandcamp takes a small share of any sales of physical media, with a proportion also taken from digital sales[76]. Bandcamp mediates the hosting of the digital files and the storefront - they provide the platform - while the artists and labels are responsible for everything else. Uploading music, keeping on top of orders and posting out tapes or CD-R’s is the sole responsibility of the artist or label. On the surface, Bandcamp is seen to take a very hands-off approach, mediating at an arm’s length, with relatively few restrictions placed on the user. Whereas the mainstream rivals took control of all the back end of uploading, sharing and organising the streaming of digital music, Bandcamp allowed the artist to retain a degree of autonomy in the process. Thus, from around 2010, Bandcamp

[75] This could be the physical release element, in the format of a cassette, CD or LP, or additional related merchandise such as t-shirts, prints, zines, books.
[76] 15% of digital sales, reducing to 10% after reaching a certain threshold, and 10% of physical sales (Bandcamp, n.d.)

started to become widely adopted in the n-au, both artists and labels using the platform to share their works to all that would listen.

As a fan, we can go to an individual artist or label page and stream the music that has been uploaded, shop for the physical merchandise or download the digital files in a wide range of formats. These get added to your library on your own fan page and your profile's avatar appearing under the release, pointing out that it exists in your collection. Fans can follow other fans, as well as artists, receiving notifications when new music is released. This is the new way of browsing a friends record collection, but rather than flicking through piles of LPs to see what they have, you scroll though their digital collection and are linked straight to the release page. Hayler (2019a) documents his process when describing his new daily routine, his preferred way of engaging with music in the n-au:

> My routine is well established: during the day I follow recommendations, mainly garnered from twitter, dutifully keeping a browser tab open for each. On retiring to bed those that are 'name your price' are dozily downloaded to my phone, either paying nowt or an amount depending on proximity to payday or whether my PayPal account contains anything I can pass on. Those that require a specific fee are placed on my wish list, triaged and either discarded or purchased according to taste and resources. Releases acquired this way are listened to mainly via (surprisingly good) wireless headphones as I nod off, walk to and from work or busy myself around the house. Most of my life in music is now comprised of this process and I find it magical. The efficiency, the frugality with which I can navigate an unimaginable catalogue, dizzying myself with novelty, whilst offering direct support to artists (who are sometimes also friends) is borderline miraculous.

Availability and circulation of otherwise niche material is a key part of the appeal and use of Bandcamp. Like Goldsmith (2020: 6) explains of such fringe work, when an 'artifact has little economic value (a cassette tape or concrete poem, for instance), its value is in its accessibility'. Far removed from some of the endless searches and chance discoveries of experimental music we explored in chapter 2, the ability for Bandcamp to bring the music of the n-au to a marginally wider audience is a fundamental affordance of its use. Recommendations still happen, but the processes are streamlined. Rather than making a copy of a tape or CD-R it now becomes a simple link sent from one person to another. A digital platform can thus be considered a 'tool [for] revitalising the democratic ideology' of a particular scene or culture (Monteanni & Pennesi, 2022).

As the platform has grown, it has developed its own editorial streams, featuring writing on new releases covering a range of genres, anywhere from experimental tape music and modern composition to hyper pop. It has allowed for labels and artists to offer listening parties for albums ahead of releases and has even branched out into offering record pressing services. Especially when compared with the alternatives, Bandcamp seems to be the ideal solution for the discerning n-au practitioner - it has a low barrier to entry, has a much more equitable pricing model and gives a large degree of autonomy to the artist using the service. However, the relatively siloed position in the world of independent digital music publishing that Bandcamp holds has the potential to impede on that autonomy. It has become the de facto home for the n-au because largely, there is no alternative.

My argument in this thesis so far has been that the use of De Certeau's (1984) 'tactics' as a 'way of operating' within the current system is one way that practitioners in the n-au can retain a degree of autonomy, a degree of self-reliance, whilst being conscious of maintaining an ongoing criticality towards the complexity of this entangled relationship. Practitioners rely on the use of time, in lieu of solidifying a 'proper' place (De Certeau, 1984: xix). Working in this way, the n-au practitioners can 'insinuate itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking if over in its entirety' (De Certeau, 1984: xix). But what happens if the place takes over the one using tactics? Jones (2020) speaks to the idea of a twofold engagement with the 'affordances' digital social media platforms offer DIY music scenes with their use oscillating between patterns of 'resourcefulness' and 'refusal'. The same situation is the case with Bandcamp, where the affordances of the platform have been of benefit to the n-au, but the platform is increasingly mediating the way music in the n-au is being distributed and listened to.

Navigating Monocultural Independence

Within digital music and platform studies, there is much discourse around the balance between the democratisation of the music industry and the replication and continuation of inequalities that existed prior. Lee Marshall (2015) explains how 'access-based' services such as Apple Music and Spotify should have liberated the old structures of the music industry in favour of a more equitable terrain but instead opted for the 'consolidation of long-established power structures', instilling hierarchies of control over the access to

music and renumeration in terms of streaming royalties. Richard Frenneaux (2023) agrees, suggesting that despite the democratisation of DIY music encouraged by streaming platforms, what should have resulted in a 'level the playing field' has instead 'produced new gatekeepers who control the distribution and propagation of music'.

Though Bandcamp is often considered an alternative to these more mainstream platforms, criticisms are still raised over renumeration enabled by the platform, with Pilati et al. (2024) suggesting that it 'replicates the winner-take-all dynamics and inequalities of corporate streaming', rather than attempting to negate it. However, their study still concludes that 'Bandcamp offers a more artist friendly alternative to traditional streaming services' which can be strengthened by 'innovating and experimenting with new approaches to compensation, promotion, community-building' (Pilati et al., 2024). While the hobbyist practices of the n-au are imbued with the idea that 'there is certainly no right to expect there to be money in it' (Hayler, 2012a), the platform still impedes the potentially liberating nature of creating work in such a way.

The lifecycle of Bandcamp has undergone multiple changes since its inception, most notably its sale to Epic Games in 2022 and its subsequent acquisition by Songtradr in 2023, moves which brought with them stories of mass redundancies and concerns over the future independence of the platform (Ahmed, 2023). Looking closer on the functionality of the platform itself, issues arising from its position as a monocultural entity become increasingly apparent. The pricing on Bandcamp, which Hayler (2019b) refers to as being situated with a 'wild west' of options, are both points of democratic potential and concern. An album can be priced at anything the owner wishes. Starting at the bottom end, the price can be set to 0 which, from a fan's perspective, results in either the name your price or free download option appearing on the release page. This allows listeners to download the digital files for free or choose any price they deem suitable. However, there are some limitations that come with this. Regardless of the price entered the listener receives the same files, but entering 0 into the price box does not add the files to their collection. A minimum of 50p is required for a release to be added to a fan's collection page. While this is a seemingly small issue, this has larger implications when we consider the full functionality of Bandcamp as a potential resource for sharing and discovery, rather than just a marketplace. The previously mentioned benefit of being able to follow lines of discovery by exploring other fans collections is one of the main ways the individual retains agency over their choices, instead of giving it over to the will of the algorithm. By

requiring the need to make a purchase to use the full functionality of the platform, the democratic potential is impeded upon.

Even though it is a small amount, limiting the full functionality of the site in relation to money negates much of the democratic potential it originally offered. Allowing your music to be available to anyone, regardless of economic status is one of the fundamental advantages of internet-based distribution, rooted in the egalitarian ideal of equal access. If we are beginning to think of the n-au as contributing to a reconfiguration of forms of economic exchange beyond the dominant capitalist modes, in favour of those more aligned with a 'diverse community economy' then, as Gibson-Graham (2006: 144) state, we must consider how these forms encourage individual 'capacities'. The capacity for sharing music, irrespective of economic capital, is possible through Bandcamp but in doing so, an element of functionality is lost, essentially placing the practice lower down in a hierarchy of modes of exchange.

On the other side of the pricing argument is the ability for artists and labels to price digital releases unreasonably high. Hayler (2019b) talks about this at length when he questions examples of the digital files of a release being prices at thousands of pounds to discourage fans from buying the digital files, pushing them instead towards the physical release. Rightly so, Hayler (2019b) points out that this approach brings the questions of value into the equation. Why should someone be penalised for wanting only the digital files. Whether it is down to personal choice or economic limitations, purposefully limiting access is, I believe, a resolutely undemocratic process, at odds with the whole notion of the n-au. In the history of Invisible City Records, the record label I run in which every release has been mediated by Bandcamp, I have offered all the digital downloads as name your price[77]. The impetus around the label was the championing and sharing of music that I think needed to be heard. I was adamant that all the audio should be accessible to anyone, regardless of their cultural or economic status. While physical releases are an integral part of the label and came at a cost, it was essential that the fundamental music itself was free in every sense of the word.

In terms of the concern over the homogenisation of space, Bandcamp has begun to shape how the n-au operates. Like with the seemingly democratic pricing structures, the Bandcamp Friday initiative, which was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and

[77] That is, apart from releases featuring the artist Culver whose mindset is that all his music should be analogue only and thus I offer no digital version of the release (for streaming or download) – existing only as a cassette.

waives any revenue fee, has inadvertently shaped how artists and labels distribute their work. Ask anyone who engages with Bandcamp as a platform and come Bandcamp Friday, their inbox will be inundated with release notifications. My response, unfortunately, is often to quickly glance over the barrage of emails and delete them all. Margree (2022) shares a similar experience, feeling the overwhelm of this concentration of material being released combined with the way certain labels are hyping new releases to try and cut through the chatter: 'it can't all be "essential"!'. The overload of information means that a release I might be interested is lost in a sea of overwhelm, the process of discovering music becoming increasingly alienating. Billy Gomberg (2021), in a column for *The Wire*, highlights the contention of this situation, suggesting that rather than encouraging more equitable, non-commodified approach to distributing music, Bandcamp Friday has pushed the artist or label to follow 'a set of release dates and promotional strategies around music' to fit 'a listener, or more accurately consumer's expectations'. Releases and sales are now concentrated around these days. Prior to Bandcamp Friday, Invisible City Records would see people buying tapes and CD-R's over the course of the month, never really constrained to a specific time, except on a day an album was released. Since Bandcamp Friday, there is a trend of sales being funnelled into this small window of time. Speaking with many other artists, this is not an isolated incident. With everyone vying for the attention of the listener, it encourages competition amongst labels. But, given the n-au's notions non-hierarchical structure and non-competition, these practices are at odds with its whole ethos.

Furthermore, relying solely on one platform invites the questions of what would happen if Bandcamp suddenly disappears? Where does our music go? Helena Celle's net label Outlet Archival is an example of the ephemerality of relying solely on one digital platform. Running between 2019 and 2020, the digital only label released 16 albums by a range of artists. In 2025, the Bandcamp page no longer exists. The music is not hosted elsewhere. For all intents and purposes, it has disappeared. The Bandcamp page can still be accessed using services such as Internet Archive but only as a placeholder, the music files absent. Like Arnot (2022) states, 'you're relying on a tech company for infrastructure that if it collapses, it's just gone', highlighting both the ephemerality of digital music and the issue of relying on one platform to host your music. Hayler's (2019a) outline of his approach to interacting with music found on Bandcamp and mentions that the 'name you price' options are 'downloaded to my phone' before being listened to over the course of the day's activities. But, what if these releases weren't downloaded? The release then becomes lost, disappearing with the platform, its situation having a direct impact on the sounds on

the n-au, another instance of the autonomy of the scene being reliant on an external mediator.

Hayler (2015c) has provided a lengthy rumination of the notion of ownership and collecting, stating being a music fan can be ‘enjoyed independent of, and are not necessarily connected to, owning and accruing the objects on which music is stored’. I agree with Hayler that you can’t own music, whether that be a cassette, CD-R or LP, recorded music is in a constant cycle of passing between people, being sold and resold, let go of and rekindled and that being a music fan is much more than simply a reflection of accumulation. However, with the increase in ‘access-based’ streaming platforms there is no chance of owning anything, even temporarily, as it can be removed as quickly as it was acquired at the whim of the arbitrator (Marshall, 2015). The records on Outlet Archival are no longer available to hear. The democratic nature of digital distribution has come full circle, where we are now back in the age of music we can only read about and is unattainable, like reading about an LP in a weird zine, knowing you’ll never get the chance to ever hear it.

We have found ourselves at a strange impasse, where the democratic potential of a service such as Bandcamp is beginning to show signs of becoming undemocratic. This coincides with an increasing awareness of the dominance of digital devices and platforms, alongside the complex agential entanglement of music consumption meditated by algorithms where music exists as part of an ‘interplay between user practices, technological affordances, and cultural meanings’ (Zhao, 2024). Despite the benefits such a platform brings – wide ranging access to music, a degree of creative autonomy, low cost of participation – the changing nature of its service warrant approaching with a critical eye. Although an alternative solution has not yet been reached, there are some in the n-au that have given consideration towards total reliance on Bandcamp as a monocultural platform, this criticality a step towards the realisation of space which could encourage a more democratic, free, autonomous approach to digital music distribution.

Considering the Alternative

I must remind you at this point that what I am arguing is not for a complete dismissal of Bandcamp, digital music or streaming in general but a critical approach to how we are

relying on external platforms exclusively. While I have some sympathies with the 'avant-conservative' attitude of the digital age creating a more 'superficial' engagement with culture I find that most in the n-au do not fit into that bracket (Graham, 2016: 116). Hayler's (2019) retort against this type of passive engagement with culture is by offering the conscious act of 'listening', of paying attention. The questions that now arises is what is lost if this conscious act becomes increasingly alienated?

In a 2018 article, included as a separate pamphlet with *TQ* Zine issue 15 and simultaneously published on his website, Murray Royston-Ward (2018) gives us a 'An (Opinionated) Critical Guide to DIY Digital Publishing', in which the use of Bandcamp in the n-au is questioned critically. While acknowledging that a complete abandonment of the platform is not what the piece is about, Royston-Ward (2018) invites us to consider our reliance on a monocultural platform, the independent outlier as compared with much of the digital landscape being 'held in very few corporate hands, and especially in the hands of GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft)'. What the piece suggests is that in line with DIY digital attitudes, both in the present day and historically, a new, decentralised, commons-based approach to digital publishing is not only desirable, but totally possible[78]. When speaking with Royston-Ward (2022), he admits that he may have been 'slightly ahead of the curve' when he suggested that the use of p2p networks or hidden proxy sites to host your own server as being a potential alternative to the dominance of Bandcamp, especially with regard to technical ability across the scene, but he still believes that the n-au needs to become more self-critical of its practices and sole reliance on a singular platform[79]. Paul Oliver's (2024) research into the role of 'integrity' in navigating digital platforms concludes by suggesting that 'while the digital domain has redefined the parameters of what it means to be a DIY artist, it has also reaffirmed the enduring significance of artistic integrity, community, and resilience' and this is what Royston-Ward is advocating for. Regardless of the practicalities and limitations of exactly how a different approach to distribution of digital music exists, Royston-Ward's (2018) argument is clear, 'if you're going to do it yourself you should really do it yourself, or together'. This mindset follows the fundamental nature of the n-au, as we have been discussing throughout this thesis, of self-reliance as being a determining factor in the mindset of its practitioners.

[78] Referring to creative commons, copy-left and open-source methods of publication and distribution.
[79] Note the neo-luddite attitude of many in the n-au we mentioned earlier, where individuals have historically held a more techno-sceptic stance.

While Bandcamp has been significant in widening participation in the scene and broadening access to the weird music of the n-au, it has reached a point where an alternative is necessary. Other platforms have been launched in attempt to further democratise the music industry, with names such as Ampled following a co-operative, community based, self-organised and equitable approach to building a streaming platform. Despite the potential located within the platform, it ultimately decided to cease operations, with 'lack of resources' and 'burnout' being the main contributors to taking this decision (Dector, 2023). Royston-Ward has followed these changes closely, having uploaded his music to Ampled instead of Bandcamp, documenting the process on his website. However, given the platforms closure, he has reverted to using Bandcamp again, despite his general misgivings. The back and forth, constantly changing process of responding to shifting technological contexts is documented on his website as a series of paragraphs explaining where to find his music, which have subsequently been struck out and given an update as things either progress or regress. Done in such a way, we can follow the process, able to observe these points of change, going from one platform to another, seeing the reflective nature with which Royston-Ward is navigating this process. The frustrations with the technological landscape are clear to see in his reflective writing, demonstrating the difficulty in finding a sustainable and equitable platform. What this does show, despite the clear frustration, is that artists such as Royston-Ward are engaged in a continual search for an alternative and even though much of the time is spent having to settle for what is currently on offer, when energy and resources allow the push to explore the alternatives is ever present.

Like with Jones's (2021: 143) examination of the use of social media in DIY music scenes, there is a constant, ongoing push to 'create new spaces in which to practise *actual sharing*', rather than the commercially minded, individualist, passive version that Bandcamp has cultivated. Despite there currently being no sustainable alternative solution to Bandcamp, there is an enduring desire to continue to imagine alternatives and persistently question the reliance on a singular, centralised platform.

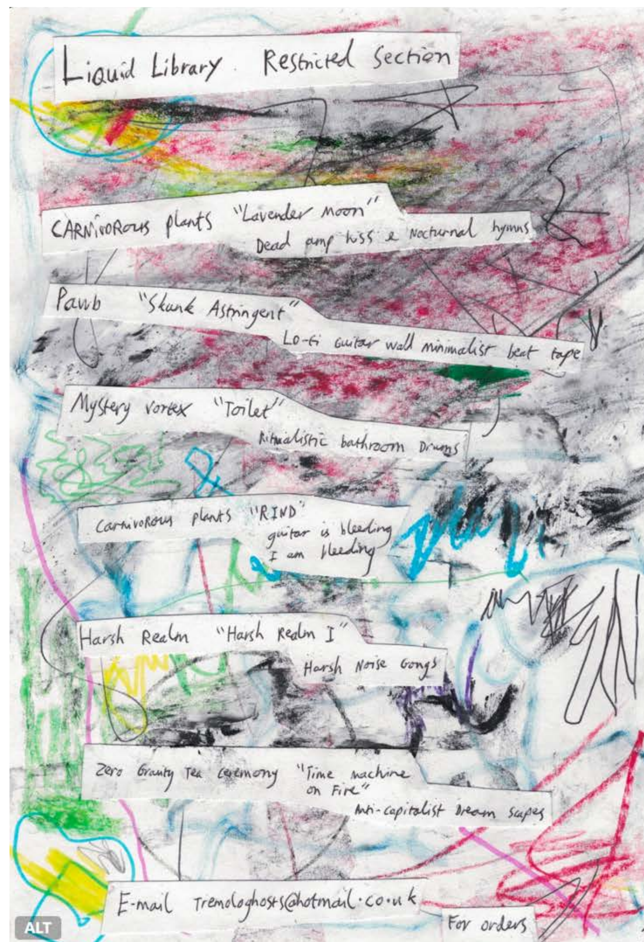


Figure 25. Liquid Library restricted section flyer (2023)

While Royston-Ward's attempts here are rooted in the world of digital democracy, there are also those experimenting with offline alternatives in tandem. Bristol's Liquid Library (2023) have taken one decidedly different step from the technologically focussed solutions when they introduced a 'restricted section' of the label which is described as: 'All offline, cassette only editions of however many we feel like making' (Figure 25). This section of the label looks to exist outside of the structures of Bandcamp, seeing a handful of releases made available either for sale or for trade without any digital counterpart. There is a clear call back to the roots of DIY, experimental music's association with cassette culture, especially surrounding the notion of trade, where the idea of community is ingrained in the culture surrounding the format. Stepping back to this period of analogue only releases can be seen as yet another instance of Demer's (2017) 'creative anachronism' in action, where Liquid Library are not looking nostalgically towards the format but attempting to create a space which encourages 'creating rather than recreating'. On the one hand, this approach is problematic because it encourages an exclusivity and a degree of commodity fetishism that the name your price solution of Bandcamp initially helped to avoid. While we know the n-au is personified by its marginal appeal, being purposefully restrictive of reaching an audience does not make sense. This is something Arnot (2022) brings up in our

discussion on the openness of label, highlighting how some of the more problematic, right-wing labels use a similar tactic and have only a contact email, eschewing any real online presence to stay hidden, where the n-au also doing this can potentially lead to 'normalising behaviour [...] providing cover for folk'. Herein lies the paradox of balancing a separation from wider music world and the desire of openness and accessibility of form. Despite considering Liquid Library's move in a purposefully restrictive way, I believe it is more appropriate to consider this a pause of business as usual, an attempt to create some space to consider the alternatives. By actively eschewing the use of Bandcamp, even if only temporarily, Liquid Library are not necessarily doing anything to change the scenario but are creating a space for us to contemplate how it might possibly change in the future.

Despite efforts to create such a pause, the dominance of Bandcamp as a platform has impacted the efficacy of such action. Two of the restricted section tapes have subsequently been released on Bandcamp, a decision which suggests a hesitancy, or perhaps inability, to completely cut ties with the platform. There is an indication in this action of the contradictory nature of the contested relationship people have with Bandcamp and signals the reduced autonomy a label has in operating outside of a sole reliance on the platform. On the one hand, there is a wish to part ways, to move on without it. On the other, there is a reluctance to exit completely in lieu of no currently viable alternative. It is here that the 'complex and contradictory' relationships between DIY and dominant systems exists, it being not simply a case of refusing or using a platform but in an ever-shifting dynamic between these two positions (Verbuč, 2023). I believe that it is the work of DIY scenes such as the n-au to recognise and be critical of the situations they are in, work tactically and temporally with the affordances of structures while simultaneously testing and trying other options. In doing so, it is important not to be fixed in relation to how this plays out, acknowledging that sometimes the time is not quite right for a complete departure. Within music scenes which are defined as being experimental, based around exploratory ways of working, there must be space to test out ideas and anticipate that some of them may not work as hoped. The activity and the processes involved hold more value than the immediate result.

Aside from the work of Liquid Library in creatively attempting to opt out of the reliance on a singular platform, others in the n-au take a differing approach which straddles the line between digital refusal and adoption. Here, we come back round to thinking about Chocolate Monk. As a label, it has a multiplicitous relationship with Bandcamp, neither

completely adopting nor completely rejecting it, existing somewhere in between. Additionally, their longevity in the scene allows us to observe how they have continually adapted to the shifting dynamics of new technologies over time where they have gone from running a cut and paste, scissor and paper label, to selling on their own website. Interested enthusiasts move from writing away for a catalogue and a disc in response to an advert in a distro catalogue, sending an SAE to their original Blackburn address and awaiting a response, to simply browsing the .com site and adding to their cart (Figure 26). While the approach might be different, the result is almost identical, all bookended by one constant, the distinct gonzo-outsider descriptions that accompany every release.

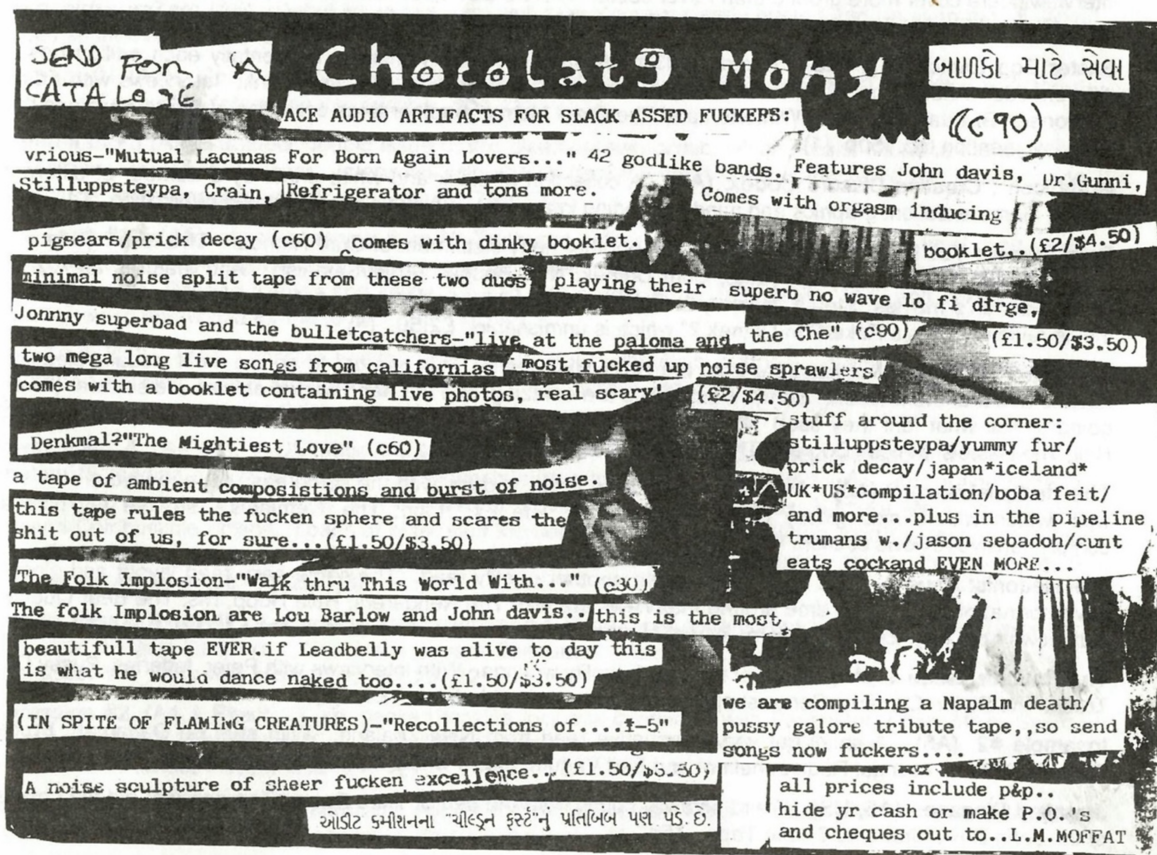


Figure 26. Chocolate Monk advert (Fisheye Distribution Catalogue #7, Spring 1994).

In the world of Chocolate Monk, the physical format still takes centre stage, the label being an ardent, unwavering supporter of the humble CD-R. Despite using their own website as the prime point of access, holding a degree of autonomy as compared with sole reliance on an external platform, to suggest that it exists aside from any external intermediation would be naive. Web hosting and payment processing are still outsourced, but as compared with a label whose entire presence relies on Bandcamp, the platform itself is specific to Chocolate Monk. Rather than offering full streams of material, their site uses small, embedded snippets of sounds hosted via Internet Archive to tempt digital

ears, making tactical use of the archival site's media players in lieu of a full stream. The practice that Chocolate Monk undertake straddles the line between digital refusal and adoption, making do with the affordances of both positions.

While Chocolate Monk don not have a dedicated Bandcamp page, some of their releases find second homes on artists personal pages and even on the page of label owners Dylan Nyoukis and Karen Constance's house band Wino Lodge. Once physical items have sold out, the site links you to a Bandcamp stream of the whole album if it is available (Figure 27). The label is still managing to refuse full subsumption to Bandcamp while reaping some of the benefits associated with it. Rather than advocating for any one approach, Chocolate Monk are demonstrating a plurality of approaches to digital distribution, working with multiple platforms temporally. They manage to tactically work with the benefits Bandcamp clearly offers without being beholden to having their activity shaped by its structures, resisting the urge to become stationed to one singular choice.

choc.582

00:00 / 04:25

00:00 / 05:21

Tracklist

Don't Get Rusty In The Toxic Triangle
Solved By Excellent Chalk
Cult Joints Creak
Harried Tape Fluss At Gloam

Credits

Recorded and mixed late 2022

Wino Lodge

Pocket Mutations **boxset**

£20

The second communique with the outside world from the re-christened Constance/Nyoukis joint is a nattering and belching collection of weird for the eyes and ears.

Rubber stamped cardboard box (24cm x11.5cm x 2cm) featuring C30 cassette, 2 x 3" CDrs, A6 colour booklet of collages, fold out art print (5.8" x 16.5") and 1" button badge. Liner notes by Seymour Glass.

"Time passing and notated by gnawing dust-infused cardboard. The mush compacted in sediments. The ungnawable. smooth bliss of the interior of Nanny's Sunday gloves is right there. Pepper and dust and cellulose. A sign that says "gaping" with an arrow pointing the way, placed with exquisite feng shui, an abomination, a rash too far. Cardboard infused with dust, notating, notated. Nanny's Sunday gloves, the interior, a proper mute for hallucinations triggered by teretomatic brain-teeth."
- Seymour Glass

Edition of 50

SOLD OUT

Available for download at Bandcamp

Figure 27. Chocolate Monk release page for the sold-out Wino Lodge boxset (2025)

One step removed from both Liquid Library and Chocolate Monk is an example which Hayler frequently brings up which is synonymous with the n-au mindset, that of Lee Stokoe's Matching Head. Existing, as Hayler (2019) phrases it 'resolutely, pathologically offline', the label acts in direct contradiction to the record label as found on Bandcamp. While Hayler's retort slightly exaggerates the luddite nature of Stokoe, it is not too far

from the truth. Running since the mid-1990s to the present day, Matching Head has existed through differing waves of technological advancement yet resisted, or refused, to move away from the humble cassette. Matching Head does have an email address, Stokoe's personal, and has a page on Discogs - although this is not updated by the label itself - but beyond that exists firmly in the analogue. The entire discography of the label, apart from a handful of deleted titles, is still available to order directly, always on tape[80]. To function this way, Matching Head's approach is to keep a master copy of each release and duplicate copies as and when somebody wants to buy one. Cassettes can then be bought in bulk, in several lengths, to be dubbed when required. Releases consist of stark, black and white photocopied artwork, often with a piece of collage work on the cover. The artwork for each release is duplicated as and when, on the work photocopier, cut up, folded and the release is ready to go. Thus, a vast back catalogue of releases can be kept constantly in print without the need to stockpile editions. Marginal music such as that found on Matching Head allows for such an approach to work, where limited interest can be sustained by adopting such tactics. Of course, Matching Head is an extreme example in the current climate but demonstrates how a complete refusal of the digital world can result in a high degree of relative autonomy[81].

None of these solutions are ideal and none retain complete control of the process of distribution of recorded work. However, they do not need to be. The n-au and the structures it operates within are continually changing - always being updated in reference to external contexts. At this point in time, Bandcamp is still the dominant mode of operating, but I believe that many in the n-au are continually looking towards more open source, equitable solutions of circulation, akin to how Royston-Ward has suggested going forward. Creating music as a hobbyist pursuit essentially means the stakes are lower, allowing experiments to take place. There is space to refuse then readopt. What we have seen with the examples of Chocolate Monk, Liquid Library and Matching Head is that there are practitioners continually questioning the status quo, testing ideas and never ceasing.

In experimental music scenes, the inquisitive listener always has a way of seeking out weird music, the question for the future is, where do they go?

[80] At time of writing (11th August 2025) equalling 274 releases since 1995.
[81] The tapes need to be bought from a supplier, usually Tapeline, and get posted out but beyond that is almost completely self-reliant.

Chapter 4. Recording Performance

I had been to see a few gigs of music synonymous with the n-au, mostly in places like the Old Police House and The Soundroom in Gateshead or The Star and Shadow Cinema in Newcastle. I was a frequent attendee at the annual Tusk Festival- the last weekend of October always booked off from work to be able to bask in three days of strange sounds from across the globe. Starting from first developing an interest in the strange music of the likes of Nurse with Wound and The Dead C, the uncovering of an active local scene had opened my eyes to this whole new underground world, beyond the marginally more popular rock adjacent music I'd previously seen in venues such as The Cluny in Newcastle. It was never a question of whether to get involved but how and when that was going to happen.

After starting the radio show and running the label for a while, I turned my hand to recording. I'd made a few solo recordings, attempting to navigate the intricacies of tape and all its ferric appeal. Beyond that, I'd wanted to collaborate. With a friend from work, we decide to try our hand at making some strange, subdued tape work – me on tapes and synth, him on highly processed bass guitar.

Soon after self-releasing Ruminations on Invisible City Records, I received an email from a local promoter with a question somewhere along the lines of 'can it be done live?'. The answer, I assumed, was yes. We had not tried it live but I had an inkling we could make this work. The shift from recording project to live performance happening in a matter of weeks, seamless. The invite not a result of endless hounding for a space to play but from individuals with a keen ear to the ground for sounds which were typical of the North Eastern outpost of the n-au.

Recording and performance, the two main cultural forms of the n-au are not totally disparate but inherently intertwined. Yet, they both have their own organisational, social, economic, spatial and technological idiosyncrasies – hence treating them separately in this thesis. Yet, from the discussion of recording in chapter 3, it is clear to see some of the points of convergence of these two forms and their locations in proximity and at a distance – CD-Rs are slipped into hands at gigs while postal collaborations result in eventual live performances.

This short chapter acts as a bridging point between these two forms, acting as a transitional space in this discussion. Despite its short length, I use this chapter to provide perspectives on the discourse surrounding the differences between recording and performance and note the points where they appear most entwined. Using the case study of North East based amateur archival label No-Audience Underground Tapes, I demonstrate the points where the entanglement of these two cultural forms is most prominent. This conversation then leads us directly on to a more in-depth, specific study of performance in chapter 5.

The Ephemerality of Performance

Performance is often perceived as a spatiotemporal act, something which only happens at a particular place and time or, as Peggy Phelan (1993: 146) phrases it, ‘performance’s only life is in the present’. Phelan’s (1993: 146) argument speaks to a practice which is grounded upon its real-time unfolding through a combination of place, time and material bodies which is predicated upon its resistance to ‘reproduction’, something which ‘becomes itself through disappearance’. The performance happens, then it is gone. Like with Erving Goffman’s (1959: 22) notion of social performances being synonymous with a particular material ‘setting’, predicated on their ‘continuous presence before a particular set of observers’, Phelan’s (1993: 148) notion of performance is marked by how it ‘implicates the real through the presence of living bodies’. However, suggesting that performance is the only real form of cultural production, positioning it in opposition to recorded music, becomes complex when considering the ongoing reproduction and simulacrum of the online world.

Philip Auslander (2023: 29) argues that ‘the live can exist only within an economy of reproduction’, a view positioned as a direct affront to Phelan’s notion of the ephemerality of performance, particularly relevant in the ongoing the age of mass mediatisation. Where Phelan (1993: 148) suggests that performance exists ‘without a copy’, that it ‘disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious’, Auslander (2023: 13) contends that this is not the case, suggesting that despite the fact that ‘live performances are representations and are usually experienced as such by audiences who see them only once’, they ‘function within the economy of repetition’. In popular music, this comes in

the form of songs which are played repeatedly, a repertoire which is called upon time and again, or in the recording and subsequent distribution of live performances.

Auslander (2023: 85) goes on to suggest that rather than examining live performance as ontologically different from a mediatised and recorded form of music, the 'two forms have remained mutually dependent and intertwined', sharing a series of conventions and technologies. Given the current socio-cultural climate, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, it would seem now more than ever that this is the case. During the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020, many in the n-au took immediately to experimenting with new forms of performance and distribution, the absence of proximity in person requiring a different approach. Organisers such as Heinous Whining, The Old Police House, Isolated Mess, Fuzzbat, Box Moon and Colour Out of Space took the lack of ability to organise performance in person to an online space, experimenting with the affordances of differing technologies and the unprecedented nature of the time we were living through[82]. Here, a mix of live streamed and pre-recorded material was hosted on streaming sites such as Twitch or on social media and messaging services such as Telegram. With instant messaging chats functioning in tandem with the performances and recordings, these temporary spaces of activity became a substitute for the absent spaces of proximity – being neither one nor the other, but both.

Jarvis (2022) explains how seeing these streams appear and watching performances from artists across the UK and further afield compounded the idea of connecting the separate nodes of the scene in one place and the relative absurdity of that: 'all these different people from all these different places are just on one bill […] that's never going to happen in real life. Kirsty Fife (2020: 49) ruminates on how various DIY communities were 'mobilised into seeking and creating alternatives' to allow for connection 'at an otherwise distant time'. In these unique situations, live performance was enmeshed within the world of mediatisation and reproduction in an unprecedented way. However, despite the quick adoption of online forms of performance in the n-au, the approach was not maintained, the streamed counterpart dwindling as spaces of proximity began to open again. This, Fife (2020: 49) suggests is down to how DIY culture has 'traditionally been reliant on physical spaces to gather, perform, build connections and mobilise community'.

[82] A detailed archive of many of these online evens is held at https://streamityourself.neocities.org/. There are links to recorded sets, hosted on YouTube and Archive.Org, alongside links to Facebook page events and flyers for performances.

Part of the desire to position performance as the more authentic form of cultural production is precisely due to the proximity of other individuals within it, the ease of which community can be cultivated within this space of proximity. Auslander (2023: 25) is quick to challenge the apparent social cohesion that results from live performance, suggesting that performance is predicated on 'difference, on separation' insisting instead that 'the sense of community arises from being part of an audience and interacting with fellow spectators', a notion that requires the distinct separation between artist and audience, the transmitter and receiver. These assumptions may be accurate in the case of larger, more popular forms of music where the separation between artist and audience is more prominent, personified in the clear boundaries of the stage, but I believe it functions differently in the n-au, precisely because of the size of the scene and the nature of the music itself, alongside Hayler's (2012a) fundamental idea of there being there is 'no audience for the scene because the scene is the audience', they are one and the same.

Further complicating the relationships between reproduction and ephemerality is the improvised nature of much performance in the n-au. Auslander (2023: 22) suggests that the restrictions of improvisation are bound up within a 'context that limits what can happen', and while acknowledging that a certain level of 'spontaneity' is inherent in improvisation, these acts of spontaneity are 'relatively planned and predictable', pointing towards something which is concerned with and bound up in the 'economy of reproduction'. This would suggest that despite the apparent freedom of improvisation, within certain contexts improvisers are likely to adopt and develop certain behaviours, moving towards a performance which is centred around reproduction rather than completely free composition. As we will go on to uncover, this is indeed often the case, where conventions become formulaic and idiom develops.

Auslander's (2023: 29) fundamental argument is that performance exists 'within an economy of reproduction', not separate or distinct from reproduction but entangled within it. Given the improvised nature of much music in the n-au, it is important to think about where the intersections of recordings and performances are. The example just used of online events during the COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious reference point, but the extraordinary nature of the situation positions it far from the everyday practices of the n-au. Speaking with Joe Murray (2022), we considered how recorded material in the n-au can often take the form of performance, encased in a distributable format. Single take recordings, produced without overdubs or editing, are common in the n-au and while not a live recording in the traditional sense of the recording of a concert, they provide a distinct

point at which the two positions converge. The recording thus becomes a live document of a particular spatiotemporal act but one without the spatial proximity of an audience. An album of popular music may be played on repeat, listened to time and again, soundtracking a person's life over many years. However, as Murray (2022) muses, a CD-R of his lo-fi musique concrète may only be listened to once or twice, the act of listening to a record mirroring the act of observing a performance, an almost ephemeral act, the separation blurred somewhat. Beyond this, the point at which the entanglement of these two forms - of recording and performance, distance and proximity - occurs is no more apparent than with No-Audience Underground Tapes.

No-Audience Underground Tapes

The case of David Howcroft's No-Audience Underground Tapes (N-Aut) is a particularly interesting one when thinking about how recording and performance operate in the n-au, not least because of its adoption of Hayler's term used explicitly in its naming. Epitomising the DIY tape trading approach of the 70s and 80s Punk scene that Howcroft grew up with, N-Aut is an exercise in a democratic, communal approach to documenting an ongoing scene, blurring the boundaries between recording and performance.

The impetus to start N-Aut was inspired by fellow North East bootleg label Fuckin Amateurs, whose efforts took a uniquely anarchistic approach to documenting the North East noise and experimental scene from 2007 until 2019. Fuckin Amateurs legacy as subverters of expectations is imbued with a deeply punk sensibility. Hayler (2012e) dubs them 'the punk-as-fuckest exponents of the photocopier aesthetic' and that while 'attention to detail may not be their uppermost concern', 'their bubbling and heartfelt enthusiasm is infectious and life-affirming'. Perusing their Discography on Discogs gives an insight into the haphazard approach to the activity of bootlegging. Those fond of organisation beware; their listings show 94 releases whilst catalogue numbers go up to #108, with multiple repeats and missing entries throughout. This could be a result of the prosumer approach of a website such as Discogs, but equally likely is it being a result of the nature of Fuckin Amateur's proprietors. Consisting of a series of CD's, vinyl, and cassettes often made in ludicrously small editions of 15 or fewer, Fuckin Amateurs perfectly encapsulate the hobbyist approach that is so fundamental to the n-au. Releases were most often live recordings of gigs attended, crudely captured and proudly boasting labels such as *positively no quality control*. Fucking Amateurs releases were never for

sale, never officially available, often given away at the following gig or shoved into the hands of unsuspecting punters in a pub, that is if they were even given away at all, many being simply thrown away or left for an unassuming passerby. Their approach is indebted to North East noise pioneers The New Blockaders, particularly their anti-art philosophy of noise music. Analysing the label's work from a distance, it is difficult to ascertain whether this is done with sincerity or irony - perhaps it is a heady mix of the two. The beauty of the label lies in this unanswerable question. It veers from clear admiration to self-referential nihilism - never clear, never designed to be.

Economic and social commentary aside, browsing the labels listings gives a particularly obtuse insight into the North East noise scene at the time. We see the mention of n-au heavyweights such as Posset and Jazzfinger mixed in with the doom drone elegies of Bong or the psychedelic noise of Lobster Priest, all coalescing into a multigene sense of a local scene. Aside from the local noiseniks, there are recordings by international artists such as the free skronk of Ascension, chaotic harsh noise of Hijokaidan and the anything goes weirdness of Sunburned Hand of the Man, hinting at the transient nature of artists outside of the North East passing through, the local scene operating within and aside from these temporal instances. To coincide with this, the names of venues such as The Chillingham Arms, The Cumberland Arms, The Northumberland Arms and The Telegraph indicate the material structure of the scene at the time. Some of these venues still exist and are used, some have fallen out of use in the n-au and some no longer exist at all. What Fuckin Amateurs represents then is an incomplete, messy, cynical document of a scene in action, an indispensable resource for those interested in the mid-2000s noise scene in the North East of England. That is, of course, if you can even procure any of these releases and trust what you are hearing.

Alas, as is often the case with any hobbyist pursuit, there comes a time when the overalls get hung up, the baton passed on. With Fuckin Amateurs eventually coming to an end, someone would surely have to carry it on. David Howcroft (2022) tells me how he wanted to see more from Fuckin Amateurs but that it was to be no longer, with Fucking Amateurs' Martin Gregory suggesting to Howcroft that he ought to continue the pursuit. The gauntlet had been passed on, activity paused then resumed. Thus, beginning in 2017, N-Aut became the next unofficial archivist of the North East scene. While certainly taking a huge inspiration from Fuckin Amateurs in terms of its base aesthetic, N-Aut has its own distinctive approach to the process, becoming its own thing entirely.

Figure 28. David Howcroft captures a performance by Posset. The Central Bar, Gateshead (24th January 2025)

Each N-Aut recording is approached in a similar way, the processes and routines providing the distinctiveness for which it has become known. It goes as follows. Howcroft attends a performance of his choosing. Upon entering the room where the performance is held, the tape recorder is taken out of his pocket, red record button pressed in firmly and placed upon whatever surface is nearest. Sometimes this is on top of the subwoofer at the front, sometimes on top of the nearest table (Figure 28). The tape runs until either a performance has finished, the tapes duration is maxed out, or the depleted batteries grind its motors to a halt. It is then flipped to the other side and continues for as long as is necessary. There is usually a pause between each performance, the in-between lull of conversation cut out, that is unless a distracting conversation takes place and the tape keeps running, in which case these sounds get captured. Howcroft is a keen archivist, albeit fully committed to Hayler's hobbyist sensibility. Alongside the recording, a photo or two is captured on a small digital camera. The gig ends, we say our goodbyes and the next step in the process ensues.

What we now have is the master tape. After the event, the artwork is made. This is usually a crudely put together A4 sheet, printed on a domestic inkjet printer, with an image of the performance, a detail or two or the event or even just a folded scan of the flyer (Figure 29). The N-Aut logo is haphazardly added, a catalogue number is assigned, the tapes are labelled and that is about it. It is now officially part of the N-Aut back catalogue. These releases are available to anyone who wishes, for free, postage and all. All you must do it get in touch with N-Aut and request a tape. A few days later, it arrives in the post, usually accompanied by a handwritten note from Howcroft. There is no online presence - apart from the incomplete Discogs page built up by fans - and no central place for an up-to-date catalogue outside of contacting Howcroft himself. A cursory web search locates the contact email on said Discogs page - the rest is up to you.

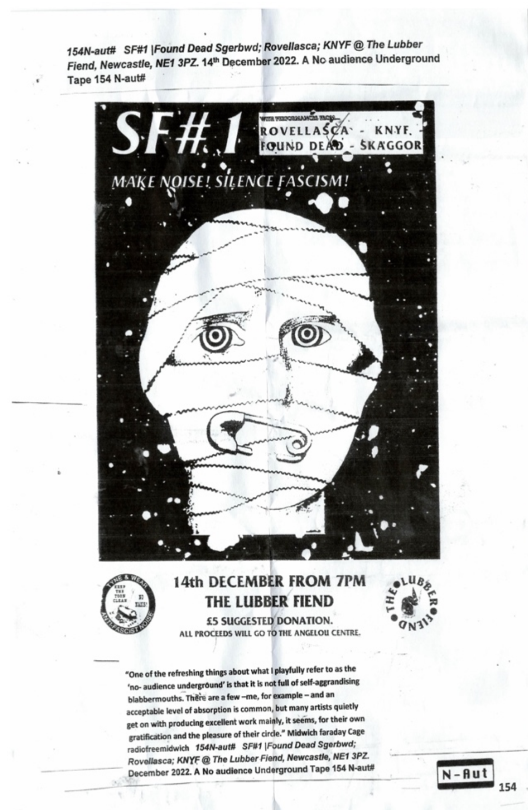


Figure 29. Artwork for 154N-aut# (No-Audience Underground Tapes, 2022).

Bootlegging as a cultural practice is nothing new, occurring in all manner of disciplines, but specifically being associated with the cassette culture movement, where Masters (2023: 88) suggests it was no more 'influential' than with the Grateful Dead bootleggers meticulously documenting each live performance and trading with fellow 'deadheads'. Part of the appeal of trying to capture every possible performance was that no one quite knew what was going to happen live, the ephemerality part of the allure. This is not just

the recital of a repertoire of songs, identical in each iteration, but every version working with the spatiotemporal attributes of improvisation - the jam. For those who could not get enough, it was important to be able to hear each performance, even if they were unable to be there in person.

Getting as accurate a representation of a live performance as possible is not the aim of N-Aut. The process is carried out almost flippantly, although done with a deep sincerity. A tape recorder is simply placed down wherever Howcroft decides which, more often than not, is not the perfect place to capture a recording. Deciding where to be positioned could be as simple as where a conversation is happening, the placing of recorder an almost incidental activity. If a performance starts mid conversation, Howcroft is not rushing off to find the perfect point in the stereo field to place the recorder, it is simply placed down where he is. This becomes the point of action. It is almost superfluous to what is happening. We are not witnessing a professional concerned with placement, technology and representation, but a dedicated amateur concerned more with the fundamental notion of documenting a scene – pressing record. What N-Aut captures then is a subjective record of the imperfections of a scene. When we are listening back to a recording, we are listening to Howcroft's version of events, from his perspective.

Working my way through the N-Aut back catalogue, we find some interesting aural artifacts. The crunching of crisps, the lull of conversation and the clinking of glasses all tend to permeate these recordings. On occasion something will go wrong. A performance could be missed, or the recorder may malfunction. These accidents are not written off, kept hidden or fixed. Rather, they are shared openly. Countless tapes have phrases such as "recorded at the wrong speed" displayed. In a world where representation of events is highly edited and calculated, it is refreshing to see an approach which is so unconcerned with precision.

Acquiring a tape is an equally symbolic affair. Howcroft (2018) writes in *TQ* zine that 'if you want a tape, you have to get in touch with me', positioning this as a conscious choice, encouraging dialogue and connection. Remember, this does not mean *get in touch with me and send me money*. All tapes on N-Aut are given away for free, echoing Fuckin Amateurs' approach but done so where Howcroft will post them out to anyone who asks, rather than just giving them away in the pub. Whereas Fuckin Amateurs' approach could be read with an ironic slant, N-Aut is post-ironic, earnest in its approach. The idea of offering a recording for free and having to personally interact to obtain it epitomises both

the nature of goodwill as a form of currency and the social aspects of the n-au, which are consciously ‘intertwined into the N-Aut philosophy’, built around an idea of community (Howcroft, 2018). Whereas the notion of the trade relies on reciprocity, N-Aut engages with a form of economy based out of altruism, echoing the sentiments of the gift economy we mentioned earlier although done in a way which the receiver must initiate the exchange.

Figure 30. 154N-Aut# (No-Audience Underground Tapes, 2022).

Being a product of the Punk scene and deeply rooted in cassette culture as we mentioned in Chapter 2, it is no surprise that Howcroft keeps N-Aut an offline affair. Like I have suggested, the embodied alternative distribution and economic values of the cassette are particularly relevant. Searching YouTube, one can access a handful of N-Aut releases, mostly on the channel by user celestialrailroad, furthering the complicated entanglement between the analogue and digital. The result of these tapes being uploaded to the internet further broadens the scope of who can find them and, in turn, Howcroft’s label. Likewise, Greek underground music blog Bulletproof Socks, which has a long admiration for the North East noise scene, has championed Howcroft’s efforts, suggesting that N-Aut is ‘underground sharing par excellence’ (Kampragkos, 2018).

Howcroft can certainly be classified as what Verbuč (2021) terms a ‘pillar’ or ‘icon’ of the DIY scene. Epitomising the interchangeable and hierarchical flattening of roles in the n-au, Howcroft is one of vital importance. Given the ‘invisibility’ of much underground and DIY music, N-Aut is attempting to make at least some of these activities visible (Chrysagis, 2016). In doing so, the gaps between distance and proximity are reduced. This work does not go unnoticed either. Speaking with people across the n-au, especially those not based in the North East, many reminisce about their experiences playing in Newcastle and citing Howcroft’s presence as enthusiastic documentarian - a perfect example of the DIY mindset so prevalent in the N-Au. If I refer back to chapter 2, it was an introduction to Howcroft at a festival that first made Owen Chambers, of Liquid Library, aware of the n-au.

Howcroft’s practices present a uniquely hobbyist approach to the documentation and archiving of an active scene. The discography of the label an incomplete, partial, subjective snapshot of a distinct time in the n-au. The four track Dictaphone has borne witness to activities across venues which no longer exist, documenting acts which have since disbanded, providing the only record of such events. Given the hidden and often invisible nature of the n-au and underground music, Howcroft’s work attempts to give visibility to the thriving scene. However, the methods employed, and the formats used – rooted in Howcroft’s reference points of Punk and DIY – are as marginal as the music they contain. Stumbling across N-Aut is even more difficult that stumbling across the n-au, its hidden nature part of Howcroft’s ideal. Yet, with collective efforts of those across the scene, these releases are brought to wider audience via YouTube rips, situations where the bootlegger has become bootlegged, entangled in a process and economy of production and reproduction. The performance becomes a recording just as the recording is a performance.

Chapter 5. Performance and Proximity

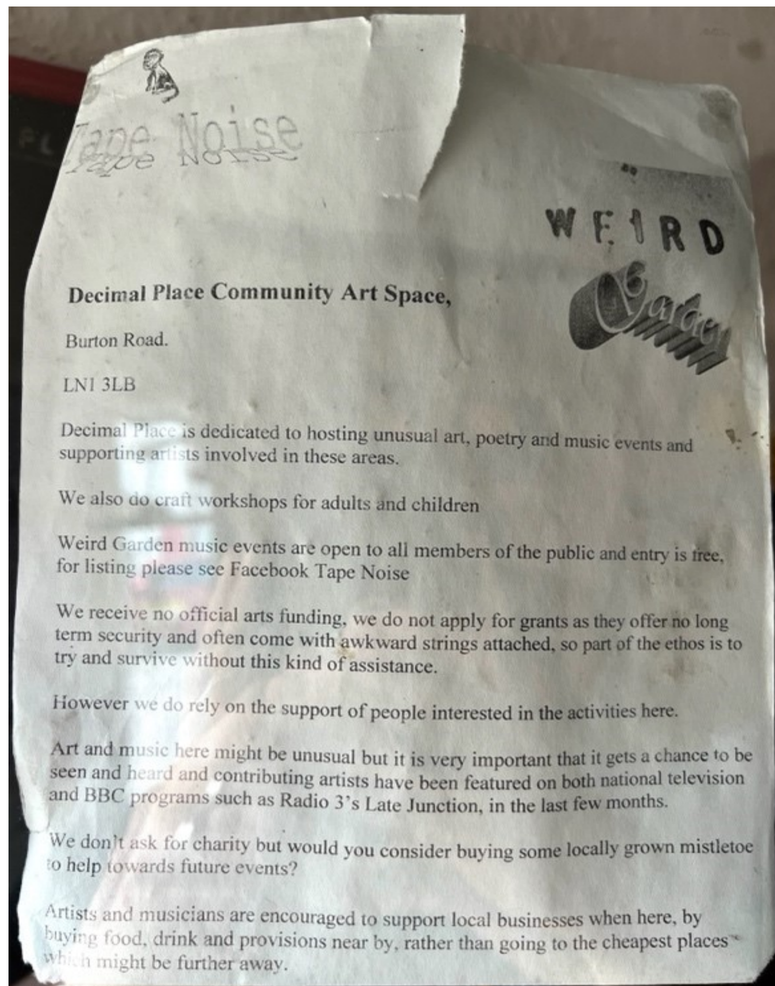
After a day of recuperating, we head over to Lincoln for the final date of the Liminal Haze tour. The venue we are heading to is mythical! A bastion of outsider art in the Midlands. Decimal Place was the work of Dex Wright, who unfortunately passed away in 2023, his legacy being upheld by long-time admirers of his work and current promoters of the experimental music night Weird Garden. The venue is presently in a liminal state, a legal purgatory while the estate of Dex is going through an administrative process following his death. For the moment, Lucy and Gavin Morrow, alongside Peter Rollings and handful of volunteers are running the venue. Weird Garden happens once a month and is a free entry night of experimental music.

*We arrive and I notice a small sheet of A4 paper in the window of the venue which contains the sentence "We receive no official arts funding, we do not apply for grants as they offer no long-term security and often come with awkward strings attached, so part of the ethos is to try and survive without this kind of assistance" (*Figure 31*). This is the ethos of DIY and the n-au more broadly. Trying to survive to let this weird and wonderful sound and art exist.*

The venue is essentially someone's front room. All week people have been saying "however small you're picturing it, it's smaller". I think we have imagined something so miniscule that it turns out to be bigger than expected. It's still tiny though by any stretch of the imagination. During the performances people are sitting on the staircase, four people squashed on a two-seater sofa and a few heads peering in from outside. Despite the size, I count at least twenty people crammed into this weirdo haven. We talk all evening of the need for these kinds of spaces and the constant struggle they are under. Looking around the room, I can see n-au connections everywhere. A pile of TQ zines on a table, a letter of thanks from Territorial Gobbing, countless names of artists on past posters. It's something special, somewhat of a rarity in a world of dwindling spaces for the n-au to use. Tonight, we are joined by Modulator ESP and Bias Equaliser, experimental electronics from both but taking a separate trajectory. I'm almost unable to keep concentrating on the performers as there's art everywhere, every inch of the space filled with unique creations and ephemera.

This being the last set of the tour, we've built up a collection of sounds, made recordings at each previous venue, all culminating in tonight's perfomance. Toi works with the limitations of the space, weaving in and out of the tightly packed crowd before exiting the room, dancing out and down the street whilst myself and Ross are left wondering if she'll return. Thankfully, she does.

Lucy and Gavin, our hosts for the gig say their goodbyes – they're off home to Nottingham. Afterwards, it's beer, a chippy and a wander round Lincoln until the early hours. We've been fed well all week, cooked delicious meals by our hosts and been put up in their homes. However tonight, we sleep on the floor of the venue, the atmosphere of Decimal Place seeping into our dream states. A fitting end to a week on the road.


Tape Noise

WEIRD

Decimal Place Community Art Space,

Burton Road.

LN1 3LB

Decimal Place is dedicated to hosting unusual art, poetry and music events and supporting artists involved in these areas.

We also do craft workshops for adults and children

Weird Garden music events are open to all members of the public and entry is free, for listing please see Facebook Tape Noise

We receive no official arts funding, we do not apply for grants as they offer no long term security and often come with awkward strings attached, so part of the ethos is to try and survive without this kind of assistance.

However we do rely on the support of people interested in the activities here.

Art and music here might be unusual but it is very important that it gets a chance to be seen and heard and contributing artists have been featured on both national television and BBC programs such as Radio 3's Late Junction, in the last few months.

We don't ask for charity but would you consider buying some locally grown mistletoe to help towards future events?

Artists and musicians are encouraged to support local businesses when here, by buying food, drink and provisions near by, rather than going to the cheapest places which might be further away.

Figure 31. Notice in the entrance of Decimal Place, Lincoln (June 2023)

To refer again back to Small (1998: 13), the process of creating music ‘establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies’. This quote outlines our premise for this penultimate chapter, exploring what is happening in the place of performance and the interactions that are cultivated within. These relationships are not only between the individuals involved in the process of performance and its organisation but the technological, economic and, particularly in this instance, spatial relationships that unfold. Live music, after all, ‘is where the action is, and live music depends upon venues’ (Watson, 2013: 121).

Performance is an activity in which the n-au operates in a space of proximity. It is the point at which the practitioners of the n-au interact in person, providing a different vantage point to view the inner workings of the scene as compared with recording.

Conventions of performance

In chapter 1, I outlined how the n-au is predicated on a ‘dissensus’ of genre (Arnot & Fitzpatrick, 2016), where multiple individual aesthetic preferences can co-exist. I further expanded upon this idea in Chapter 3 when thinking about the n-au as being part of the weird music scene, based around the aesthetic difference that it cultivates. The conventions of performance, the modes that convey this aesthetically varied music are equally wide-ranging. Performances draw on multiple avant-garde and experimental musical practices while oscillating between instances of ‘composition, improvisation and indeterminacy’ (Arnot, 2017). Performers employ extend techniques to both musical and non-musical objects, create music using aleatoric processes, and employ methods derived from artistic disciplines such as Fluxus and Dada, whether than be the use of instruction scores or sound poetry.

Given that the conventions of a particular world influence its actions, examining performance will allow us to observe how they are actively changing. Breaking conventions, no matter how flexible they may be, requires the action of individuals to undertake. Performances come into being through the materiality of the individuals involved and the space in which they occur, an entanglement of these social and spatial contexts. Following Verbuč’s (2022: 11) understanding of the practices and relations in DIY

music scenes as 'material' in that they are 'produced by material bodies, transpire in material places, leave material traces, and are therefore materially or empirically experiential and observable', any change in conventions come to be through the actions of these material bodies. As Becker states:

> Breaking with existing conventions and their manifestations in social structure and material artifacts increases artists' trouble and decreases the circulation of their work, but at the same time increases their freedom to choose unconventional alternatives (1982: 34)

Practitioners in the n-au, in search of a consistently weird music, are drawn to hunt down these 'unconventional alternatives' and realise this search in myriad ways (Becker, 1982: 34).

Musical instruments are commonplace in the n-au, but are used in non-conventional ways, sounding the instruments using extended techniques, eliciting timbres and textures that would otherwise remain hidden. Guitars are played with pencils and hand fans while snare drums are resonated with hexbugs, tiny bells are bowed and resonated while violas are scraped across the wall and the bells of saxophones are muted with CD's. In other cases, huge gongs are sounded with leg massagers, the vibrations producing deep waves of sound which wash away the absurdity of the act being carried out. Just as non-musical techniques are used on musical instruments, the use of non-musical objects as sound sources is equally conventional the n-au, where their textures and sonic properties are examined and exploited to the nth degree. Hayler (2022) remembers a time in free improvisation where it was all 'rattling keys' in quiet spaces - a nod to the dynamic range of performances, sometimes deathly quiet and focussing on the most minute sounds or sometimes the complete opposite. Opening the potential for any object to be worthy of inclusion in a performance is part of the experimental methods so integral to the n-au, a Fluxus tinged approach to the use of found objects in artistic production. Sheets of metal are beaten and berated, run through an intricate loop of effects pedals to produce a crushing, deafening roar. House bricks are hooked up to contact microphones and scraped along the floor. Tables full of glass bottles are whipped from a distance with a length of shower hose.

The spectacle of performance in the n-au similarly runs the gamut between the absurd and quietly gestural. You might come across someone dressed in a pig mask, in a jester's

outfit, wearing a balaclava, donning swimming goggles and shower cap or tangled in wool. Alternatively, you might be in a cold 16th century tower, watching someone hunched over cheap keyboards and Dictaphones, coaxing pulsating drones out of the dying machinery with candlelight being the only source of illuminations. As the drone simmers to a halt, the candle is blown out, a quiet suspense suddenly dissipated – 'it's pure theatre' (Murray, 2022).

Mahay (2022) finds that humour is one of the fundamental aspects of performance in the n-au, suggesting that things should not be taken too seriously, allowing for freedom and experimental, where performance should have a level of 'curiosity, integrity and authenticity' too. This curiosity is one of the key facets of how practitioners in the n-au operate. It is the work of those in the scene to create a space where this curiosity can be practised – allowing for the ability to engage in distraction. Robertson (2022a) explains the importance of humour too, declaring that he feels a 'kinship with folks who take being daft very seriously'. The sense of humour in performance is acknowledged by Stewart Smith (2023) as being an ongoing presence in the n-au, taking cues from previous waves of artists and improvisors while developing a particular approach to performance which is said to be 'inclusive and joyful, a celebration of difference'. What the n-au's 'merry pranksters', as Smith (2023) calls them, offer is a practice which is 'perhaps the only sane response to the […] absurd horror of these times', acting as an affront to the wider socio-political environment they exist within[83]. Luke Poot (2023), who performs as Lovely Honkey, suggests that continuous employment of humour in his performance has seen a shift towards an ever-increasing sense of 'awkwardness and embarrassment', where dry humour and stilted dialogue are combined with chaotic, amateur approaches to noise music[84]. Despite this awkwardness and embarrassment, Poot (2023) suggests that he does this type of performing because it is 'rewarding' and there is an innate need to do it, which has resulted in a 'normalisation of that level of weirdness'. A normalisation of the weird, of difference, is a key aspect at what performers in the n-au strive for, whether that is an explicit action or not. He goes on to suggest that there is a very unique triangulation of work that appeals to his tastes and is found in the n-au: 'It's got to be daft, evil and beautiful' (Poot, 2023).

[83] Here Smith (2023) is talking about a newer wave of artists such as Max Syedtollan, Usurper, Fritz Welch, Ash Reid, Acrid Lactations, Territorial Gobbing and Robert-Ridley Shackleton. These artists are said to have continued the humorous 'antics' of earlier improvisers such as Lol Coxhill, Alan Tomlinson and Steve Beresford or those straddling the old and new such as Secluded Bronte or Dylan Nyoukis.
[84] Poot has also performed as Chastity Potato with Dave Birchall, had an ongoing collaboration with Phil Minton and Dylan Nyoukis as Skatgobs and collaborations with a range of other names across the n-au since 2005.

Figure 32. Mia Windsor and Thomas Carroll. The Lubber Fiend, Newcastle (22nd February 2025)

Performances by artists such as Mia Windsor & Thomas Carroll turn what would be a somewhat conventional presentation of organ-based drones into a dada tinged half hour of absurdism. What begins as carefully constructed soon derails into something deconstructed. Sonically, drawn out tones offer a minimalist and sombre affair; however, the visual and performative actions of their work move it beyond the purely musical. Windsor uses a slowly deflating exercise ball to pump air through decoupled organ pipes while Carroll stands atop a chair, playing a reed organ with his foot while simultaneously humming along (Figure 32). The juxtaposition of serious, sustained organ tones paired with the absurdity of the performative actions point to the crux of performance in the n-au, that based around experimentation. Such performances further the weird sensibility of music in the n-au, a decidedly different approach to the performance of tonal music, far removed from what Andrew Choate (2025) calls the ‘calibrated austerity’ of much drone music which features in the wider experimental music world.

Expanding on the playful, weird potential of performance are artists such as London based Mosquito Farm whose work aligns with what John Richards (2021: 188) terms ‘performance installation’, a practice which bridges the divide between the static and the transient,

occurring as ‘a nexus between performance and installation art, DIY electronic music, and maker culture’. Complex contraptions are set up, installed in a space, creating an area for the performance to occur. Small assemblages of found materials and electrical motors create ad-hoc sound sculptures, traversing the gap between temporality and permanence. In the case of Mosquito Farm, their performance at London’s Avalon Café consists of Maddie Banwell and Grace Black taking turns activating parts of their set up, letting things sound out and unfold for moments at a time, before moving to another part (Figure 33). Motors click rhythmically around, oscillating on and off as handheld fans pluck metallic strings. An upturned cymbal is, at one point, struck with a mallet, at another point used to catch a series of small nuts and bolts which are being thrown across the room, a concave receptacle which gives of a delightful crash with each successive shot. A bizarre spectacle played out in the middle of the floor.

Figure 33. Mosquito Farm. Avalon Cafe, London (28th August 2024)

Richards and Shaw (2022) suggest that these modes of performance have a distinct ability to dissolve some of the hierarchy between artist and audience, where they can bring the ‘performer closer to the audience, and the audience closer to the performer’. Like how the artists move around their installation, the audience are free to do so too, despite the cramped room this particular occasion unfurls in. These types of performance span

different disciplinary boundaries, being performance, installation, improvisation, music and sound art all at once. There is a synergy here with how Alan Licht (2019: 7) positions sound art, in that it 'tends to heighten a listener's sense of place, even if it's filling it, whereas music aims to transcend its setting'. Observing this performance, we are conscious of the confines of the room being occupied, the large set up in the middle of the floor making us increasingly aware of the space we are taking up.

The relationship with space in performance is integral to its dissemination. Many venues used in the n-au do not have a designated stage, rather just an area of the room that seems most fitting, hence performances often taking place on the floor as standard. In other venues, such as Wharf Chambers in Leeds, a physical stage exists but is sometimes circumvented with artists opting to perform on the floor, at the same level as the audience. We can observe this in a 2023 performance by Yakki Da, where their equipment is set up to the side of the stage, off centre, performing with their back to the sound desk, everything set up on the ever present noise table[85] (Figure 34). While this could be viewed as simply a nonchalant attitude towards performance, opting to just set up and perform anywhere, it can also be read as an enacting of the n-au's focus on non-hierarchical ways of operating by adopting such an unconventional approach. This performance encourages a literal flattening of the audience and artist separation, merging the two in a new third space in the venue. A stage is a podium, lifting the artist up to a level that is higher than that of the audience, encouraging a hierarchy. Purposely choosing not to use the stage, especially when one is available, puts both performer and audience at the same level, an explicit rejection of the structure, and conventions, of that performance space.

In these instances, performances and their material space thus become more 'informal', where 'everyone is on the same level', both literally and figuratively (Cooper, 2022). This action has the potential to allow us to reimagine how space is used, beyond its designated purpose, challenging its conventions. However, this also has the potential to become a convention in itself, the once novel and often flippant attitude taken by artists becoming expected, idiomatic. It is therefore the work of those in the n-au to recognise when these situations arise, working with new forms of producing and altering space. As we will see in the following section, this can be entangled with a performance itself, an artistic

[85] The noise table being a convention of the scene. A small, usually foldable trestle table which is easily set up and taken down in a venue, the ideal surface for the set-up of many artists in the n-au.

approach to challenging conventions and reimbuing a space with a sense of the unconventional.

Figure 34. Yakki Da. Wharf Chambers, Leeds (1st June 2023)

The conventions of a scene, no matter how loosely they are adhered, carry the ability to 'make possible some of the most basic and important forms of cooperation' (Becker, 1982: 46). Some performers, like Edinburgh based Ali Robertson and Firas Khnaisser, use performance to work with not only with novel approaches to sound, but also collaboration. In a typical performance of their project Off Brand, trestle tables are chock full of charity shop detritus - slicers and scrapers, tongs and tines, gongs and bells. These objects are played alongside plastic trombones, Bluetooth speakers and snare drums. Beyond their unusual approach to producing sound, what is most poignant about Off Brands approach to performance is the frequency with which they collaborate with other artists. In their

ongoing TFEH series of events, they are usually the first act on the bill[86]. Sometimes they appear just as a duo but commonly it occurs in collaboration with another artist, using their positions as promoters to invite different voices into the space. This could see their unique flavour of free music paired with the leftfield electronics and synthesis of Lauren Sarah Hayes, the murky tape manipulations of Dead Labour Process or the improvised viola work of Nikki Moran (Figure 35). Moving from improvising with each other to improvising with a revolving third player, Off Brand use the affordances of their positions as promoters to bring new voices to the scene, engaging in a musical and social dialogue on each occasion, creating space for new forms of collaborative performance to occur.

Figure 35. Nikki Moran and Off Brand. Fruitmarket, Edinburgh (19th April 2024)

Like Eddie Prévost (2008: 38) puts it, free improvisation can 'a site for human activity in which there is also the potential for exchange'. It is, as Georgina Born (2017: 41) describes, built on 'degrees of openness, mutuality, and collaboration', a process which encourages the 'real-time co-creation and negotiation of social-and-musical relationships'. In the case of Off Brand's collaborative performances, these relationships are negotiated in space, realised precisely because of the structures of performance and proximity. Collaboration here speaks to the deep-rooted practice of improvisation being based around the search for new forms of collaboration, witnessed in a continual changing of

[86] TFEH is based in Edinburgh and has taken place across various venues in the city since 2021.

playing partners, where new formulations of individuals are rotated and constructed anew frequently. While solo performances are still commonplace, the combination of different players lies at the heart of the emancipatory potential of a music such as free improvisation.

The nature of free music such as that found in the n-au has the potential to nurture a process of construction – sonically, politically and socially - its perceived lack of idiomatic structure allowing for experimentation and invention outside of predetermined conventions. However, as Fitzpatrick & Thompson (2015) point out, sometimes the perceived emancipatory nature of improvisation can be performative, as the freedom it implies 'is not guaranteed by any means' and that the spaces of performances can instead be highly coded with 'nuanced sets of expectations, emanating from the histories from which improvising in this milieu emerges' or, more specifically, 'from other players and the audience.' Bailey (1993: 44) suggests that improvisation sits in a unique position where an audience 'can affect the creation of that which is being witnessed' offering a sense of 'intimacy with the music that is not achieved in any other situation' but how that manifests in the space of performance is complex.

From Confrontation to Accommodation

Historically, both noise and free improvised music have been considered 'dangerous' by those outside of the scene itself, hence their relatively marginal appeal (Atton, 2012). The non-standard approaches to sound that both genres employ, alongside differing social and cultural readings of noise, can render them difficult to grasp by those unfamiliar with their conventions. Hegarty (2007: 4) outlines how noise as a concept is often described as being something which is risky, something which is too much, something which is 'an excess', being that it can literally 'damage hearing'. Marie Thompson (2017: 19) expands on this concept, positioning noise as something which is often considered to be 'unwanted'. Noise is, therefore, 'subject-orientated', reliant on an individual to encode it as unwanted, this coding often coming down to an 'issue of personal taste' (Thompson, 2017: 19).

Many works of noise music play on this sense of danger or unwantedness in their aural and performative approaches. Subgenres of noise music such as Power Electronics are known for their purposefully 'provocative, confrontational and controversial' approaches to

performance, commonly inviting a wealth of controversy over their desire to shock audiences (Taylor, 2016: 16). Nathan Clemence (2016: 89) outlines how performance in noise music can range from the 'highly entertaining, to the deeply thought provoking, to the downright disturbing or nauseating' where the harsh aural aesthetics are likely to be paired with acts such 'self-harm and punishment' as an extreme visual stimulant. Stephen Graham (2023: 125) echoes this, explaining how the early development of noise music in the 20th century was dominated by 'intense sounds' and intentionally 'extreme, often upsetting and offensive subject matter'.

Across the n-au, there has been a divergence from the more controversial, contrarian aspects of performance in noise music and while this is generally welcomed, some still bemoan the move away from the transgressive nature of noise music. It is these approaches to sound and performance than I believe David Keenan (2015) laments in his declaration of the death of the underground, where instead of a milieu of artists involved in a self-perpetuating 'PR machine', he wishes for an artform which is 'almost sociopathic in its evasion; its willingness not to be liked' - something precisely confrontational. While noise and free improvisation's niche existence as musical genres are likely to always invite a degree of confrontation or challenge from those unfamiliar with their approaches, such tensions similarly arise within the confines of the scene itself. What would previously have been considered a new and radical approach to sound can become formulaic and static. Mattin (2022: 7) explains how noise ended up becoming predictable, a genre which ended up 'turning into a parody of itself'. It has become, ironically, 'a specific sub-genre of musical vanguardism and a name for what refuses to be subsumed by genre' (Brassier, 2009: 62). Concurrently, Thompson (2017: 177) notes how noise has an increased tendency to be co-opted by the 'predatory nature of capitalism', where the association between 'coolness' and the 'dangerous' relegates it to being synonymous with the 'creative and quirky.' Thus, Thompson (2017: 167) calls for a shift in moving away from seeing noise as symbolic of the 'full noise' approach of harsh noise and its ilk, looking towards noise as a descriptor of a wider and more diverse range of sound not limited to a 'single mode of exploration' moving from finite to potentially infinite variety.

Joe Murray (2022) tells of his experiences in the n-au in the North East of England where his self-described 'goofing off' is sometimes met with indifference and frustration by those who are more inclined to the harsher side of noise music, that being Thompson's (2017: 167) 'full noise' approach to the genre. Murray's practice is rooted in the manipulation of ferric tape where swirls of magnetic hiss are deftly operated by the

transport mechanisms of doubly wielded Dictaphones resulting in a decidedly - and self-appointed - amateur approach to musique concrète. Surely Murray's warped tape manipulations are equally quantifiable as noise? This is what Thompson makes us question, prompting us to consider why noise must just stand for the often violent and nihilistic approaches of harsh noise which end up becoming performative in themselves. Gowans et al. (2023: 76) outline how the contradictions inherent in the reaction over the changing nature of the scene, where those who long for the extreme and confrontational aspects of an older formulation of the n-au are antagonistic towards what they now consider to be a scene which has become too 'safe':

> A recurrent suggestion that 'safe' people have infiltrated a scene implies that for many the anti-reflexive discourse of power electronics persists beyond the tight-knit Leeds noise scene, evoking a nostalgia for an antinomian imaginary that posited extreme music as 'dangerous', despite their performance to a homogenous audience where any implied resistance was itself performative

While these changes in convention could be considered another instance a drift in action, the confrontation they invite signal something greater since a 'drift', Becker (1982: 304) suggests, 'does not require any troublesome reorganization' and 'no one is inconvenienced because someone else insists on doing things differently'. The shifting conventions in performance are more akin to what Becker (1982: 304) instead calls 'revolutionary change', especially when we consider how particular moments in the history of the n-au have enacted this shift in convention[87]. A helpful way to picture these types of change, which are imbued with both confrontation and potential, is through the lens of Deleuze & Guattari's (1987: 474) notion of 'smooth space and striated space – nomad space and sedentary space'

Rather than these two spaces being binary opposites, they exist within a complex, relational nature, where 'smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 474). Of the two, it is said that 'one is defined by a standard, whereas the other is irregular and undetermined, and can be made wherever one wishes to place it' – one is rigid and bound by convention whereas the other is seemingly free of idiom (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 477). In our discussion, the initial structural freedom of sound implied by a process in which texture, intensity and danger are favoured over the

[87] I am referring here to the Skullflower incident that I detailed in Chapter 2.

more familiar musical notions of structure and harmony has become a rigid structure itself, the smooth space has become striated. The confrontational impetus that noise music preoccupied itself with has ‘produced an order and succession of distinct forms’, of observable tropes and conventions, rather than allowing for the ‘continuous development of form’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 478). Styles and trends, codes and conventions have become repeated and ingrained in the fabric of a scene, what was once the smooth space of a new and exploratory form of music has becomes homogenised in a striated form. What was once radical and experimental has becomes formulaic and expected. The n-au can therefore be seen to be moving away from its former space of ‘happy dissensus’ into one of unhappy dissensus, where the ability to welcome a divergence in taste has begun to cease (Arnot & Fitzpatrick, 2016). What is important to note about reaching this point, where conventions become rigid and begin to impede on creative autonomy, is that they provide opportunities for change. Moving away from a striated space, which is here personified by a performative sense of confrontation, the n-au can consciously move towards a space where openness and experimentation are recentred, allowing for space which can produce ‘continuous variation’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 478)

In these spaces of change, these spaces of ‘dissensus’, it is the collective responsibility of participants in the n-au to ‘maintain the conditions’ within which the multifaceted, multi-genre ‘incoherence’ of the scene can thrive (Arnot & Fitzpatrick, 2016). Moving towards a more inclusive atmosphere in the n-au is, Boehringer (2022) argues, a ‘really important’ step, precisely because the ‘capitalist structure, especially when it's managed by a few powerful people at the top […] doesn't allow people to change and grow in an organic way’. By reframing the previously confrontational nature of the n-au into what Atton (2012) describes as a process of ‘accommodation’, will allow for an understanding of how practitioners in the n-au are responding to and prompting change in the scene’s conventions.

Whereas Atton’s (2012) idea of accommodation is concerned with how artists adapt to the lack of material and spatial resources, where ‘the political economy of low-budget touring that produces unexpected aesthetic outcomes’, the idea of accommodation can also be extended to the underlying conventions of performances themselves. Mahay (2022) suggests that a key element to performances in the n-au and the experimental music community is having the ‘ability to be able to fail’, to try out ideas without knowing if they will work, to be accommodating to an experiment. Whereas in more popular forms of music, these ‘risks’ would be deemed unwanted as they represent a shifted away from a

‘desired norm’, the contrary is often the case in the n-au, failure being an integral part of experimental and weird music (Auslander, 2023: 21). Andy Hamilton (1990) argues that it is the ‘imperfection’ of improvisation, the feeling of being ‘on the brink of the unknown’ that is so desired in these spaces of uncertainty. Phil Julian (2024) likens this approach to that often found in theatre groups having ‘scratch performances’ to test out ideas, and in the n-au it is often the case that sometimes you ‘don't really know if this is going to work but everyone's in the spirit of just watching’. Improvised or experimental performance broaches the divide between instinct and doubt, a constant questioning of where to go next, of which line to follow.

Those who value the uncertainty of the approaches used in the n-au, whether it is truly freely improvised, composed or indeterminate in some way, are responsible for its ability to exist. Returning to the points raised by Arnot (2017), it is the collective work of the n-au to facilitate and create the space where this type of cultural expression can occur, to allow these ‘capacities to circulate’, creating spaces which are accommodating toward the potential of failure while eschewing the expected norms. Altering the conventions of a scene through the actions of performance has potential to build these capacities anew.

Rearranging Hundred Years Gallery

To observe accommodation, experimentation and improvisation in action we must look to a specific example of how this can unfold, in this case a collaborative performance by London based artists Rory Salter and Ecka Mordecai which took place in East London’s Hundred Years Gallery in June 2023. Their work straddles the borders between noise, free improvisation, sound, and performance art, where electronic and acoustic sound sources are employed using extended techniques while movement and performative actions are taking place. What is important about this specific performance is the attention it draws to questioning conventions, to the alteration of space. Within the basement performance space of Hundred Years gallery, Salter and Mordecai work with the disruption, and subsequent creation, of space.

It is important to think about how space is created in this example. Following the thinking of Henri Lefevbre (1991: 73), we can understand space as being the product of the actions and routines of individuals, and it is the existence of a social space that ‘permits fresh

actions to occur'. The actions of individuals have the social capacity to reimagine space. Hence, as Massey (2005: 9) suggests, space is 'always under construction'. Thus, we can observe how the actions of a particular performance – in this case Salter and Mordecai – can enact the production of a new form of social space. Whereas De Certeau's (1984) approach advocates for the navigation and subversion of space in a tactical manner, thinking about how we can also produce new space through everyday actions is essential for the continuation of the marginal practices of the n-au.

Being both a café, community hub and art gallery, Hundred Years is split into two main areas. The space used for performance is the buildings small basement. There are no specific material structures with which to assume its function. After navigating the bright, open upstairs of the café, a descent down the stairs leads you to its subterranean performance space, the compact, white walled cuboid a blank canvas on first arrival. There is no stage, no permanent fixtures, not set rules for use, no codes to follow. Its PA system is taken away after each performance, packed away overnight, any sign of musical activity hidden away. However, when it comes time to set up again, the PA often gets located in the same spot. Opposite, rows of chairs are laid out, all facing the same direction. On the surface, this makes sense given the dimensions of the room, but if we are thinking about how performance can de- and re-construct space, the predictability with which it is set up points to a sense of striation, of convention.

The setup which it usually adopts reiterates Auslander's (2023: 26) claim that live performance is predicated on the 'separation' between performer and observer, the audience and artist allocated different sections of the room, opposite one another. In a room which most often hosts music of a free and improvised nature, why does the layout stay so rigid, so coded? These are, I suggest, some of the conventions of the space, and often live performance more generally. Done so without conscious attention, the repeated setup of a space in a similar way encourages idiom and structure to emerge, where space is produced and reproduced in the exact same way. One way to retain a degree of autonomy in how these spaces are used and formed – especially pertinent given the lack of space available to the n-au, which we will examine later in this chapter – is through performance. The conscious actions of individuals within a space can challenge and dismantle these striated structures, teasing them apart. These spaces are never permanent, they exist in a constant state of flux: 'smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988: 552). Disassembling structures

first requires conscious acknowledgement of their existence, of pointing to the convention outright. In this performance, the act of rearranging a space from its previously striated setup becomes part of the performance from the outset.

Figure 36. Before - Rory Salter & Ecka Mordecai rearrange Hundred Years Gallery, London (2nd June 2023)

Mordecai commences by rearranging the audience, announcing her displeasure at the room's setup.

> *'I'm not very happy with the way you're all sat, because it feels like we're in a club*
> *[…]*
> *Have you ever seen those dances where there's two lines of people facing each other?*
> *[…]*
> *Sorry, I should have done this earlier.*
> *[…]*
> *There's these two here if anyone wants these two?*

While Salter walks around the room arranging various objects, flicking a buzzing amplifier on and off, Mordecai begins directing the audience to reorganise the linear seating into a circle around the periphery (Figure 36). What began as a typical setting of mismatched chairs laid out in rows facing towards the front of the room is quickly transformed into something else. The space is smoothed out, the clear distinction between artist and audience has been altered somewhat. The audience now sit around the edge, the artists free to traverse the newly formed space in the centre, each audience member having a front row seat, each action visible, democratising the view.

Carried out in an explicit way, while the audience are there, these actions convey a conscious decision to bring attention to the breaking of convention and the production of a new space. We have been made to question how we occupy space, how easy it is to fall into a routine, repeat the same actions and rituals time and again, become complacent even if not explicitly stated. What could have been enacted in the break between acts, while the audience were in the 'transitional spaces' of the upstairs café, the space between the 'outer everyday world' and the 'inner world of the performance' is instead done so without subterfuge, embedded in the performance (Small, 1998: 23). The performance then begins. Or has it already begun? Was the rearranging of the audience an action taken to prepare the room for the performance or part of the performance itself? Is this a nod to Allan Kaprow's happenings, a performance in two parts, re-arranging and performing?

Little buzzing motors, powered by 9-volt batteries, are filling the room both physically and sonically - the slight variations in pitch creating pulses around the space. The artists pace up and down the newly formed central aisle, their footsteps full of intention. A cello is scraped along the floor by its end pin, the screech reverberating through its body, I chuckle at the absurdity of it while I catch the eye of my friend sitting opposite. The scraping across the floor acts as a novel way of sounding the instrument, whilst also showing a dismissal of the instrument as a cultural object. It is taken down from its pedestal, so to speak, its cultural position flattened. At one point, it is given to a member of the audience to hold whilst the artist carries out a different action, the performer and audience no longer distinct. The audience are not just passive receivers of the sound, they become integral to its performance, entangled in the action. The small buzzing motors, some of which are laid around the floor, are also placed in the hands of the audience. They become plinths in this performative sound art installation, integral to its execution, enmeshed in its materiality and structure.

'I don't like the way that the PA looks, so actually…'

A jacket is slung over one speaker of the PA, obscuring the main source of amplification in the room, its function dismissed (Figure 37). Mordecai muses on the scent of elderflower, her thoughts spoken aloud, entwined with the now multiple buzzing tones. Musical phrases ring out, then disappear. Barely strung guitar notes hover in a reverberant space of unfinished melodies. Electronic devices are clicked on then off, small fragments of sound disappearing as quickly as they arrived. In deciding to draw the audience's attention to the rejection of the typical sources of amplification – the PA – Mordecai signals a desire to question the conventions of the structures of live music, of what we need, of what we can do without.

Figure 37. After - Rory Salter & Ecka Mordecai rearrange Hundred Years Gallery, London (2nd June 2023)

The simultaneous breaking of convention and restructuring of space enacted by Mordecai and Salter is not limited to their own performance but carries on after they have finished. The space remains in this newly formed setup for the remainder of the evening, left for

the following act to use, improvising in its new layout. With the next act consisting of Liminal Haze and Toi Guy, who combine electronic drone music and dance in their performance, the rearranging of the gallery has provided a new space to navigate, influencing the performance without any previous anticipation. A new space has been produced. However, despite the changes that have happened during the performance, the space will be packed away again at the end of the evening, 'reversed' back to its original state (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 474). When we next descend the staircase into the basement of Hundred Years, any spectral remnant of this performance will have disappeared, and we are likely to be faced again with the striated structure of rows of chairs, that familiar layout reproduced.

The example used here is just one instance of artists active in the n-au navigating and shaping the conditions under which they operate. As Fabian and Carsten (2013: 12) state, 'musical performance involves the continuous production of space', so rather than viewing this returning of space after a performance as a negation of the performative actions prior, it can be considered as part of an ongoing continuum, creating a point at which further performative action can take place and rearrange space in an entirely different way. The work of Salter and Mordecai is here akin to what Lauren Hayes (2017) terms 'site-responsive', a practice which 'acknowledges the human presence within ever-shifting environments' and, particularly when we consider the ability for the performance to reconfigure space, the 'cultural possibilities of a site'. If, as I will explain in more detail in the coming sections of this thesis, the material space of the n-au and wider music industry is becoming scarcer, then practices which favour a consciously site-responsive approach to producing new forms of space can be one way to widen the scope of what is spatially and performatively possible.

Rituals of Performance

Performances in the n-au begin in numerous ways, differing from place to place, promoter to promoter, artist to artist. Sometimes the lights will go down, or the music playing over the PA will fade out, signalling the beginning of the performance. A performer may take to the stage, which is more than likely simply an area of the floor demarcated as the performance space, suggesting that a something is about to begin, the audience slowly

dropping quiet in anticipation, the din of chatter simmering to a halt. Occasionally promoters will announce who is playing, shouted from the side of the room. Sometimes we get a brief thank you after an evening has finished, the promoter providing details of the next booked event. Or, as we have just understood, the performance might begin by rearranging the space.

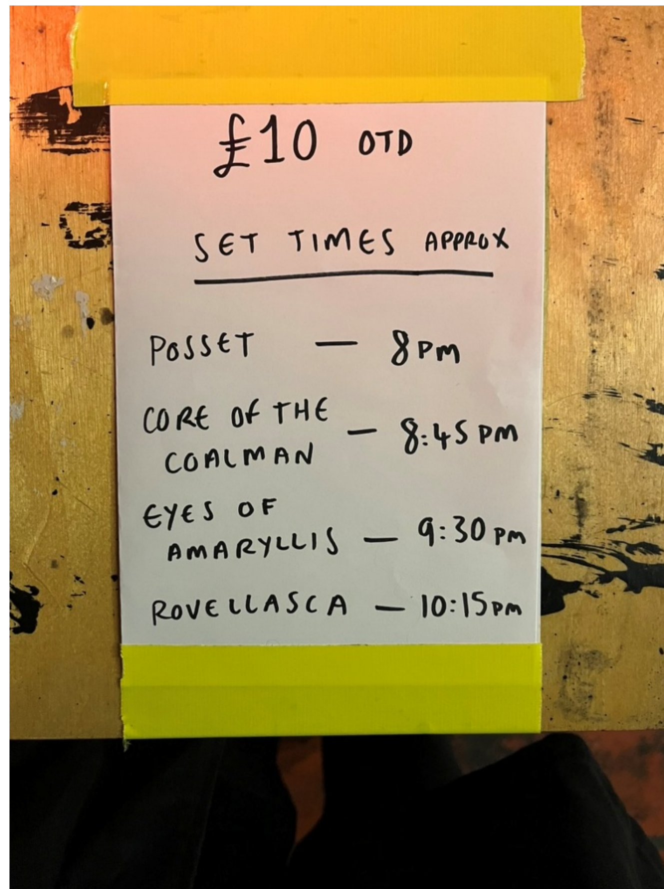


Figure 38. A typical running order. The Lubber Fiend, Newcastle (March 2024)

Alternatively, performances can start abruptly, waves of noise appearing as if from nowhere, immediate and intense. Such sudden beginnings are described as 'levelling acts' by Ritwik Banerji (2023), techniques which attempt to ensure all artists in an improvised performance start on an even footing. These acts endeavour to encourage participants to 'liberate themselves from several aesthetic and interpersonal hierarchies that commonly structure music-making as a human activity' (Banerji, 2023). However, despite such approaches trying to create a sense of egalitarianism between players, these acts can have the inverse effect on those not involved in the performance. It may be that you know everyone who is playing or know who each artist is before they begin. Equally, you may not know any of the artists performing, leading to sense of bemusement over whose performance you are witnessing. *Is the night running in the same order as listed on the*

poster? Should I just assume so and enjoy whatever happens? A simple running order is usually all that guides us, often hastily written on a piece of paper to give an indication of which act is playing and at what (approximate) time (Figure 38).

Pseudonyms are routine in the n-au, whether employed for long running projects or to denote one-off ensembles. Their use sometimes represents practitioners' wishes to retain an element of anonymity, moving away from being identified and named as an individual. For some, the use of ones given name in recording or performance reflects the institutionalised experimental music world, where there is a definite author and an air of seriousness – a clear contrast to the often playful, hobbyist nature of the n-au. To contrast this, a pseudonym can theoretically flatten hierarchy by rendering individuality invisible and also invites the opportunity to create sometimes humorous, sometimes offensive names in the process. However, the uncertainty surrounding clear identification can have the adverse impact, enforcing a sense of hierarchy between those who know the names of the n-au, those who are decidedly 'in the know' – those with sub-cultural capital - and those who aren't (Thornton. 1994: 31). Banerji (2023) goes on to suggest that 'the levelling rituals improvisers use to imbue these scenes with a feeling of egalitarianism are actually what allow the inequalities of the wider social world to infiltrate them', instilling the very binaries that they attempt to circumvent. This is where the actions of those in the n-au have the potential to shift the rituals and conventions of a scene, to redefine the 'outer perimeter' (Becker, 1982: 46). One can still perform under a pseudonym while instilling an egalitarian approach to experiencing their performance, doing so from a position of accommodation.

Artists such as Joe Murray, under his Posset guise, are actively acknowledging and addressing the issue. In a recent change to his practice, Murray (2022) has taken to the idea of 'demystifying' the practice of experimental music by laying out exactly what the audience is about to witness. Here is the introduction Murray gives to a performance at The Lubber Fiend in Newcastle (Figure 39), preceding the actual performance proper:

> *Hello everybody. Is everybody well? YEAH! Alright, excellent, that's good to hear.*
>
> *My name's Joe Posset and I'm going to play for you tonight. I'm on my single-handed mission to demystify the world of tape nonsense, so I'll do a couple of things.*

I had this thing prepared, this big spiel about what I'm doing. it's about breath and it's about air and it sounded a bit wanky. So, I'm not going to say that, but that is what it's about. I've just said it now and it sounded wanky when I said it. It's about breath and it's about air!

Pretty much most of the sound you're going to hear today have been generated by my mouth; there's singing and talking and schwerling and all that kind of business. Or they are air that I've captured in balloons. So, you'll hear some recorded balloons and live balloons and live mouth and recorded mouth. And yeah, that's what's going to happen. I have some instructions here so I will work off my instruction sheet and hopefully we'll all be done in about twenty minutes, and we'll be fine. If you want to have a chat, if you have any questions, we can do that afterwards.

All ok? Yep.

Figure 39. Posset. The Lubber Fiend, Newcastle (26th March 2024)

Steeped in sincerity and care, Murray is adopting a different strategy to some of the usual tropes of experimental music, where the slow or sudden start of the performance could be seen as alienating to those unversed in its rituals. This is the beginning of a performance which embraces a sense of accommodation over confrontation. In our example here, Murray is going some way to leverage his position as a long-time practitioner in the n-au to approach performance with a sense of equity, rather than replicating the wider inequalities of the outside world where hierarchy is imposed. Whereas a lot of the practices that attempt to create a sense of egalitarianism in improvisation focus more so on the artists and players – the 'levelling acts' that Banerji (2023) discusses - Murray's approach is directed outward, towards the audience which may have the potential to consist of individuals not yet familiar with the workings of the n-a. Introduction given, Murray then proceeds to perform, the introduction taking nothing away from the improvised dictaphonics that follow. As performances in the n-au move towards occupying different social and cultural spaces, different audiences have the potential to discover its music. In this situation, Murray's introduction becomes a levelling act that functions across the whole of the room, rather than being relegated to just those performing.

Once a performance has begun, the audience usually stays silent for the duration. Long passages of sound are commonplace, strung together into one extended piece rather than split into a series of distinct movements, compositions or songs. In fact, having witnessed acts who have structured their performance into a set of songs, there is frequently an awkward interaction that takes place. As one song finishes, there is usually an indication for applause, celebration filling the silence between tracks. However, when this has played out in the n-au a collective, unparsed sense of *should we clap?* fills the now silent room. What we witness is a clash of expectations between the rituals of different scenes.

These clashes of expectations can be seen not only in response to how a performance is received, but in how it unfolds and is organised in a material space, the rituals changing between scenes and disciplines. Artist and curator Eleanor Cully Boehringer (2022) gives an example of how this manifests at the opening event for a collective art exhibition, organised with a clear DIY approach, where a group of musicians who had been invited to perform requested a formal seating arrangement for their performance. Being that this was a DIY show, the ad hoc organisation of the space and the informal nature of the work seemed at odds with the formality of structured seating, with Cully Boehringer (2022) stating: 'it wasn't in line with the space, the way of working'. She explains that the idea

of having the audience seated during an exhibition opening felt like a ‘clash of two scenes, of approaches’, a misunderstanding of the rituals of a scene, a mistranslation of situations (Cully Boehringer, 2022). Fellow artist and curator Jorge Boehringer (2022) goes on to describe how the space was initially laid out in a purposefully non-hierarchical way, with ‘no centre’, but then the clash of expectations negated this: ‘then these people come in, and they need it to be gridded, they suddenly need it to be very regular’. The exhibition space, which was an empty retail unit in Huddersfield, had been transversed into a smooth space by a collection of artists and their curatorial approaches, reconfigured from a site of commerce to a site of collective creative expression. Then, with the invitation of a group with differing rituals and conventions, the space becomes striated with the introduction of order and linearity, imposing a hierarchy between the performers and the audience - the initially innocuous nature of the request showing how expectations over space can differ.

However, despite the dissonance of this clash of expectations between scenes, Cully Boehringer (2022) suggests that it ‘was good that they did come together’. Navigating differing rituals and conventions is part of the work of bringing different scenes together, when different scenes intersect, the occurrence of which provides a potential for the reconfiguration of space, of both sides’ conventions to be questioned. The spaces of activity, in this case a DIY exhibition in a meanwhile space, impact how individuals act and how they come together. Many of the rituals outlined in this section are dictated, or at least informed, by the material and immaterial spaces which they take place in. Live music, as Behr et al. (2016) suggest, is a ‘living cultural practice that is embedded in—and depends on—a surrounding material culture’ and thus it is pertinent to this thesis that we understand the spaces which the n-au operates within.

Spaces of the No-Audience Underground

The n-au does not exist autonomously from the wider context of live music and, despite Hayler (2012c) insisting that the mainstream is ‘largely irrelevant’, it still operates within material structures external to the scene. Rarely having its own permanent place, those active in the n-au must rely on finding space within the wider ecology of material place. From bespoke music venues to art galleries and pub function rooms, performances in the

n-au take place in an array of different places which introduce both creative constraints and opportunities to its practice.

The shifting landscape of the post-industrial city has historically provided opportunity for new 'DIY "microscenes"' to emerge in its ruins, artists and musicians finding a home, albeit temporarily, 'in the peripheries' (Holt & Wergin, 2013: 1-2). We can see examples of this happening throughout the histories of experimental and avant-garde music not only in the UK but further afield, such as in the 'loft jazz' scenes of 1970s New York, where the 'cultivation of new communities' was facilitated by the active 'reclamation' and 'repurposing' of post-industrial city space by these musicians – directly inspired by the visual artists of the city a decade earlier (Heller, 2017: 130). However, this process is often temporary, bound up with ongoing redevelopment of these sorts of spaces, where 'gentrification has been the specter of artist communities, following like a shadow' (Bradley, 2023: 5). We can see this in the later New York avant-garde scene of Williamsburg, with artists first occupying defunct warehouses, building new communities in the unwanted spaces before slowly being displaced, pushed further out to the edges, relocated and forced to find new space time and again. In these situations, the general 'lack of appropriate public spaces and non-commercial venues' leads DIY scenes to search for alternatives which, in the case of DIY house shows and venues, can cultivate a scene based around an 'intimacy', using spaces which provide potential to facilitate new socio-economic forms of community (Verbuč, 2022: 229). Indeed, as Arnot (2022) states when thinking about organising gigs in Manchester in the early 2000s, many were house shows, precisely because 'venues were scarce' or, more pertinently, it lacked 'venues that you could get for free'. These ongoing, ever changing material contexts, far from being the remit of the USA, are equally apparent within the scope of the n-au.

Ali Robertson describes how this process of gentrification, and displacement of experimental practices in favour of more economically lucrative bookings, is a constant battle in Edinburgh:

> More often than not we'll find somewhere and use it a load, somewhere that doesn't usually put gigs on, and then at some point, the venue realises "Oh, wait, we could be putting on music! Well, why don't we start putting music on that people actually like? […] you can't even blame them, because the rent's so fucking extortionate here that to pay the bills they have to get fuckin folk reciting Burns

> poetry and stuff with acoustic guitars, rather than shitehawks like us rubbing margarine lids on our faces or burping or whatever (Robertson, 2023).

Robertson's description is symptomatic of the position much of the n-au is in, reliant on external resources and temporary use of space, meaning that any sense of stability is short lived. Especially given the noisy nature of music in the n-au – and its potential to be read as unwanted - finding a space which is accommodating to hosting this type of performance, let alone one which is affordable, is an ongoing concern for many in the n-au.

The ability to find space, if even only temporarily, becomes increasingly difficult with the changing nature of the wider landscape of live music. Industry bodies such as the Music Venue Trust (2023) have shown a steady decline in what it calls 'grassroots music venues', reporting that in 2023 51.4% closed in the UK, with financial pressures cited as the most common cause with the top contributing factor being the sharp increase in 'energy prices, business rates, supply costs, or rent'[88]. This indicates a twofold problem for the n-au. With fewer options available, it becomes more difficult to find a space to organise performance. To exacerbate this issue, that the n-au has little economic power and therefore its activities are likely to be pushed aside for even marginally more commercial bookings as struggling venues attempt to keep things running. While this is indicative of a creative economy facing hardship, it only shows part of the picture. Many venues which are used frequently in the n-au do not feature in this report, furthering their unofficial, amateur nature within the economy of the wider music industry. That much n-au has activity has historically taken place in function rooms of pubs, the changing hospitality industry is of equal concern to the practices of the n-au, with reports that countless pubs are closing their doors due to rising costs and changing habits of their clientele (Davies, 2023).

Speaking of the scene in London in the early to mid 2000's, Phil Julian (2024) outlines his experience of searching for 'disposable' spaces for performance, usually in the form of a faceless city centre pub. These disposable spaces were venues that were only used once as after the performance had taken place, the promoter would probably not be welcome again. Such approaches are indicative of a particular time in the n-au where divisive

[88] Grassroots venues, according to Music Venue Trust, are those which have some adherence to their six key criteria: whether the local area recognises a venue as being grassroots, music being its primary focus both in programming and organisationally, the risks taken in its cultural programming, its generation of a night time economy and its position within a wider network of cultural space (Music Venue Trust, 2023).

theatrics were paired with intense volumes, a combination not always welcomed by those outside of the n-au. This is no more apparent than in the infamous 2007 Deaf Forever Festival in Leeds's Royal Park Cellars where opening act Smell & Quim's performance led to the cancellation of the entire festival due to a member of the band setting fire to a pig's head in the pub basement, prompting the landlord to storm in exclaiming 'I'm not having any of that shit in here' (Gowans et al., 2023: 70). Chris Atton (2012) documents how there is sometimes a 'struggle for territory' when organising performances of noise and improvised music in places which host individuals from outside of its conventions. The example used here documents the visceral reaction a group of pub locals have to the dual wielding saxophone skronk of Borbetomagus, their 'dangerous' music eliciting a 'clash of expectations', ultimately resulting in a 'conflict' between the two groups (Atton, 2012). Whether it is the sometimes destructive, always preposterous performances of Smell and Quim or the noisy and aurally challenging sounds of Borbetomagus, those in the business of noise and free improvised music aways risk confrontation over space. Searching for a disposable venue might be a necessary requirement when one is organising such events, but doing so is only possible in a landscape of material abundance, an undertaking which is becoming increasingly difficult. The situation now presents itself as a cultural landscape whose material construction is one of increasing scarcity rather than abundance as choices become more limited, more prohibitive for those working in a DIY, precarious, and confrontational manner.

Despite suggesting that the n-au does not have a space to call its own, there are certain venues which have had a more involved relationship with the scene, existing almost exclusively for the presentation of experimental art forms in a broad sense – whether that be sound art, noise, free jazz or free improvisation. However, as with the situation on the macro scale, a similar sense of precarity exists on this micro level. In 2024, Iklektik in London closed its doors, having been evicted from its home of 10 years to make way for demolition and redevelopment of the site. During its existence, the venue was host to a range of experimental arts practices, many which aligned closely with the activities of the n-au such as the Horse Improv Club. The ability for practitioners in the n-au to find a space to host a performance is particularly difficult, especially the case in bigger cities such as London where creative practices are essentially being 'priced out' (Bliss, 2016).

Further North in Huddersfield, ame's Dai Hall has met a similar fate, having been an active part of the experimental music scene in the town since 2019. Dai Hall existed as one of an increasing number of 'meanwhile spaces', an approach to the organisation of space in the

arts which relies on the occupation of empty buildings temporarily, usually with heavily discounted rents (Madanipour, 2018). Situated in an empty shop front in a declining shopping arcade, Dai Hall cultivated a strong local scene during its brief existence. It played host to almost 300 artists during its 4 years of existence – both local and international - presenting itself as an integral node of experimental art forms in Yorkshire during its time. The use of meanwhile spaces has been contested in recent discourse as on the one hand the opportunities than it can present for artist-led organisations can be vast, allowing for projects to be realised in a shorter timeframe, without the need for extensive planning and infrastructure, taking advantage of peppercorn rents and the affordances of temporality. However, on the other the lack of permanence means that any long lasting, sustainable practice is unable to survive (Madanipour, 2018). Ryoko Akama (2022), who set up the Dai Hall, explains how it was designed as a venue for experimenting, where people could come and use the space, organise exhibitions or performances, done with a sense of mutual aid in mind, on the shared understanding of there being no funding: 'we don't take anything, they don't take anything, but, you know, the space is for you'. Akama (2022) laments that there are fewer no 'safe, dangerous place for young people to experiment and go wild', whether these be more organised and formal – like ame – or under the radar - 'illegal parties'.

Even further North, Gateshead's Old Police House in another example of a bastion of n-au activity which has since been displaced by the ongoing gentrification of towns and cities across the UK. Sharing a similarly precarious, semi-permanent existence to Dai Hall, the space was built around a shared ideal of experimental ways of being. Having occupied two different spaces within streets of each other, 2019 saw the space ultimately displaced from the town centre[89]. Mariam Rezaei and Adam Denton (2023) who, along with Mark Wardlaw, ran the venue, outline its history in a treatise where they describe their intention as wanting to create somewhere that they could use to 'redefine' space, referencing the North East's long history of alternative cultural spaces[90]. Existing as somewhere with a distinct 'un-venue-ness' about it, the limitations of the cramped building led to new forms of conviviality and sociality around a space most certainly existing on the periphery (Rezaei & Denton, 2023). Their approach to working within the site is positioned as an explicit attempt at 'transforming a site of state repression into a largely un-policed place of gathering for the community', using the affordances of the

[89] The first space was, aptly, the former Police House in the town. The second space, shared with art gallery Workspace was housed in the towns old Post Office building.
[90] With reference to Gateshead's anarcho-punk venue The Station alongside Newcastle's arts and music centre Spectro, medieval turret turned music and poetry venue Morden Tower and self-organised, volunteer run cinema and music space Star & Shadow Cinema.

semi dilapidated building to reimagine and reconstruct space (Rezaei & Denton, 2023). Framed by how COVID19 has impacted people's interactions with space, they conclude their treatise by suggesting that now more than ever there is a desperate need for 'places that run as sites of convergence for people making and seeking out creative worlds' (Rezaei and Denton, 2023). Such activities further acknowledge the social agency in constructing space, and the work of active participants in the scene to do it themselves, retaining a degree of autonomy in the process. Alas, as with Dai Hall and Iklektik, The Old Police House building was sold for redevelopment, the space that had been cultivated asked to leave with short notice. As it stands, in 2025, the building still exists, having fallen into disrepair, any semblance of its former activities invisible from the outside – and any developments of the land still to take place (Figure 40).

Figure 40. The former Old Police House (December 2025)

Whereas the examples of the Old Police House and Dai Hall look at the more meanwhile approaches to space, and those specific to the n-au and its practice, other spaces which hold a relative permanence in the scene are faced with a similarly precarious existence. The Chameleon Arts Cafe has been one of the primary venues for experimental music in Nottingham since 2007, having been used frequently by promoters such as long-standing n-au stalwarts Rammel Club, but in 2023 were given notice by the landlord that the building would be going up for sale, seeing them close their doors after 26 years of activity. As Lauren Rothera (2024), landlord of The Chameleon points out, there was a conscious effort

to try and uphold the DIY ethics of the Nottingham scene, with the place 'organically building a weird cult reputation'. The Chameleon's long-standing nature cemented it as a central home base of the Nottingham outpost of the n-au since it opened, where it has hosted a multitude of artistic styles, observing the changing nature of the scene over the past sixteen years, from the harsher noise side of its earlier roots to more diverse acts passing through its doors. What was different about the Chameleon Arts Café as compared with Iklektik, ame or The Old Police House was its multiply embedded existence, being a space not solely intended for experimental music but broader culture in general, hosting anything from standup comedy to poetry alongside this more obscure work. This type of space is by far the most common across the n-au, that being one whose programme reaches beyond the scope of experimental music, embedded in multiple creative worlds, and their equally precarious standing in the current climate is cause for concern.

That many short and longstanding venues are disappearing has seen the n-au move elsewhere, finding new spaces in which its activities can be carried out. Paul Margree (2022), for instance, notes a distinct change in the venues of London where different pockets of activity are cropping up around the capital in places which had not previously been used for this type of performance, highlighted with venues such as Spanners in Loughborough Junction becoming a relatively recent mainstay (Figure 41). As a venue, this has now been adopted by promoters such as Bezirk, Infant Tree and Earworm, being one of only a handful of regularly used venues for this type of performance in the city[91]. The way this venue is used is quite emblematic of the n-au's tactical way of working. Spanners is predominantly a club housed in a small, converted train archway in South London. Its main days of business are Friday and Saturday nights, the weekend. However, on a Sunday and Thursday, the quieter nights, it is more likely to be available – it is here that the n-au finds itself, outside of the demand that the weekend usually garners, operating on the days which are deemed less desirable. This is what Phil Julian (2024) humorously terms the 'noise scene's weekend', the times which are left over, not as commercial or busy as the traditional weekend and thus presenting an opportunity for the n-au. In lieu of being able to compete economically with those who can book the regular weekend or those who can bring in a larger audience, the n-au must settle with what is left over, finding space where and when it can, working with these temporal opportunities – being tactical. Thus, during the mid-week lull, the n-au finds itself operating in the quiet hours which tend to be cheaper to hire, fitting for the n-au's economic scarcity. Spaces like Spanners are ideal

[91] Hundred Years Gallery The Horse Hospital and, on occasion, Café Oto being the other commonly used venues.

for the activities of the n-au, the tiny space meaning the small audience numbers usually drawn by performances fill it quite nicely, a bastion of weird sounds tucked away under the railway arches in South London.

Figure 41. Spanners, London (2024)

While much n-au activity happens in large cities, there are several instances of activity in smaller, more rural or provincial settings. Abi Bliss (2016) explains how some of the hubs of experimental music are forced to operate outside central cities, as marginal artforms are increasingly ‘wiped out by redevelopment, and of the pressures of everyday living leaving little time or space, either physical or mental in which to create’. The influx of privatisation and increasing rents are making the capital city a place difficult to ‘sustain and nurture cultural life’, despite the efforts of individuals in making things happen, doing it themselves (Bliss, 2016). It is often that the efforts of individuals to organise events in these precarious situations are deemed the ‘noise’ that exists in newly gentrified neighbourhoods - that which is unwanted (Straw, 2019: 29). This is especially pressing with music deemed dangerous or misunderstood by venue owners, where the noise becomes ‘too much’ for those unaccustomed to it and while It can sometimes be an ‘enjoyable challenge’ to organise in such spaces, it can also be ‘so stressful and that you're not actually able to engage with anything’ (Beylis, 2022). Practitioners are always adapting to

these changing spatial contexts, looking for cracks and opportunities in the material landscape to continue to operate, whether that is within the confines of the city or outside of it. That is why we see much n-au activity occurring in provincial settings, removed from the allure of the big cities for something much smaller and intimate. Bliss (2016) outlines how places such as the Calder Valley in West Yorkshire have become new homes for those wishing to experiment with the pressures of the big city and goes on to acknowledge that rather than being recent occurrences, they are in fact the 'fruits of rhizomatic webs of activity dating back years'.

There are historic and continuing homes of n-au activity in places like Todmorden in the Calder Valley. Newer venues such as the bar Nan Moors have seen performances play out from the likes of Yakki Da, Eleanor Cully, Dylan Nyoukis & Karen Constance and Territorial Gobbing. Equally, artists such as Sophie Cooper had found a home in the town after time spending time organising gigs in both Manchester and London, bringing a whole host of artist to the bohemian ideals of the West Yorkshire countryside, a continuation of practice not limited by the moved outside of the metropolitan centres but rejuvenated[92]. In a similar vein, albeit geographically separate, Murray Royston Ward (2022) points out how the temptation to continue to host events followed his moves across various locations, seeing him organise events in Cardiff under the name Rusty Trombone of God, alongside activity in London and now in his home base of Nottingham, where he has helped organise events with Rammel Club and under his own guise as The House Organ. Most of this occurred due to no one else organising what he wanted to see, reiterating the nature of DIY music as filling a void, doing something in lieu of anyone else doing it.

De Certeau (1984: 38) argues that those whole employ strategies look to the 'establishment of a place of power', to build roots, whereas those without that power, such as those in the n-au, are instead required to develop 'procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time.' Even in the examples used above, no matter how long individuals have been able to use a particular place, those with greater economic power inevitably move them on. Therefore, we see the cyclical, flowing nature of the scene as existing in an entanglement with the material forces that surrounding it, responding to these changing spatial and economic contexts.

[92] Cooper, along with her partner Jake Blanchard run Tor Bookings in Todmorden, organising individual events along with the occasional festival.

Material Space

The materiality of spaces used in the n-au differs drastically from location to location, practice to practice. The characteristic live music venue with its raised stage, sound desk, lighting rig and PA has hosted countless performances in the n-au but it is by no means the sole place of activity. One could bear witness to performances in grotty back rooms of pubs, white walled art galleries, bookshops, slightly nicer back rooms of pubs, huge concert halls, repurposed houses, cinemas, streets, churches, private homes, community halls and rehearsal spaces. Indeed, like much underground music, the n-au exists between different strata of the wider music and cultural industries and the spaces used for performances demonstrate this. Many venues which used are certainty synonymous with what Miller and Schofield (2016) call the 'toilet circuit', venues which are usually small and exist in the substratum of the live music ecology and are 'the least sustainable, most vulnerable yet culturally most significant' for grassroots music[93].

Venues which are used, whether they be more geared towards musical activity or not, come to being as part of a particular scene due to various factors. On occasion, their suitability for performance may be superseded by their economic viability, hence we get such a breadth of space being used. Ben Watson (2007: 133) argues that marginal music has an ability to 'open up uncommodified spaces in the metropolis', to find spaces for performance outside of those which have been 'besieged by everyone seeking to make a name in the field of culture'. The looseness of aesthetic idiom that the n-au is based around – and its resultant small audience numbers - afford it the ability to work in spaces which would otherwise be deemed unsuitable for the performance of live music. However, like I outlined in the previous section, even spaces whose activities are based primarily around the n-au and underground music, their existence is often temporary.

The type of artists performing can also impact the type of venue that is suitable. While a more traditional band may require extensive backline equipment such as amplifiers and drum kits, performances in the n-au may of only need a PA if anything at all. Reducing the amount of external equipment needed to perform opens a range of possibilities in terms of venues that could be suitable for performance, not to mention the rigmarole involved in transporting and organising equipment. Equally, adopting a performance set up based around frugal means allows for a greater degree of autonomy in occupying space. By

[93] Although, it is also important to note that many venues the n-au operates in exist in a stratum below these. Is there perhaps a sub-toilet circuit?

actively avoiding a complex set up, choosing to be streamlined in the equipment that is used for a performance, the artist has a wider range of potential performance spaces at their disposal, not being limited to using a venue that is tailor made for live sound. Hayler (2016) is just one such person who recognises the liberation of such a concise set up: 'midwich fits in a rucksack'.

Given the general material scarcity of the contemporary spatial landscape, many in the n-au are actively looking to reconfigure their relationship with space, searching for opportunities beyond what had previously been considered acceptable. The use of 'non-musical' spaces is routine in the n-au and wider experimental music world, precisely because they are often cheaper than their more musical counterpart, a space less tailored to the specifics of live music and therefore easier to attain for those with less economic capital (Atton, 2012). Louie Rice (2022) recounts how his experiences hosting experimental music nights in Norwich after moving there from London found him using community and church halls, acknowledging that their 'civic aesthetic' is something which attracts him to using these spaces, precisely because they are not deemed 'cool'. That they are not often associated with the experimental music scene means that they are usually cheap to hire and frequently come fitted with a PA as standard. The church hall is a space typically unaccustomed to the conventions and practices of the n-au, a new place to organise performances, a blank canvas which has the potential to cultivate new forms of experimentation – aesthetically, socially, organisationally and spatially. Rice's decision to use such venues was a result of the material construction of the area, where an abundance of these types of spaces existed. Rice (2022) finds a sense of liberation and humour in how these venues are used, remarking that 'the next morning, there's probably going to be like a WI meeting in there or a yoga class or something', suggesting that the mixed-use nature of the space means that different communities and age groups tend to feel 'comfortable' in them. The approach adopted by Rice is just one example which highlights an attempt to try and subvert the apparent sub-cultural capital that a particular venue or space may hold, with Rice (2022) acknowledging that the 'contrariness' of using venues which are deemed uncool is a large part of their appeal. Being used perhaps only once or twice, being repurposed for a performance one night at a time, these spaces have the potential to reassemble and alter some of the conventions of the scene, precisely because they are not embedded in its material structure. It is in these sorts of 'anonymous spaces' that performance's 'liveness can be reassembled and remembered', the novelty of such a space having an affective impact on those using it (Novak, 2013: 35). The neutrality

of such spaces – at least in relation to the n-au – becomes a blank canvas, an invitation for experimentation and potential critique of the conventions of a scene.

London, Hayler (2012b) suggests, ‘has rules of its own’, yet despite this, it is still responding to the same pressures we see nationally, albeit on a much more stratified scale. Due to its size, the situation within London can be seen as a unique microcosm of the situation in the wider UK, played out within the confines of the M25. London is home to one of the only permanent venues to exist exclusively for the purpose of music which can very broadly be categorised as experimental in the UK, that is Café Oto. Duncan Harrison (2022) is right to point out that even though Café Oto could be viewed as existing in a slightly different strata of experimental music in terms of its international reach and historical reliance on institutional funding, it is still part of the DIY network we are exploring and exists as a key cog within the ecology of the n-au. Again, this speaks to the activities of the n-au and the wider DIY experimental music scene as being able to move been different strata, occupying places from multiple different levels of the wider experimental music ecology.

With Café Oto in mind, Rory Salter (2024) highlights that looking at the current iteration of the scene, it could be argued that a lot of performances seem to be taking place in small ‘institutions’, in part due to a scarcer material landscape to operate in. Graham (2016: 71) describes the underground’s relationship with institutions as multifaceted, existing in forms that are either ‘extra-institutional or institutional-fringing’, sometimes working with the temporal affordances of their support but never being completely dependent upon them. These institutions still carry much of the social and cultural capital that aligns with the general value and ethics of the n-au, but an increasing scarcity of material space can ultimately impact the autonomy of the n-au. As Fitzpatrick & Thompson (2015) discuss, when venues begin taking similar stances, following similar approaches, the ability for flexibility, experimentation and improvisation becomes more difficult and the potential for social division can worsen, hence their suggestion that there needs to be an ongoing search for spaces which are more ‘adaptive’ than concrete. Only part way through 2024, it was announced that Café Oto was fully booked for the entire year. While on the one hand this suggests a strong and healthy scene, it also signposts potential trouble for those looking to organise performance on a more ad-hoc, less organised basis.

Despite Café Oto being considered an institution - to some degree - there are clear aesthetic and cultural differences between some of these institutions and those with a wider disciplinary remit. Take, for example, Café Oto as compared with The Fruitmarket in Edinburgh. Both are currently used for organising performances in the n-au but their positioning in the ecology of live music and the wider cultural industries is markedly different[94]. At a quick glance, Café Oto bears the materiality of what would be expected from a DIY music venue. A poorly hung hessian curtain, low lighting, and creaking chairs surround the performance space - its stripped back nature a fitting backdrop to its experimental sounds (Figure 43). In a stark contrast, The Fruitmarket proudly displays official text acknowledging its funding sources, nestled within a brightly lit Café, behind the performance area (Figure 42). The way an individual occupies each space is also different, just as the social and cultural codes that one adheres to when entering such spaces are distinct from each other. It would go to reason then that the way performances unfold and the collective action that takes place within them is different too. With a venue such as The Fruitmarket, its position within the wider art world and its prime function within the discipline of the visual arts, as opposed to music, has the potential to create either another clash of expectations or provide a potential avenue towards more interdisciplinary modes of collaboration and community.

While we have these two venues in mind, it is worth pointing out how they organise the spaces for performances. Both venues have differing lives during the day but once the evening hits, their daytime roles are quickly changed around, the spaces altered. The spacious café setting of Oto is rearranged to make way for performances, the seating and tables moved around the room with a central focus on the performance area. Similarly, with The Fruitmarket, its daytime role as Café and Art Gallery are altered on the evening of a performance. The whole Café space is reorganised, what would usually be a thoroughfare is reshaped into a performance space. A PA is erected, the table and chairs pushed to the back, the whole space repurposed. The material space is being 'translated' into something else, to then be 'reversed' again at the end of the evening, speaking to the nature of these spaces existing on a constantly shifting continuum (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 474).

The materiality of the spaces of performance, the spaces of proximity, plays a role in how the activities of the n-au unfold. Their constructions impact how sound travels and their

[94] Café Oto has been used by a number of organisers active in the n-au, both on singular and recurring occasions, including Poot Records, Heinous Whining, Infant Tree, Earworm and Molt Fluid. The Fruitmarket is currently used by TFEH.

set up dictates how performances take place. Whether it is taking advantage of the affordances of the funded institution, or ‘making do’ with a broken PA in a pub basement, the activities of the n-au respond to these situations precisely because of the lack of anywhere else to be, because of the scene’s ‘absence of a proper locus’ (De Certeau, 1984: 37). However, beyond the materiality of space, the social and cultural nature of a space also impacts how the n-au operates.

Figure 42. The Fruitmarket, Edinburgh performance backdrop. Arttu Partinen celebrates (2024)

Figure 43. Cafe Oto, London performance backdrop (2024)

Social and Cultural Space

The n-au praises itself as being a scene that is non-hierarchical and open, but given the hidden nature of much underground music, finding a way in is difficult. In chapter 2, we examined some of the ways people come to discover the underground, from the use of micro-media and word of mouth to specific aesthetic entry points. However, beyond these individual experiences, the spatial construction of the n-au also impacts how people can discover its activities.

If we consider venues that could be deemed non-musical, in the sense that their sole existence is not predicated on the performance of music, such as the pub function room, we are faced with the question of exactly how someone is to find the n-au. Without having prior knowledge of a particular scene or promoter, the ability to become involved in and attend performances is likely to be more difficult without some obvious entry point. What Chrysagis (2016) describes as the 'invisible' nature of many DIY promotional activities is particularly pertinent here. Whereas Chrysagis's (2016) research touches upon activities which are purposefully 'disorganised' in their approaches to maintain distinction from the highly organised but emotionally distant and alienating side of promotion, this is not always the case with the n-au. Like Chambers (2022) states, music in the n-au is not made 'wilfully for no audience' but its general appeal is limited. Depending on where and how certain events are advertised, whether that be on social media channels or putting up physical posters, their invisibility may be contextual rather than purposeful. Despite the insistence that promotion does little to alter audience numbers, Hayler (2012b) argues that if an event is 'plugged in whatever the usual places are, then the cognoscenti will find out about it and do their best to roll up.' This comment directly references the 'subcultural capital' of those who are informed about such a scene - the cognoscenti, those in the know - acknowledging that this type of cultural capital is required to find out about such performances (Thornton, 1995: 27). Similarly, acknowledging that there are indeed usual places suggests a conventional approach towards promotion where organisers are doing what is expected, following trends and implicit codes of practice.

Many n-au performances occur in places which hold a strong sense of what Sarah Thornton (1995: 27) refers to as 'objectified' forms of subcultural capital, observed in its visual and material culture. This is best highlighted with a specific example. Wharf Chambers in Leeds programme a range of events, from film screenings to club nights, bookfairs to workshops, alongside the venue being the mainstay location for several promoters' activities within the n-au. On the surface, Wharf Chambers' objectified subcultural capital can be observed in the visual material of the physical venue, where posters for n-au performances organised by Heinous Whining are surrounded by posters for *pumping gay dance parties*, *top surgery fundraisers* and *anarchist book fairs* (Figure 44). The visual language of the venue and the types of events it hosts signifies a specific political and cultural stance, one of resistance to a dominant, capitalist mode of being. Such venues act as points where multiple overlapping scenes share a convivial space, each using the affordances of the space but bringing their own aesthetic and scenic relationships in.

Figure 44. A selection of posters inside Wharf Chambers, Leeds (2022)

Places such as Wharf Chambers have their own subcultural capital, hence their ability to act as ‘agentic forces’ alongside the actions of the individuals and collectives that operate within their walls (Wood & Ortega, 2024). As Sam Whiting (2021) explains, ‘small venues’ hold a specific cultural value in helping to cultivate music scenes since ‘musicians and audience members are drawn to and socialise in these spaces because they see themselves reflected in the staff, those on stage and in the broader social milieu’. With Wharf Chambers in particular, having a broad remit, as opposed to solely hosting of live music, such a space can be where scenes can ‘congregate' (Whiting, 2021). There are similar examples of these common spaces across the UK where they act as a central hub for a multitude of differing cultural activities, often somewhat disparate in terms of aesthetic tendencies but with definite crossovers, usually in terms of core values and process. JT Soar in Nottingham or Hatch in Sheffield are both venues which are deeply rooted in the DIY scenes of the UK with a focus on community building and alternative forms of creative production, as opposed to the commercial mindset of larger venues. However, their core aesthetic activities revolve around a more punk and hardcore tinged music, that which is commonly associated with DIY practice, as opposed to the noise, experimental and free improvisation of the n-au. However, their shared values mean that n-au activity often takes place there.

Figure 45. BLACKCLOUDSUMMONER - JS Soar, Nottingham (4th June 2023)

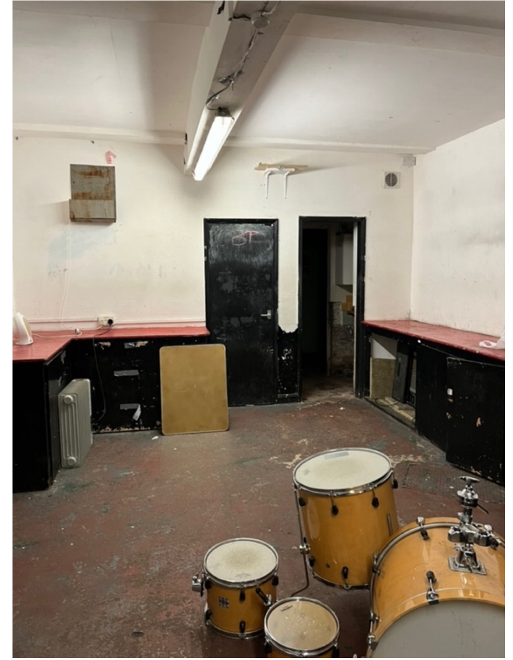


Figure 46. Interior of Hatch, Sheffield (25th April 2024)

JT Soar is a practice room, live space and recording studio while Hatch is a practice room and live space (Figure 45, Figure 46). Their underlying values, those of self-organisation and cultural autonomy, align with those of the n-au, but also that of a wider DIY scene. Sophie Cooper (2022: 15) highlights that if specifically musical venues are to be used in the n-au, practitioners are likely to try and find a venue that 'also shares a very DIY attitude', somewhere in explicit alignment with the values of the n-au. De Certeau (1984: 117) formulates that in a place, different elements are 'beside' each other, whereas in space, they are 'composed of intersections'. The structure of the n-au and its lack of permanent place mean it must work to combine these intersections, find potential gaps to bridge.

Beyond the immediate visual and material culture of such DIY venues, their political leanings can become more formalised. Venues such as Wharf Chambers and Hatch are part of an increasing number to adopt a safer spaces policy, providing clarity of their underlying values but also situating them with increasing discourse around such policies. Gowans et al. (2023: 75) go some way to demonstrate how the use of venues which have adopted such policies has worked in practice, suggesting that in the instance of Wharf Chambers, the venues approach to operating inclusively has increased the diversity of the Leeds scene, seeing a wider range of individuals both attending and performing while also minimising the 'use of reflexive anti-reflexivity to justify promoting artists with problematic political stances' that could be seen in the Leeds noise scene previously.

Rosemary Hill & Holly Megson (2020) outline how the use of safer spaces polices have become commonplace in Punk and DIY spaces to explicitly demonstrate their collective values, which work towards creating a space to 'promote access for marginalized groups'. These approaches, Barrière (2020) suggests, are step towards creating a space where a 'more egalitarian society' can be envisaged, using these tools as a way of 'protecting the audience from the fear of gendered violence'. The efficacy of such policies, however, is questioned as, while they may be effective in small scale, DIY scenes, 'power relationships are unlikely to disappear without a broader cultural shift in our society' (Barrière, 2020).

Verbuč (2022: 77) highlights the conflicting arguments as to whether the subcultural capital that safer spaces policies look to utilise is effective or simply a form of 'virtue signalling', concluding that despite their perceived potential inefficacy, 'they can also have positive and transformative effects on DIY participants and scenes'. Mahay (2022) reiterates this idea of virtue signalling, suggesting that in some situations in the scene people need to 'do the work' to recognise injustices as often these are occurring 'out ignorance and out of neglect'. Fitzpatrick and Thompson (2015) discuss the implications of safer spaces policies in the n-au and related scenes, acknowledging that they are not the perfect solution in enabling those who have faced oppression to participate but are certainly deemed good 'starting points'. Their argument suggests that the binary thinking implied by safer spaces policies can be limiting, furthering division, and instead suggest that while these types of polices are sufficient for now, they should be part of a wider, ongoing attempt to construct a series of 'adaptive strategies' which deal with systems of oppression in less rigid and oppositional ways (Fitzpatrick & Thompson, 2015).This is supported by Hill & Megson (2020) who suggest that the use of safer spaces polices should be 'backed up with practical actions which show their commitment to inclusion'. Indeed, as Mahay (2022) suggests, sometimes the focus subcultural capital which is so dominant these spaces actually facilitates deeper inequalities to develop unchecked, where 'social value' can overshadow 'mutual respect, mutual admiration and just community'.

What I contend here is that using spaces such as Wharf Chambers, JT Soar or Hatch for the promotion of performance in the n-au can be a way to diversify and alter the social dynamics of the scene towards a fairer structure – especially when we consider how the n-au has changed over time. Aligning with organisations who share policies which are based around communal, equitable, emancipatory and radical politics can be one way for the n-au to adopt a more critical stance concerning how it operates, but this shift must coincide with individuals doing the work to move towards a space of mutuality. If performances are

organised in such spaces, individuals have an indication of the social, cultural and political underpinnings that an event may have. If this same performance took place in an indistinct pub, the same cannot be assumed.

While talking about the consistently small audience numbers of the n-au, Hayler (2015b) quips that ‘a wet Wednesday night at the Fenton, say, has attracted a remarkably consistent number of paying punters for at least 20 years’[95]. While it may be that audience numbers will always hover around the same quantities given the marginality of the music, thinking about the growth of the n-au not in terms of numbers of attendance but the breadth of its participants is more apt. Aligning with spaces which hold this type of cultural capital has the potential to widen participation in the scene with individuals may be more likely to attend performances in venues which share a similar political mindset, especially if these are micro-institutions which are likely to have a pre-existing audience. Nevertheless, given the increasing scarcity of the material places available to the n-au, being able to organise events in such spaces is becoming increasingly difficult, again placing the scene at a disadvantage as compared with music scenes with a wider reach and more abundant resource. Hence, it comes down to the individuals involved to build and facilitate the forms of mutual respect and reciprocity that the n-au purports to value.

The Role of the Organiser

Like the record label owner in a space of distance, the role of the organiser in the n-au facilitates performance in a space of proximity. Organising performance in the n-au entails a navigation of multiple social, spatial and economic contexts to a greater degree than in recording and, given what we know to be its lack of resource, it is the point at which the tactics employed by its practitioners become indispensable. Before, during and after an event, the organiser must consider multiple actions. Artists need to be booked, venues need to be sourced, gigs need promoting, flyers printed and distributed. Technical equipment must be organised and live sound considered – either hiring someone in or, more than likely, doing it yourself. Artists need to arrive at a venue, load in, set up and

[95] Interestingly, the Fenton now has a safer spaces policy.

potentially sound check[96]. Audiences need to be hosted in a space, running orders made and roughly stuck to. Money needs taken on the door and artists need to be paid. Food and accommodation need to be considered for those coming from out of town. All of this occurs, as expected, on a budget of practically nothing. The complex role of the promoter is thus, as Rory Salter (2024) states, 'to make sure that first and foremost the conditions for good art making are catered for'.

Organising Performance

Organisers most often employ what Keith Kahn-Harris' (2007: 122) calls 'mundane subcultural capital' in arranging performances and addressing the required actions. While this type of capital can, on the one hand, be demonstrated by individuals having a comprehensive understanding of the histories and musical conventions of the scene, I use it here to refer to the 'detailed knowledge of the institutions and practices of the scene' which individuals gain through their 'active experience' (Kahn-Harris, 2007: 124). Knowing which spaces are available, how much they cost, how to set up a PA, how to take card payments and any manner of organisational details are necessary for an event to function. Much of this knowledge comes from a 'sustained investment in the myriad practices through which the scene is reproduced', becoming indicative of an 'altruistic commitment to the collective' (Khan-Harris, 2007: 124). This may come from historical involvement in the scene, built up over time, and demonstrated in an ongoing dedication to carrying on. However, since we know that in the n-au the idea of people coming and going, 'dropping in and dropping out', is essential to its ongoing survival, this knowledge must be shared between the scene's participants, made a communal resource (Murray, 2022).

Knowing that a venue will offer free room hire if you organise the sound yourself can be a salvation to those with limited economic capacity, the mapping of these potential resources a common tactic of many in the n-au. At this point, the cultural capital of one practitioner can be shared, a commoning of their mundane subcultural capital, redistributed across the wider scene, this act being fundamental to the survival of the n-au given the increasing inaccessibility and scarcity of resource and infrastructure surrounding it. This sharing of resources is often vernacular, word of mouth exchanges

[96] Sound checking in the n-au may be merely a line check – making sure that any electronics and equipment is functioning correctly – with any focus on the sonic mix and balance occurring as part of the performance, especially in an improvised performance.

within the everyday of the scene. However, it also occurs in more formalised ways, evidenced in zines or similar resources, providing practical, accessible guides on how to function in the n-au. TQN-Aut's *DIY Music Manual: A Complete Guide to Everything You'll Ever Need to Know - A User and Creator's Manual* acts as such a resource, giving advice on how to run a label, organise a gig, host a podcast or create an archive. Beyond this, making introductions, vouching for new organisers with certain venues and pooling skills is an essential part of exchanging knowledge and showing solidarity in the scene. Equally, it can be about making sure the mistakes aren't repeated. As Sophie Cooper (2022) says of her early days organising performances in Manchester and London, it was a 'terrible learning curve of mistakes and pissing people off' – sharing knowledge of how not to piss people of is essential.

Setting aside the money required to hire a venue is an everyday reality of organising performance. Before an overhaul of the employment support system in the UK in the mid 2010's, many promoters could scrape by with the support of 'the dole' to organise events, with even the small support enough to help hire a cheap venue (Arnot, 2022; Cooper, 2022). Similarly, historical precedents such as the Arts Council England's touring support for exclusively improvised music were a lifeline for the type of marginal music typical of the n-au. Now, however, that support is no longer a feasible option. Given that most of the activity in the n-au exists outside of institutional support, hiring a venue comes straight out of the pocket of the organiser. This change in economic viability has aligned with a changing material landscape, where hire fees are now pricing out many in the n-au. Often, traditionally musical venues – even those who operate in a DIY manner – have room hire fees alongside sound technician fees, which could run £200 - £300 before even opening the doors. For those in the n-au, such an upfront cost is unworkable. That is why we see certain venues used time and again, their economic viability a necessary draw. Take the example of Hundred Years Gallery – the venue owns a PA and has a small mixer to use, no sound technician required, resulting in a flat fee of £100. Others, such as Wharf Chambers have a dual fee, depending on the day of the week. Weekdays are £70, Friday and Saturday are £100, both of which include a dedicated sound engineer. This is where we see Phil Julian's (2024) idea of the 'noise music's weekend' play out, taking advantage of a reduced rate as both opportunity and nescessity. However, as venues face increasing precarity themselves, it becomes more difficult for those without an abundance of economic capital to source spaces that are both willing to host a performance and are affordable.

Rice (2022) explains how in the beginning of his time promoting gigs in London, under the name Hideous Replica, he found a basement pub venue which had free room hire and a PA, meaning that 'you could run the sound yourself, buy the artists some drinks and that was the basic level of expense you would incur.' There is a negotiation at play here in the trade-off between the cost incurred and the suitability of the venue, where the autonomy the organiser has in being able to run an event in whichever way they like is sometimes hampered by the material constraints of the space. Daniel Teruggi (2019: 89) reminds us that 'music is made to be heard, but the site in which it we hear it can strongly influence the way in which we perceive it' – and venues in the n-au are no different. Rice (2022) recounts that 'most of the time you turn up in the PAs broken' or you're 'competing with the sound from the upstairs bar' - the pitfalls of settling for a free venue. This can even happen in venues which have been paid for. Navigating these spatial contexts is a balance between affordability and suitability. Venues which are more matched towards the regular promotion of live music are likely to have well looked after, functioning equipment but come at a cost to the promoter which has a knock-on effect to the artist. Rice (2022) suggests that by jumping through the hoops of applying for Arts Council funding, 'the production value will be higher', resulting in a more controlled aesthetic experience but with that some of the autonomy is lost, suggesting that funding equally 'warps' a scene. Beylis (2022) actually ponders whether the inclusion of funding – which results in a reduced 'risk' to promoters - takes some of the fun out of organising and moves things away from a more communal spirit, especially as competition for funding becomes more fierce. Here lies the paradox of balancing making do and having a degree of autonomy versus having a degree of safety but less creative control.

Outside of the straightforward exchange of paying for venue hire, organisers in the n-au work to try and minimise these costs wherever possible. Like De Certeau (1984: 29) points out, those working on a tactical basis are 'sly as a fox and twice as quick'. They must work with haste and ingenuity to use whatever form of capital necessary to find a space. Cooper (2022) exclaims that she has 'never had to pay for a venue', instead using her social and cultural capital as a way of gaining access to a space, citing how the endeavour can be mutually beneficial to both the promoter and the venue, using this as leverage:

> The benefit to Gig, who owns it, is that she sells more beer. So, you kind of sell it to people like that. I've never been charged to use the venue because it's always just been very like: "you'll get this benefit. You know that I'll do a good job kind of putting it on and getting people in the door and then you'll make a tonne of money

> on the bar." So I've never had to pay for venue, which is quite a thing actually (Cooper, 2022)[97].

Avoiding the need to harness any economic capital, Cooper resorts instead to using her social and cultural capital, alongside some cunning manoeuvring, to be able to use the space. Despite the venue in question being a commercial entity – a pub - its shared values of supporting grassroots music and community are leveraged by the discerning promoter into a form of mutual benefit.

Others, such as Gowans (2022), look to work with the affordances of their employment to benefit the n-au. He explains how previously, he relied a lot on his administrative job at the University to support his activities but now that he works at Wharf Chambers, the affordances go beyond simply economic, being that he can use the gig space 'for free' (Gowans, 2022). He points out that doing so falls 'outside the scope' of his actual work, but does so because of a dedication to the scene, feeling that there is a 'responsibility to use the space more when I've got this kind of resource' (Gowans, 2022). Graham Dunning (2022) refers to this as 'feeding back privilege', directing material, temporal or spatial abundance back into the scene. Owen Chambers (2022), who organises performances in Bristol under the Liquid Library banner, follows a similar thread, volunteering at the Cube Cinema, exchanging their labour in return for space to organise events.

[97] Cooper is referencing The Golden Lion in Todmorden in this example.

Once the venue is booked, spreading the word is the next logical step in organising performance. As we discussed in chapter 2, the n-au relies on various forms of micro-media to disseminate information, particularly in relation to promoting events. Flyers and posters have been used over the history of popular music to disseminate information about concerts, providing even the most basic information to potential audiences – a list of acts playing, the venue, the time, date and the cost of entry. Yet, beyond the flyer as a mere source of information, they are imbued with the DIY aesthetics, signifying the sensibilities of the type of event on offer – the visual culture of the n-au. Posters frequently have a description of the artists playing, hinting at what one might expect, with these ranging from the clear and concise, listing instruments and approaches (Figure 48), to lengthy, abstracted ruminations and emotive explanations which are sparse on concrete detail yet still indicative of expected sounds (Figure 47). However, sometimes the design is deceptively minimal, the lack of discernible information being both an invitation for the curious and a barrier for those not in the know.

Figure 47. Singing Knives Presents poster (26th April 2013)

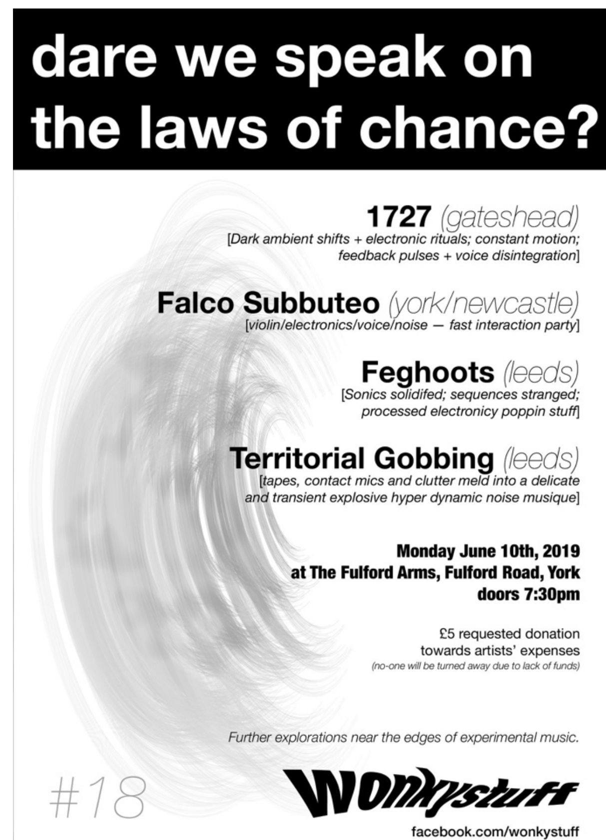


Figure 48. Wonkystuff #18 poster (10th June 2019)

The early days of the n-au saw flyers hand cut and pasted with stark, black and white, high contrast photocopies providing the information needed. The photocopier aesthetic a constant in the n-au, both representing an underlying luddite attitude whilst also

referencing a commitment to DIY culture more broadly. As digital tools become commonplace, sleek and clean designs bring a new minimalist edge to the dissemination of information. These aesthetic tendencies are often symbolic of the organiser, with some following set layouts and design, veering into the territory of creating a recognisable brand (Figure 49). For others, designs differ with each flyer, the aesthetics as varied as the music. Some of these may feature the straightforward handwriting of the organiser, a back-to-basics attitude which eschews any need for conscious design while embracing the hobbyist, lo-fi approach to the task. Others contain a comparably craft aesthetic, where linocut printing provides the information in an individually handmade form, resisting the replicability of digital tools (Figure 50).

Figure 50. Luxury Bucket Poster (13th April 2018)

Figure 49. A Better Noise Poster (17th November 2011)

The balance between professional and amateur is not only visible in the aesthetic design choices of the organiser but in the process of reproduction and distribution. Some organisers decide to get posters reproduced professionally, at an external printer, perhaps even using a DIY risograph or screen-printing studio to keep the process embedded within the wider DIY network. For others, they resort to the tactical ways of working which have become so ingrained in the n-au at this point, using printers at work to produce fliers. Like

Arnot (2022) points out, organising gigs without a budget meant he had to work this way, being up front with those he was organising for: 'I will spend no money on this gig like, I'll steal photocopying […] but I will flyer it, I'll go to all the gigs and flyer it'. The suggestion here, aside from just highlighting the budget nature of reproducing flyers, is how the n-au exists within a wider economy of live music. Putting posters up in venues and record shops, handing out flyers at other events are what help spread the word about a particular performance, the activity not relegated to its own world but actively interacting with the different sections and sub-sections which exist apart from it. By opting to promote an event in such a way helps to avoid the potentially closed-circuit nature of spreading information on social media and mailing lists which require active following or signing up to receive that information. These are used often, but it is the combination of multiple avenues of dissemination that helps to resist the n-au becoming a hermetic, insulated scene.

Aside from the individual organiser, there are continual efforts to provide a common space where events sharing similar cultural value can exist, even if the aesthetic tendencies may differ. Take, for example, Leeds based listings zine Cops N Robbers. Running since the late 1990s, the zine provides a monthly round up of gigs which are loosely banded together as DIY. This may contain the noise rock activities of the mid 2000's LS6 scene, the noise and improv melange of Termite Club, the weirdo showcases of Heinous Whining or the crossover chaos of ARS DIY. The zine is well known for providing a short, succinct paragraph on its reverse which defines what it means by DIY, that being music which is done for the love of it, in a self-organised fashion and exists within its own ecology, distinct from any careerist mindset of the mainstream (Figure 51). Over the course of its existence, which has spanned over 20 years, this small piece of text has been a constant shwoing an ongoing commitment to this fundamental idea of DIY.

Figure 51. Scans Cops & Robbers zine from 2000 (L) and 2019 (R) - Front and back.

While listing zines such as Cops & Robbers are commonplace, and are indicative of that more general DIY approach, technological shifts have opened new avenues for those operating in a self-organised way to disseminate information in a communal manner. Scotland based listings site Communal Leisure provides a platform for DIY events to promote their events, existing outside a sole reliance on the dominant social media space. Organisers can upload their own information, providing an entry on the platform for events which are happening in the broad central belt of Scotland, between the hubs of both Glasgow and Edinburgh. Their ethos is like Cops & Robbers, where they are attempting to provide a space for 'independent promoters and DIY events', with a strong

focus on events which are ‘not-for-profit, free or cheap, creating space or platforms for oppressed groups, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, queer’ (Communal Leisure, n.d.). While the ethos and DIY spirt may be similar, their technology focussed approach is analogous to what Royston-Ward was advocating for in moving away from Bandcamp in favour of a more decentralised alternative. By circumventing the need to rely of the dominant platforms, whether they are social media based or otherwise, such actions provide a step towards navigating a world which is more commons based.

While the fundamental activities of the organiser – booking a venue and spreading the word – are seemingly complete at this point, their role is much more involved and nuanced and becomes the point at which they move an organisational and administrative role into of care.

Organiser as Host

The organiser in the n-au is a host. In spaces of performance, the role covers both the artists and the audience. Organising an event is based around the premise of being host to an artist, to give them space to create whilst simultaneously hosting an audience within that space. To be hospitable is to be welcoming.

First, the host must decide who to invite. The curatorial agency the organiser has in playing host to artist is one of the fundamental ways they can create a space of egalitarianism. Brining new voices into these spaces are essential to encourage the longevity of the n-au and balance power. As Becky Mahay (2022) states quite clearly, ‘if you are responsible for doing promotion, you need to have done the work to understand power dynamics, intersectionality’. Like we saw with the record label, there is an agency present where organisers are looking to broaden the demographic scope of a scene. The n-au is becoming increasingly conscious of this, hence my suggestion that we are observing its critical turn. By inviting new voices as not just a means to encourage aesthetic variety, the n-au is taking a step towards making an actually equitable environment, creating smooth space. Paul Margree (2022) explains how when booking his Tread Into Mulch events, he is aware of the delicate ‘balance’ of building line ups and not taking the easy route: ‘it will be really easy for me to fill up a bill with people I know who are blokes’. He goes on to reference how other promoters in the city, particularly Rory Salter and Li Song,

are working hard to bring new voices into the scene, broadening the demographics of those playing and attending performances in terms of age, race and gender. Sophie Cooper (2022) explains the conscious effort put in to diversify line ups of the previously male dominated scene, where her and partner Jake 'do preach that quite a lot to other promoters and call them out on it as well', not only in the n-au but for others in their immediate locale. This comes after relaying a story about attending a more mainstream gig where the audience had a really 'macho energy', noting how uncomfortable the energy felt, reiterating the importance of diversifying participation (Cooper, 2022).

Aside from broadening participation and democratising access to marginal music, bringing new voices into the fold was one way to encourage aesthetic variety. Tim Hodgkinson (2000: 30) highlights a particular strategy in the histories of free improvisation where artists expand musical possibility by opting for 'frequent change of playing partners to avoid learning the habits of others', essentially looking to resist the chance for striations in idiom to occur. However, scholars such as Banerji (2023) suggest that these approaches can sometimes lead to the reproduction of inequalities that exist in the context of wider society, that just because free improvisation is built a set of 'levelling rituals' does not make the egalitarian promise applicable to those outside of a select few. The critique here points to the lack of wider political engagement, the processes in free improvisation which foreground aesthetic invention only ultimately exclude social and political invention, resulting in the situation whereby 'a scene characterized by a lack of direction and meaningful positive feedback is likely prone to feature white, male, or otherwise privileged individuals' (Banerji, 2023).

In the n-au we are beginning to witness a shift in programming, moving from the scene being the domain of the few to a space of the many. Consciously inviting artists whose work otherwise would not have been observed in the n-au is one-way organisers are attempting to build a more equitable space. From inviting first time performers to building a wider awareness of the demographics of a local scene, the organiser has agency in making these changes. This is where ideas such as Arnot and Fitzpatrick's (2016) 'dissensus' of genre can begin to play a part. Rather than relying on organising events with 'particular sonic signifiers (e.g., noise, dissonance, lack of rhythmic repetition, absence of melody)' organisers are beginning to work outside of the immediate, sometimes limiting, disciplinary boundaries of noise, free improvisation and experimental music (Fitzpatrick & Thompson, 2015). Reminding ourselves of the translocality of the n-au is also tantamount. Akama (2023) holds this of grave importance, noting how bringing artists from other places

beyond the immediate locale resists what she described as a 'semi-nationalistic' view that arts organisations can hold in terms of focussing solely on the local, and that it should instead be 'global'. Roe (2023) is critical of the contemporary arts scenes' reliance on 'parachute artists' to essentially art wash areas with high level of deprivation – paving the way for future gentrification in the process – while also recognising the importance of diversifying the local scene. This something Salter (2024) mentions also, where his programming aims to bring artists from further afield, combing with those who are more local, connecting the hyper local and the global rather than repeating lineups, 'doing something that isn't already being done'. By considering the scope of the n-au beyond just the local, we can conceive of a broader demographic of participation, but also new forms of collaboration. Collaboration becomes integral to cultivating spaces of equality. As Layla Legard (2023) points out, the change in demographics of the scene in Leeds has fostered new chances for collaboration and since 'there's so many interesting musicians in this one little scene and everyone's quite into collaborative practice', new assemblages of performances are continually being formed and negotiated within these constructed spaces.

In terms of hosting the artist, this goes beyond simply giving them space to perform, especially if an artist is from out of town. Here, we find the hospitality of the organiser as a key part of both the solidarity-based economy of the n-au but also how the wider community flourishes. Sometimes you could be sleeping on someone's sofa, in someone's spare room, on the floor of a venue, on a slowly deflating airbed in a living room or a whole host of space in between. That many organisers in the n-au host artist in their own home points to the communal and often quite personal relationships that are cultivated through activity in the n-au. Indeed, as Royston-Ward (2022) points out, this is how a lot of these deeper friendships start - from staying at someone's house after a performance. When Deasy (2022) mentions the importance of the 'hang' after a gig, this is extended further when it comes to the sociality that occurs between artist and organisers. Staying in someone's house, you get to know them on a personal level, meet their partners, meet their kids, meet their pets. Atton (2012) talks about the 'political economy of low-budget touring that produces unexpected aesthetic outcomes' in free improvisation, referring specifically to aesthetic experimentation, but this low-budget touring also produces community and sociability in the n-au. Hence my suggestion that when Arnot (2022) talks about the 'lack' of resource in the n-au, the social is something which is built up in abundance, precisely because of the importance of community in building and maintaining such scenes.

Part of the communal nature of the n-au is based also on the sharing and distribution of available resource. It might be that the organisers simply do not have the space to host someone I their own home or cannot for whatever reason. Here, the collective, pooled resources of the n-au come into play. When I have toured, there have been times when an organiser was unable to host me but has arranged for me to stay with a friend of theirs – who happened to also be one of the artists performing that evening. Such a situation further expands the community of the n-au, leading to a social situation that otherwise would have been constrained to the space of performance. Likewise, when I have organised performances for artists, I have not been able to host everyone. In this situation, someone else stood up and offered to host – this person was also an artist and organiser in the n-au. So, the reciprocal nature of the scene keeps going. Hayler (2012a) even alludes to this in his article about the economics of the n-au: 'Now I'm off to stuff duvets into bin-liners so Aqua Dentata and BBBlood don't have to freeze as they kip on Dan's floor tonight...'

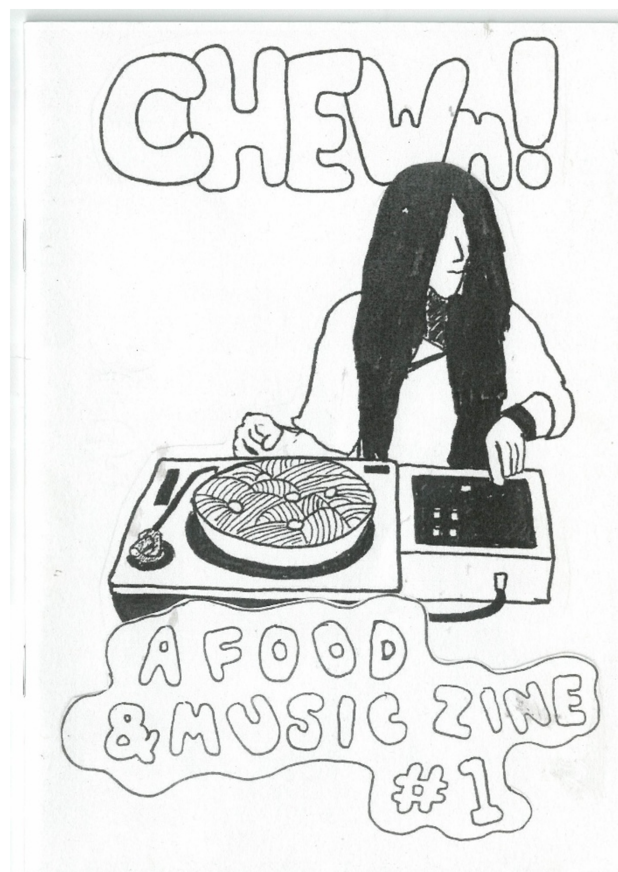


Figure 52. CHEWn Zine #1 (2019)

Aside from a moderately comfortable space to sleep, artists need feeding. In terms of sustenance, this is another integral part of hosting someone. A takeaway Pizza may be

sufficient at the end of an evening but many in the n-au follow a more involved, caring approach to feeding artists. Home cooked meals and specially prepared dishes are commonplace, both inside venues and out. That many in the n-au have more than a passing interest in food is entwined in this approach. Flick through the pages of Matt Fifield's *CHEWn!* and you get a sense of the passion people have for both cooking and feeding (Figure 52). The zine looks to consider the 'parallel between composing improvised experimental noise music and throwing together a soup from what you have left in the fridge' and brings artists and organisers from a range of DIY practices to consider the importance of food in such spaces (Fifield, 2019).

In my own experiences when hosting I cook vegetarian, sometimes vegan, food for everyone to share at the venue in the time between soundcheck and performance. As there are no facilities in the venue, I make cold salads. Green beans, broccoli, lemon and tahini or an Italian rice salad are common features. Understanding the need to eat something which is not heavily processed, especially while travelling, informs these decisions. Bringing plates and cutlery from home, this can be done with minimal cost, but the social aspect of everyone eating together before an event is fundamental to building a communal atmosphere. When I have been hosted, I have been taken out for food at a Mosque, been served a beautiful aubergine curry, shared roast vegetables and olives while taking in the sunshine in the promoters back yard and a whole host of other weird and delicious treats. Of course, there were countless instances of trips to the chippy or a supermarket sandwich, but it is no surprise those are the meals that I do not readily recall.

The sharing of food is ingrained in DIY organisation, witnessed in different scenes and in different places. Rice (2022) talks about the approach taken in many countries on the European mainland in DIY circles, where sharing food becomes an important part of the ritual of performance. Rather than an afterthought, this is a central event. Everyone involved, from artist to organisers, bar staff to sound engineers are invited to share food before a performance is open to the public. Beylis (2022) explains how organising big events in Country Leitrim end up becoming sort of a 'potluck', where people are invited to bring dishes, to share recipes, break bread. Conversely, Arnot (2022) tells me how often feeding bands on a budget came down to making a 'big pot of daal', something quick, easy, affordable but most of all nutritious and delicious – the simple means of the dish not detracting from its intention. Some go out of their way to make something specifical, like Salter's (2024) mentioned of making 'soba noodles' on occasion. These gestures, while

small, signify the ingrained notion of sharing active within the n-au, of a communality that is ingrained in the DIY spirit.

Jack Walker (2023), in talking about the 'productive capacities of relational artwork' suggests that to consider the realistic impact of practice in affecting meaningful change, artists might 'fixate on their own limitations' to provide capacity to 'fruitfully propagate the types of world that their artist wants to live in'. Such an approach has begun to permeate through the n-au in its ongoing critical consciousness. While we have understood that the financial renumeration in the n-au is minimal to non-existent, the frequent approach of artists getting a door split as a performance fee is common practice where set fees and adequate funding is absent. The money taken from ticket sales of the evening split between the artists playing, sometimes after covering the costs of venue hire. With no guarantee of a specific amount, this all depends on the amount of people that attend on the night. When hire rates for venues increase, the margin for a promoter to be able to break even and give the artists even a meagre amount in return is limited[98]. Hayler (2012a) has suggested that the economic scarcity of the n-au means any sense of reward beyond the love of doing it should not be expected:

> I'm afraid that if your idea of 'reward' is more than some taxi money, a few quid in your paypal account and a glowing review on radiofreemidwich then you are going to have to do something else.

Murray (2019) outlines how many in the n-au would have previously been happy with 'BFH – Bus Fare Home', that token payment which many have been used to. However, if we are thinking about the n-au as a translocal scene, the idea of bus fare home does not consider those who are performing from out of town. Likewise, an increasing awareness of the precarious nature of the n-au is making many organisers considerate of how they can renumerate artists, even if it is only a little more than bus fare. Owen Chambers (2022) has witnessed the knock-on effect of rising hire costs when trying to find space to organise performances in Bristol and how this impacts not only the ability to organise shows, but to do so in an equitable way:

> a big thing with us is making sure artists get paid properly, fairly and equitably. But then I can't take the hit and put on a gig that's like 200 pounds for a hire fee. You

[98] Note I talk about breaking even, *not* making a profit.

> calculate and it's like, well, I need to charge 20 quid a ticket to get people paid. It's difficult.

Beyond the organiser being host to the artist, they are also host to the audience. Resisting the move towards becoming a space of striation, where the same people always attend, the organiser has agency in considering who can attend a performance and how they are able to affect that beyond the typical notions of promotion. This begins at the door. In the n-au, tickets prices are considerably lower than one would find at a larger gig, especially one which uses an external ticketing provider. In the early days of the n-au, entry could be as little as 50p but usually priced somewhere around £4. For an evening with four acts playing, £1 per act, that's a bargain. However, with increasing hire costs of venues, the need to increase tickets prices also rises. It is increasingly common to see performances prices at between £8 – 10. This reflects the nature of the n-au's response to external constraints, charging higher prices because of a venue's hire fee. If the democratic ideals of the n-au would allow anyone to attend a performance while the artists still get paid a reasonable rate, the ability to do so is increasingly diminished as the material and economic landscape of live music changes.

Becoming equally common across the n-au is the adoption of varied, solidarity-based pricing models. A ticket may be priced at £10, but rather than that existing as a solid, concrete option, organisers are using differing methods to ensure everyone is able to attend a performance regardless of economic position. When we think of the n-au as being about creating an equitable space, the ability for people to attend performances is of paramount concern. Whether this comes in the form of PAYF (pay as you feel), NOTAFLOF (no-one turned away for lack of funds) or something simpler such as offering a sliding scale of prices (Figure 54), or simply asking guests to pay whatever they have (Figure 53), there are multiple ways organisers can make events as accessible as possible. These approaches to pricing encourage solidarity and accessibility in the n-au. If we consider the fundamental idea of DIY as being 'rooted in democratic socialism and therefore not motivated intrinsically by profit' but concerned primarily with 'increasing the wellbeing of the participants through self-actualization, often realized through engagement with a community' (Lowdnes, 2016: xiv), then allowing someone to attend a performance for little to no money is one way of facilitating this.

Figure 54. Adhuman Presents poster (2nd November 2023)

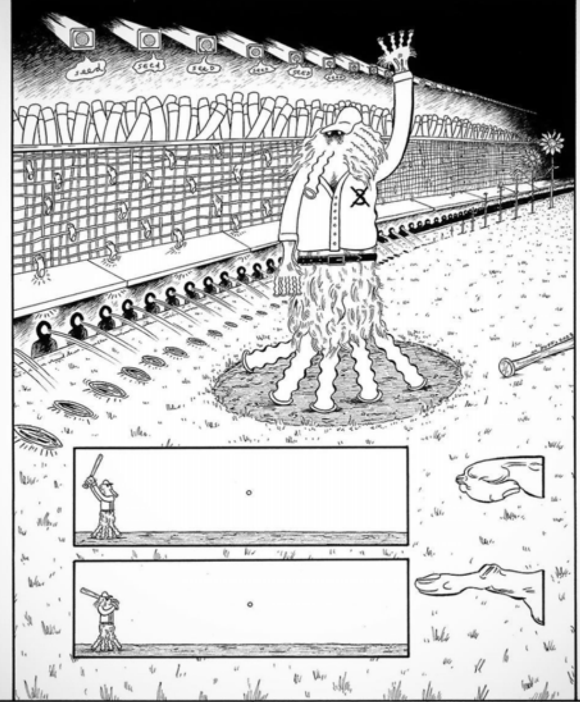


Figure 53. Baked Beans on the Doorstep poster (20th September 2023)

However, this tactic also raises some questions about how organisers can enable such an approach. Given that the cost of organising a performance sits with the organiser, ticket sales are essential to covering costs. This brings us back into thinking about how one accesses a venue. Looking at the tactical approaches organisers are taking in trying to reduce the cost of organising performance gives us one suggestion of how ticket prices can be kept low. Again, the ongoing need for organisers in the n-au to work tactically and reflexively is essential in maintain a degree of autonomy in the ever-changing cultural industries. Given the hobbyist nature of the n-au, the role of the organiser is one which is not permanent. While the organiser may have a large degree of agency in impacting the social and cultural structure of these scenes, this is done so with persistent economic, and increasingly spatial, scarcity. Herein lies the paradoxical nature of the n-au. To maintain a degree of autonomy, individuals are increasingly working within their own means without explicit external support. But, in the changing socio-economic contexts we have explored in this section – fewer venues, shifting cultural conventions and differing approaches to performance – much of this autonomy is lost.

I decide to organise one of the shows myself at the Central Bar in Gateshead. Despite my initial insistence that I didn't want to, not because I have no desire to but having the additional task of organising a gig myself is a lot to consider when we are playing a handful of other shows, I decide to go DIY. I meet with the owner of the bar to see if it's something they would be willing to do. I pitch it as an 'experimental, drone music night' to which the response is 'I don't know what that is, but you can have the room'. The room hire is free, a rarity these days (I try to hide my excitement), but there is the suggestion that we use the venues sound engineer at a cost of £100. While I have no grudge in paying for a sound engineer, my current budget for this gig is £0. Between the three of us on the tour and the other acts I plan to have play, we are all more than capable of doing the sound ourselves. Jonathan and Ross both agree that this is the best option, reminding ourselves that our setups are relatively straight forward…a couple of line outs in the PA and setting levels, straight forward stuff. I suggest this to the owner of the bar, which he is happy to accommodate. The gig being on a Tuesday night, he seems more than happy that if we bring a few people in for the gig, it'll be busier than a normal Tuesday with nothing happening. That's Gateshead sorted.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Operating with Degrees of Autonomy

The no-audience underground has thus far been absent from detailed academic analysis in any substantial way. Thus, my work here has presented the first empirical, in-depth exploration of the n-au as a distinct music scene which, due to its marginal cultural appeal and specific working practices, provides a unique perspective into how DIY, underground and experimental culture operates. The central line of inquiry running through this research has been to understand the ways practitioners in the n-au can maintain the conditions of possibility which allow the scene to operate. Bringing together the individual conclusions reached at each section of this thesis, the overall implication is that despite the dedicated work of its active practitioners, the n-au is not a fully self-reliant music scene but instead functions with shifting degrees of autonomy in relation to external social, technological, spatial and economic contexts. Rather than this constituting a fatalistic position on the scene, I instead suggest this as an invitation for a more critical understanding of how the n-au, and underground culture more generally, can endure.

What my research documents is the transformative nature of underground culture over the past 25 years in relation to these shifting contexts, using the n-au as a central case study. A core argument for much DIY and underground culture is how it relates to the mainstream, either in an antagonistic, resistant or indifferent way. Despite Hayler (2012c) suggesting that the only relationship to the mainstream should be in 'shrugging it off as irrelevant', the n-au is entangled within and often reliant on the resources that exist within that sphere of cultural production to operate. Resulting from the n-au's marginal appeal, its undergroundness, it has a noticeable 'lack of resource' (Arnot, 2017) [99]. This is a situation which requires those in the n-au to work with the affordances and possibilities of resources external to it, mobilising and redistributing them throughout the scene, many of which are embedded in more mainstream, and more popular, forms of culture. As a reliance on these external resources increases, the scene operates with a diminished creative and cultural autonomy. The scenes conditions of possibility are thus determined

[99] Undergroundness being that the n-au is broadly defined by activity which holds a certain level of aesthetic distance from its mainstream counterparts.

by finding a balance between the opportunities and limitations afforded by these resources.

It is imperative to note that at the same time as the underground is undergoing a process of transformation, the mainstream is following a similar trajectory – streaming platforms are now the dominant modes of accessing and distributing music, upending how the music industry functions and bringing with them an array of complexities, just as both large and small music venues are facing pressure to stay afloat amidst the ongoing gentrification of large cities and towns, and the nature of algorithmic social media platforms is pushing artists to become increasingly competitive and individualised in their approaches to audience engagement. The result of these parallel shifts is that the n-au's external pool of resource has changed, and in that change, it has moved from a space of material abundance to material scarcity. Hence, we find that as n-au activity has a growing dependence on the use of streaming platforms, more singular, formulaic approaches to circulating music are transpiring, just as its activities are gradually priced out of music venues and large cities, even on a grassroots level, resulting in its practitioners searching for new spaces to inhabit or construct.

One of the key findings of this research has been to highlight the determination many in the n-au have with regards to continuing their practice despite these changes, navigating these circumstances to operate without cessation of its activity. That the n-au has been able to traverse these situations, although not with issue, confirms my thesis that the underground is something that can still exist in contemporary society. Rather than lamenting the way underground music has changed, I have suggested that what endures as the underground now is fundamentally different to that prior - the underground is not 'dead' as Keenan (2015) argues, but different. Operating in spaces which exist on the fringes of other, arguably more popular forms of music and culture, and shifting towards an increasingly techno-centric existence does not negate the existence of an underground but signifies its ability to change and adapt, where is can still retain its fundamental focus of 'shared radical aesthetics and cultural marginality' (Graham, 2016: 4).

However, what I would like to reiterate in this concluding section is that despite the positive perspective with which I have described much of the n-au and its practices and ongoing ability to survive, the continually changing environment that culture is operating in is becoming increasingly hostile to the scene. My research confirms that the existence of such a music scene is possible, but not without complications. If the logic of the

neoliberal western world is continuing in a direction which devalues individual expression and a pluralistic view of culture, then what I have described in this thesis will become increasingly strained. If my conclusion so far is that the n-au can and has survived through these changing contexts, a follow up question might be to ask how long that can continue for? It is therefore essential that the pre-figurative practices and modes of operating in underground music scenes are not seen as siloed, separatist enclaves of activity but networks of interdependency from which more radical, equitable and communal politics and culture can emanate. In the n-au's move from a space which Hayler (2015a) previously described as not being 'explicitly political' to one which has developed a self-critical position, we can begin to see how the practices within the scene can coincide with broader societal change.

Like Hayler (2020a) is keen to point out, the practices that the n-au adopt are not an end in themselves but should be considered as just one element of a wider engagement with political change, existing alongside calls for a fairer and more equitable culture, where 'championing the greater cause of hobbyism involves calling for positive societal change' - the activities of the n-au being just one 'step in that direction'. While the n-au may be marginal, and its practices limited in affecting widespread change, it is still important to consider the implications of their significance. The processes of the n-au are pre-figurative, suggesting a way of operating which is increasingly based around communal, collective, collaborative, amateur and often improvised efforts that looks beyond the limitations and inequalities of the current system to do things differently, to experiment.

If, for example, the post-work imaginary and alternative economic systems heralded by the likes of postcapitalist thinkers such as Fisher (2021), Gibson-Graham (2006), Mason (2015) or Srnicek and Williams (2015) come to fruition, bolstered by schemes such as Universal Basic Income, then what does my analysis of the n-au offer? Being an approach to musicking which is decidedly 'hobbyist' in its approach (Hayler, 2020a), what is currently happening provides a speculative indication of how engagement with music outside of any market logic might function. In providing concrete demonstrations of *how* practitioners in the n-au are carrying out their activity in the everyday – whether that be recording in the car on the way to work, handing out CD-R's as gifts, building decentralised repositories of recorded work or actively challenging the rituals of performance spaces – I have provided a mapping of ways of operating and infrastructures of a scene which might be considered different in their approach.

Given the breadth of practice in the n-au, and the relatively unexplored terrain that the scene offers for academic study, my work here has a necessarily limited scope. Rather than focussing in on the local or expanding out to the transglobal scene, my research opted to concentrate on a middle point, the translocal, specifically within the confines of the UK. Doing so allowed me to dig deep enough into the scene and its practices whilst also managing to keep an expansive vantage point, hovering between the macro and the micro scale. To further build on the work I have presented here, examination of the intricacies of the local scene and its local contexts, or at a global level, could provide additional insight into how underground music functions at these different points. Likewise, continuing the study of micro scenes such as the n-au is vital to understanding how the ongoing changing contexts will impact the ability for marginal and radical culture to continue. If the resources external to the n-au become much scarcer, the degrees of autonomy become even more acute, its ability to continue much longer brought in to question.

In additional to a more molecular examination of a particular section of the n-au, my work has implications and practical applications outside of this thesis. The work carried out has primarily involved exploring the n-au as a music scene, looking to understand the intricacies of its practices which circulate around sound as the central form of cultural production. However, the underlying notions of the n-au and its way of operating have potential as a framework for activity in disciplines aside from music. Given that a lot of activity in the n-au broaches other experimental or avant-garde artistic practices, the use of its principles as a framework for engagement with activity outside of the confines of music would be a rich avenue of research. The contexts which I raised through the thesis are in no way unique only to the n-au and an investigation into how other practices and disciplines are navigating could provide further insight into how the n-au could work in tactical ways aside from what it currently does. Equally, in practices which exist separately from the funding structures so ingrained in the contemporary art world, the n-au as a framework for practice has interdisciplinary potential.

The central tenet of the n-au is focussed on a creating a space to experiment, to test out ideas and construct scenarios for weird sounds to be heard. Focussing on an approach which is a work in *process*, foregrounding the activity over the product, is one way of reimagining how we might interact with culture in the future. Doing this in a way which

highlights the need for collectivity, communality and networks of care and friendship provides a prospective framework for navigating the trajectory of the future.

Following the actions of the n-au has the potential to allow more of us to ‘create for reasons other than the standard measures of success’, to reframe our engagement with work – and hopefully reject it - and get back to the business of finding ways to become ‘distracted’ (Hayler, 2015b).

Bibliography

Interviews

Akama, R. (2023) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 24 February.

Arnot, S. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 19 December

Beylis, N. (2022) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 12 December.

Boehringer, J. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 5 November.

Boehringer, E.C. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 5 November.

Chambers, O. (2022) Zoom conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 22 November

Cooper, S. (2022) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 23 December.

Deasy, J. (2022) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 8 December.

Donkin, M. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 19 December.

Dunning, G. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 7 November.

Gowans, T. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 15 November.

Harrison, D. (2022) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 21 December.

Hayler, R. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 15 November.

Howcroft, D. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 10 November.

Jarvis, A. (2022) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 3 December.

Julian, P. (2024) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 13 February.

Legard, L. (2023) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 18 January.

Legard, P. (2023) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 18 January.

Mahay, R. (2022) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 28 December.

Margree, P. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 6 December.

Mordecai, E. (2024) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 22 February.

Murray, J. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 13 November.

Poot, L. (2023) Phone call with Craig Stewart Johnson. 12 January.

Rice, L. (2022) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 13 December.

Robertson, A. (2023) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 28 March.

Roe, C. (2023) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 24 February.

Royston-Ward, M. (2022) Microsoft Teams conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 8 December.

Salter, R. (2024) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 14 February.

Wild, A. (2022) Zoom conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 20 December.

Wood, A. (2022) Conversation with Craig Stewart Johnson. 9 November

References

Abbott, A.D.R. (2012) *Radical Resonances: Art, Self-organised Cultural Activity and the Production of Postcapitalist Subjectivity; or, Deferred Self-Inquiry of a Precarious Artworker, 2008 – 2011.* PhD Thesis. The University of Leeds.

Adams, T. E., Jones, S. H. & Ellis, C. (2015) *Autoethnography*. Oxford: Oxford University press.

Adorno, T.W. (2001) *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge.

Ahmed, A. (2023) 'Bandcamp lays off half its staff after buyout by Songtradr', *The Guardian*, 17 October. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/music/2023/oct/17/bandcamp-lays-off-half-its-staff-after-buyout-by-songtradr (Accessed: 28 September 2025).

Akama, R. (2022) 'Hearing Friends' Voices' in Akama, R. & Roe, C. (eds.) *and…: ame's R&D on DIY Culture, Sustainability and Future*. Huddersfield: ame, pp. 2-3.

Akama, R. & Roe, C. (eds.) (2022) *and…: ame's R&D on DIY Culture, Sustainability and Future*. Huddersfield: ame.

Arnot, S. (2017) 'Space, organisation and practice: the ethical continuum of underground music in the UK', in *The Place of Music*, Loughborough University.

Arnot, S. & Fitzpatrick, S. (2016) 'In happy dissensus: The audience of the No Audience Underground', in *Fringes, Outsides and Undergrounds: The Aesthetics and Politics of Unpopular Music*, Goldsmiths.

Atton, C. (2012) 'Genre and the cultural politics of territory: The live experience of free improvisation', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(4), pp. 427–441.

Auslander, P. (2023) *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. 3rd edn. Oxon: Routledge.

Bailey, D. (1993) *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. New York: Da Capo Press.

Bailey, T.B.W. (2012) *Unofficial Release: Self-Released and Handmade Audio in Post-Industrial Society*. Belsona Books.

Bandcamp (n.d.) *What are Bandcamp's fees?*, *Bandcamp Help Center*. Available at: https://get.bandcamp.help/hc/en-us/articles/23020665520663-What-are-Bandcamp-s-fees (Accessed: 7 October 2025).

Banerji, R. (2023) 'Free Improvisation, Egalitarianism, and Knowledge', *Jazz Perspectives*, pp. 1–24.

Barrière, L. (2020) "'Safer spaces for everyone'? The Ladyfest scene as an innovative field for the fight against gendered violence in the live music industry," *Arts and the Market*, 11(2), pp. 61–75.

Beaulieu, D. (2025) ‘Steal my Work’, *Derek Beaulieu*. Available at: https://derekbeaulieu.ca/pdfs/ (Accessed: 29 October 2025).

Becker, H. (1982) *Art worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Behr, A., Brennan, M., Cloonan, M., Frith, S. & Webster, E. (2016) ‘Live Concert Performance: An Ecological Approach’, *Rock Music Studies*, 3(1), pp. 5–23.

Bell, C. (1999) ‘History of the LMC’, *Variant*, 2(8), pp. 1-5.

Benhaïm, S. (2019) ‘Noise records as noise culture: DIY practices, aesthetics and trades’ in Bennett, A. & Guerra, P. (eds.) *DIY Cultures and Underground Music Scenes*. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 112-124

Bennett, A. & Guerra, P. (2019) ‘Rethinking DIY culture in a post-industrial and global context’ in Bennet, A. & Guerra, P. (eds.) *DIY Cultures and Underground Music Scenes*. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 7-18.

Bennett, A. & Peterson, R.A. (eds.) (2004) *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Bliss, A. (2016) ‘Leave The Capital’, *The Wire* (468; January), p. 41.

Boehringer, J. (2015) ‘Liberation Through a Lack of Interest: The No-Audience Underground’, *At Their Own Rates*, 17 August. Available at: https://multiplesystemsofevents.wordpress.com/liberation-through-a-lack-of-interest-the-no-audience-underground/ (Accessed: 24 January 2023).

Born, G. (2017) ‘After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re)Theorizing the Aesthetic’ in Born, G., Lewis, E. & Straw, W. (eds.) *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 33-58

Bottomley, A.J. (2015) ‘“Home taping is killing music”: the recording industries’ 1980s anti-home taping campaigns and struggles over production, labor and creativity’, *Creative Industries Journal*, 8(2), pp. 123–145.

Bradley, C. (2023) *The Williamsburg Avant-Garde: Experimental Music and Sound on the Brooklyn Waterfront*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Brassier, R. (2009) ‘Genre is Obsolete’ in Mattin & Iles, A. (eds.) *Noise & Capitalism*. San Sebastian: Arteleku, pp. 61-71.

Buccleuch, R.S. (2021) ‘Tape Label Formation’ in Wood, A. (ed) *DIY Music Manual: A Complete Guide to Everything You'll Ever Need to Know - A User and Creator's Manual*. Northumberland: TQN-Aut, pp. 10-12.

Cage, J. (1968) *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. London: Mariam Boyars.

Choate, A. (2025) *The WEIRDness of Experimental Music: The Reproduction of In/Difference*, *The Attic*. Available at: https://theatticmag.com/firstperson/2495/the-weirdness-of-experimental-music%3A-the-reproduction-of-in%2Fdifference.html (Accessed: 15 December 2025).

Chushid, E. (2000) *Songs in the Key of Z: The Curious Case of Outsider Music*. Chicago: A

Capella Books.

Chrysagis, E. (2016) ‘The Visible Evidence of DiY Ethics: Music, Publicity and Technologies of (In)Visibility in Glasgow’, *Visual Culture in Britain*, 17(3), pp. 290–310.

Clemence, C. (2016) ‘The Power of Performance’ in Wallis, J. (ed.) *Fight Your Own War: Power Electronics and Noise Culture*. London: Headpress, pp. 75-90.

Communal Leisure (n.d.) *Communal Leisure*. Available at: https://communalleisure.com/ (Accessed: 11th October 2025).

Crossley, N. (2020) *Connecting Sounds: The Social Life of Music*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Crossley, N. (2023) ‘Doing it with others: The social dynamics of Do-It-Yourself musicking’, *DIY, Alternative Cultures & Society*, 1(1), pp. 79–94.

Curran, K. (2016) ‘“On Tape”: Cassette Culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow Now’, in Purcell, R. & Randall, R. (eds.) *21st Century Perspectives on Music, Technology, and Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 33–54.

Davies, R. (2023) ‘Pub closures rise sharply amid warning over planned business rate change’, *The Guardian*, 18 September. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/sep/18/pub-closures-rise-sharply-amid-warning-over-planned-business-rate-change (Accessed: 2 May 2024).

De Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley: University of California press.

De Seta, G. (2021) ‘A “No-Venue Underground”: Making Experimental Music Around Hong Kong’s Lack of Performance Spaces’ in Charrieras, D. & Mouillot, F. (eds.) *Fractured Scenes: Underground Music-Making in Hong Kong and East Asia*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dector, R.L. (2023) ‘Music Platform Ampled Announces Closure’, *Billboard Canada*. Available at: https://ca.billboard.com/ampled-music-platform (Accessed: 28 September 2025).

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated from the French by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Demers, J. (2017) ‘Cassette Tape Revival as Creative Anachronism’, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 14(1), pp. 109–117.

Doran, J. (2019) *Why is music getting weirder?*. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/12WDc5Bx8qTpgFCZC2y1v53/why-is-music-getting-weirder (Accessed: 15 April 2025).

Duester, B. (2025) ‘The “cassette comeback”: debunking a tenacious narrative’, *Continuum*, 39(3), pp. 478-485.

Fife, K. (2022) ‘Distant Together: Creative Community in UK DIY Music During Covid-19’, in Bruzzi, S., Biriotti, M., Caleb, S. & Wiltshire, H. (eds.) *Lockdown Cultures: The arts and humanities in the year of the pandemic, 2020-21*. London: UCL Press, pp. 49–57.

Fifield, M. (2019) ‘Sup’, *CHEWn* (1), p. 2

Finnegan, R. (2007) *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Fisher, M. (2016) *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater Books.

Fitzpatrick, S. & Thompson, M. (2015) ‘Making space: an exchange about women and the performance of free noise’, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 25(2), pp. 237–248.

Foist, D. (2016) ‘The Horror The Horror - Leeds Termite Club and British Noise History’, in J. Wallis (ed.) *Fight Your Own War: Power Electronics and Noise Culture*. London: Headpress, pp. 94–111.

Fox, S. (2022) ‘New Amateurs and Tricksters: A manifesto for music and sound creation’, *Organised Sound*, 28(1), pp. 43-52.

Frenneaux, R. (2023) ‘The rise of independent artists and the paradox of democratisation in the digital age: Challenges faced by music artists in the new music industry’, *DIY, Alternative Cultures & Society*, 1(2), pp. 125–137.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006) *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Glass, P.G. (2012) ‘Doing Scene: Identity, Space, and the Interactional Accomplishment of Youth Culture’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 41(6), pp. 695–716.

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Golsmith, K. (2020) *Duchamp is my Lawyer: The Polemics, Pragmatics and Poetics of UbuWeb*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Gomberg, B. (2021) ‘Abnormal Distributions’, *The Wire* (443; January), p. 55.

Gottschalk, J. (2016) *Experimental Music Since 1970*. London: Bloomsbury.

Gowans, T. (2023) ‘Chaos Experiments’. Interview with Theo Gowans. Interviewed by Abi Bliss for *The Wire* (468; February), p. 14.

Gowans, T., Legard, P. & Procter, D. (2023) ‘Noise, Power Electronics, and the No-Audience Underground: Place, Performance and Discourse in Leeds’ Experimental Music Scene’ in Lashua, B., Spracklen, K. Ross, K. & Thompson, P. (eds.) *Popular Music in Leeds: Histories, Heritage, People and Places*. Bristol: Intellect, pp. 70-84.

Graham, S. (2010) ‘(Un)Popular Avant-Gardes: Underground Popular Music and the Avant-Garde’, *Perspectives of New Music*, 48(2), pp. 5–20.

Graham, S. (2016) *Sounds of the Underground: A Cultural, Political, and Aesthetic Mapping of Underground and Fringe Music*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Graham, S. (2023) *Becoming Noise Music: Style, Aesthetics & History*. London: Bloomsbury.

Hainge, G. (2013) *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hamilton, A. (1990) 'The Aesthetics of Imperfection', *Philosophy*, 65(253), pp. 323–340.

Harley, B. (2021) 'Music against Fascism: DIY Versus the Right Wing Safety Squad', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 51(2), pp. 138–151.

Harney, S. & Moten, F. (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions.

Hard Return (2025) Available at: https://hardreturn.bandcamp.com (Accessed: 29 October 2025).

Hayes, L. (2017) 'From Site-specific to Site-responsive: Sound art performances as participatory milieu', *Organised Sound*, 22(1), pp. 83–92.

Hayler (2009) 'OK then…', *Radio Free Midwich*, 20 December. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2009/12/20/hello-world/ (Accessed: 17 February 2023).

Hayler, R. (2010) 'wired for sound part one: back to the cassette', *Radio Free Midwich*, 20 May. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2010/05/20/wired-for-sound-part-one-back-to-the-cassette/ (Accessed: 6 April 2023).

Hayler, R. (2011a) 'the cost of free things…', *Radio Free Midwich*, 7 January. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2011/01/07/the-cost-of-free-things/ (Accessed: 18 July 2023).

Hayler, R. (2011b) 'the myth of underground versus mainstream, or: cool isn't cool', *Radio Free Midwich*, 6 February. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2011/02/06/the-myth-of-underground-versus-mainstream-or-cool-isnt-cool/ (Accessed: 18 July 2023).

Hayler, R. (2011c) '"our way of shaking hands": trades and largesse in the no-audience underground', *Radio Free Midwich*, 28 November. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2011/11/28/our-way-of-shaking-hands-trades-and-largesse-in-the-no-audience-underground/ (Accessed: 24 January 2023).

Hayler, R. (2012a) 'shock discovery: no audience underground immune to criticism!', *Radio Free Midwich*, 19 April. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2012/04/19/shock-discovery-no-audience-underground-immune-to-criticism/ (Accessed: 9 October 2022).

Hayler, R. (2012b) 'the rewards of no rewards: musings on no-audience economics', *Radio Free Midwich*, 15 September. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2012/09/15/the-rewards-of-no-rewards-musings-on-no-audience-economics/ (Accessed: 24 January 2023)

Hayler, R. (2012c) 'simon reynolds, diy culture and the no-audience underground', *Radio Free Midwich*, 7 October. Available at:

https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2012/10/07/simon-reynolds-diy-culture-and-the-no-audience-underground/ (Accessed: 9 October 2022).

Hayler, R. (2012d) ‘pete cann’s noise+punk alldayer, wharf chambers, leeds, 24-03-2012’, *radio free midwich*, 26 March. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2012/03/26/pete-canns-noisepunk-alldayer-wharf-chambers-leeds-24-03-2012/ (Accessed: 22 February 2024).

Hayler, R. (2012e) ‘black and white noise, part three: new from fuckin’ amateurs! / chump tapes’, *radio free midwich*, 14 May. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2012/05/14/black-and-white-noise-part-three-new-from-fuckin-amateurs-chump-tapes/ (Accessed: 4 February 2025).

Hayler, R. (2013a) ‘documents of the golden age: new from ashtray navigations, aqua dentata and helicopter quartet’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 29 July. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2013/07/29/documents-of-the-golden-age-new-from-ashtray-navigations-aqua-dentata-and-helicopter-quartet/ (Accessed: 25 January 2023).

Hayler, R. (2013b) ‘sorting the lego part one: soundtracks for graded tasks’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 29 November. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2013/11/29/sorting-the-lego-part-one-soundtracks-for-graded-tasks/ (Accessed: 26 July 2023).

Hayler, R. (2014a) ‘extraction music: dave thomas, daniel thomas, kevin sanders’, *radio free midwich*, 30 March. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2014/03/30/extraction-music-dave-thomas-daniel-thomas-kevin-sanders/ (Accessed: 27 March 2025).

Hayler, R. (2014b) ‘guest post (sort of)! neil campbell on taming power’, *radio free midwich*, 23 May. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2014/05/23/guest-post-sort-of-neil-campbell-on-taming-power/ (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Hayler, R. (2014c) ‘an inch of time is an inch of gold…’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 13 July. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2014/07/13/an-inch-of-time-is-an-inch-of-gold/ (Accessed: 17 July 2023).

Hayler, R. (2015a) ‘radiofreemidwich seeks new staff writer, condition applies’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 12 January. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2015/01/12/radiofreemidwich-seeks-new-staff-writer-condition-applies/ (Accessed: 17 July 2023).

Hayler, R. (2015b) ‘what i mean by the term “no-audience underground”, 2015 remix’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 14 June. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2015/06/14/what-i-mean-by-the-term-no-audience-underground-2015-remix/ (Accessed: 24 January 2023).

Hayler, R. (2015c) “you can’t own music: some thoughts on not collecting,” *Radio Free Midwich*, 30 October. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2015/10/30/you-cant-own-music-some-thoughts-on-not-collecting/ (Accessed: July 18, 2023).

Hayler, R. (2017) ‘holding our treasure aloft: thoughts on facebook, rfm and the d.i.y. underground compiled by rob hayler’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 21 March. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2017/03/21/holding-our-treasure-aloft-thoughts-on-facebook-rfm-and-the-d-i-y-underground-compiled-by-rob-hayler/ (Accessed: 18 July 2023).

Hayler, R. (2019a) ‘happy new year humans: it’s the rfm zellaby list for two thousand and eighteen’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 1 January. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2019/01/01/happy-new-year-humans-its-the-rfm-zellaby-list-for-two-thousand-and-eighteen/ (Accessed: 18 July 2023).

Hayler, R. (2019b) ‘name your price – “value” underground in the age of bandcamp’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 31 August. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2019/08/31/name-your-price-value-underground-in-the-age-of-bandcamp/ (Accessed: 20 March 2023)

Hayler, R. (2020a) ‘Stolen Moments’, *The Wire* (431; January), p. 47.

Hayler, R. (2020b) ‘misunderstanding the discussion: thoughts on the wire’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 12 April. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2020/04/12/misunderstanding-the-discussion-thoughts-on-the-wire/ (Accessed: 24 January 2023).

Hayler, R. (2021) ‘instead share: thinking about “submission” in the no-audience underground’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 14 May. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2021/05/14/instead-share-thinking-about-submission-in-the-no-audience-underground/ (Accessed: 18 July 2023).

Hegarty, P. (2007) *Noise / Music: A History*. London: Continuum.

Heller, M.C. (2017) *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s*. California: University of California Press.

Hill, R. & Megson, M. (2020) ‘In defence of safer spaces: Punk, privilege and safer spaces policies’, *Punk & Post Punk*, 9, pp. 59–76.

Higgins, D. (1998) ‘Fluxus: Theory and Reception’ in Friendman, K. (ed.) *The Fluxus Reader*. Chichester: Academy Editions.

Hodgkinson, T. (2000) *Resonance*, 8(1), p. 30.

Holloway, J. (2010) *Crack Capitalism*. London: Pluto.

Holt, F. & Wergin, C. (2013) ‘Introduction: Musical Performance and the Changing City’ in Holt, F. & Wergin, C. (eds.) *Musical Performance and the Changing City Post-industrial Contexts in Europe and the United States*. Oxon: Routledge, pp.1-24.

Howcroft, D. (2018) ‘An Interview With David Howcroft’. Interview with David Howcroft. Interviewed by A. Wood for *TQ* (14), pp. 11-17

Jones, E. (2020) ‘What does Facebook “afford” do-it-yourself musicians? Considering social media affordances as sites of contestation’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(2), pp. 277–292.

Jones, E. (2021) *DIY music and the Politics of Social Media*. London: Bloomsbury.

Kahn-Harris, K. (2007) *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. Oxford: Berg.

Kaitajärvi-Tiekso, J. (2019) ‘Proud Amateurs: Deterritorialized expertise in contemporary Finnish DIY micro-labels’ in Bennet, A. & Guerra, P. (eds.) *DIY Cultures and Underground Music Scenes*. Oxon: Routledge, pp.101-111.

Kampragkos, C. (2018) ‘Bulletproof Socks: Documenting the No-Audience Underground’, *Bulletproof Socks*, 16 March. Available at: https://bulletproofsocks.blogspot.com/2018/03/documenting-no-audience-underground.html (Accessed: 15 August 2025).

Keenan, D. (2003) ‘The Fire Down Below’, *The Wire* (234; August), pp. 32–47.

Keenan, D. (2009) ‘Childhood’s end’, *The Wire* (306; August), pp. 26–31.

Keenan, D. (2015) ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’, *The Wire* (371; January), pp. 47.

Kelly, P. (2020) *Tusk Virtual 2020 - Translocal Peripheries Morden Tower*. 20 November. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AY9YtOy9O90&t=2996s (Accessed: 30th October 2025).

LaBelle, B. (2018) *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*. London: Goldsmith Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*. Translated from French by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Licht, A. (2019) *Sound Art Revisited*. London: Bloomsbury.

Liquid Library (2023) ‘Liquid Library Restricted Section’ [X] 11 April. Available at: https://x.com/deadtotherhythm/status/1645766860393046018 (Accessed: 30th October 2025).

Liquid Library (2025) Available at: https://liquidlibrary.bandcamp.com/ (Accessed: 29th October 2025).

Lowndes, S. (2016) *The DIY Movement in Art, Music and Publishing*. Oxon: Routledge.

Madanipour, A. (2018) ‘Temporary use of space: Urban processes between flexibility, opportunity and precarity’, *Urban Studies*, 55(5), pp. 1093–1110.

Marshall, J. (2013) ‘Global Ear’, *The Wire* (358; December), p. 22.

Marshall, L. (2015) ‘“Let’s keep music special. F—Spotify”: on-demand streaming and the controversy over artist royalties’, *Creative Industries Journal*, 8(2), pp. 177–189.

Mason, P. (2015) *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*. London: Penguin.

Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage.

Masters, M. (2023) *High Bias: The Distorted History of the Cassette Tape*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Mattin (2009a) ‘Going Fragile’ in Mattin & Iles, A. (eds.) *Noise & Capitalism*. San Sebastian: Arteleku, pp. 19-23.

Mattin (2009b) ‘Anti-Copyright: Why Improvisation and Noise Run Against the Idea of Intellectual Property’ in Mattin & Iles, A. (eds.) *Noise & Capitalism*. San Sebastian: Arteleku, pp. 167-191.

Mattin (2022) *Social Dissonance*. Falmouth: Urbanomic.

Miller, D. & Schofield, J. (2016) ‘The “Toilet Circuit”: Cultural Production, Fandom and Heritage in England’s Small Music Venues’, *Heritage & Society*, 9(2), pp. 137–167.

Miller, D. (2019) *Does My Black Sun Look Big In This? Skullflower’s Patterns Of Predjudice*. Available at: https://thequietus.com/opinion-and-essays/black-sky-thinking/skullflower-matthew-bower-fascism-racism/ (Accessed: 11th October 2025).

Monacelli, E. (2023) *The Great Psychic Outdoors: Lo-Fi Music and Escaping Capitalism*. London: Repeater.

Monteanni, L. & Pennesi, M. (2022) ‘Sounds from the modem’s peripheries’, *DiSCo*, (1). Available at: https://discojournal.github.io/archive/peripheries.html (Accessed: 29 October 2025).

Murray, J. (2016) ‘a quivering lake of iron: joe murray in the invisible city: stuart chalmers, yes blythe, black thread’, *radio free midwich*, 6 July. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2016/07/06/a-quivering-lake-of-iron-joe-murray-in-the-invisible-city-stuart-chalmers-yes-blythe-black-thread/ (Accessed: 29 March 2025).

Murray, J. (2019a) ‘happy new year humans: it’s the rfm zellaby list for two thousand and eighteen’, *Radio Free Midwich*, 1 January. Available at: https://radiofreemidwich.wordpress.com/2019/01/01/happy-new-year-humans-its-the-rfm-zellaby-list-for-two-thousand-and-eighteen/ (Accessed: 18 July 2023).

Murray, J. (2019b) ‘A Small Package of Value Will Come to You, Shortly: An Essay on the Idea of Value in the No-Audience Underground’, *TQ* (24), pp. 2-4

Murray, J. (2024a) ‘Union Pole bonus post: an interview with Fisheye Distribution’s Paul Wild (UPXX)’, 15 January. Available at: https://allmyideasarestolen.wordpress.com/2024/01/15/union-pole-bonus-post-an-interview-with-fisheye-distributions-paul-wild-upxx/ (Accessed: 5 May 2025).

Murray, J. (2024b) ‘And then I ask Seymour Glass a bunch of daft questions – Union Pole bonus opinions!’, 7 October. Available at: https://allmyideasarestolen.wordpress.com/2024/10/07/and-then-i-ask-seymour-glass-a-bunch-of-daft-questions-union-pole-bonus-opinions/ (Accessed: 16 April 2025).

Murray, J. (2024c) *I’ve Had Enough*. Available at: https://whykeithdroppedthes.bandcamp.com/album/ive-had-enough (Accessed: 30th October 2025).

Music Venue Trust (2023) *Music Venue Trust: Annual Report 2023*. Annual Report. London: Music Venue Trust. Available at: https://www.musicvenuetrust.com/wp-

content/uploads/2024/01/MVT_2023-Annual-Report_Digital.pdf.pagespeed.ce.8gLcgJ--QC.pdf (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Novak, D. (2013) *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation*. London: Duke University Press.

Nyman, M. (1999) *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oliver, P.G. (2024) 'Digital transformation and the DIY artist: Balancing artistic integrity and economic sustainability in the digital domain', *DIY, Alternative Cultures & Society*, 2(2), pp. 207-223.

Pilati, F., Houssard, A. & Sacco, P.L. (2024) 'Mirroring the inequalities of mainstream music platforms: popularity, revenue, and monetization strategies on Bandcamp', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 31(3), pp. 338-357

Phelan, P. (1993) *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge.

Phoenix, R. (2020) *DIY as Privilege*. London: Rough Trade Books

Prévost, E. (2008) 'Free Improvisation in Music and Capitalism: Resisting Authority and the Cults of Scientism and Celebrity' in Mattin & Iles, A. (eds.) *Noise and Capitalism*. San Sebastian: Arteleku, pp. 39-58.

Rancière, J. (2010) *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated from the French by S. Corcoran. London: Continuum.

Raqs Media Collective (2015) 'Nautonomat Operating Manual: A Draft Design for a Collective Space of 'Nautonomy' for Artists and their Friends' in Docx, N. & Gielen, P. (eds.) *Mobile Autonomy: Exercises in Artists' Self-Organization*. Amsterdam: Valiz, pp.99-105.

Reynolds, S. (2011) *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past*. New York: Faber and Faber.

Reynolds, S. (2012) 'An Update With Simon Reynolds' *DIY Conference*. Incubate, Tilburg. 14 September. Available at: https://vimeo.com/49913417?login=true (Accessed: 27th March 2023).

Rezaei, M. & Denton, A. (2023) 'The Old Police House (TOPH): Treatise', *Contemporary Music Review*, 42(4), pp. 476–487.

Rhodes, C. (2000) *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Richards, J. (2021) 'Sacrificial Floors and Tables: Making/Unmaking Sound', in Grant, J. Matthias, J. & Prior, D. (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of Sound Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 173–190.

Richards, J. & Shaw, T. (2022) 'Improvisation through Performance-installation', *Organised Sound*, 27(2), pp. 144-155

Robertson, A. (2021) *TUSK TV April 2021 - Giant Tank's POT LUCK*, 3 April. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upxojjhguyk&t=152s (Accessed: 30th October 2025).

Robertson, A. (2022a) Interview with Ali Robertson. Interviewed by J. Jusso. *Leave Britney Alone #1,* August, p19.

Rothera, L. (2024) Interviewed by S. Gargett for *Left Lion,* 10 February. Available at: https://leftlion.co.uk/features/2024/02/we-sit-down-with-the-owners-of-the-chameleon-after-it-was-announced-that-the-building-would-be-sold/ (Accessed: 14th April 2024).

Royston-Ward, M. (2018) *An (Opinionated) Critical Guide to DIY Digital Publishing,* TQ

Roe, C. (2022) 'Intro' in Akama, R. & Roe, C. (eds.) *and…: ame's R&D on DIY Culture, Sustainability and Future*. Huddersfield: ame, pp.4-5.

Russolo, L. (1986) *The Art of Noises.* Translated from the Italian by Barclay Brown. New York: Pendragon Press.

Small, C. (1998) *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Smith, S. (2023) 'Merry Pranksters', *The Wire* (467; January), p. 39.

Spencer, A. (2008) DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture. London: Marion Boyars.

Srnicek, N. & Williams, A. (2015) *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. London: Verso.

Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.

Steep Gloss (2022) *"" [blank tape compilation vol. 4].* Available At: https://steepgloss.bandcamp.com/album/blank-tape-compilation-vol-4 (Accessed: 20th November, 2025).

Steep Gloss (2025) Available at: https://steepgloss.bandcamp.com/ (Accessed: 29th October, 2025).

Stelzer, H. (2025) *Howard Stelzer*. Available at: https://howardstelzer.bandcamp.com/ (Accessed: 30th October 2025).

Stiegler, B. (2013) *Amateur (English version)*. Available at: https://arsindustrialis.org/amateur-english-version (Accessed: 30th October 205).

Strachan, R. (2007) 'Micro-independent record labels in the UK', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), pp. 245-265.

Strauss, N. (1992) 'Putting the Net Over Network' in James, R. (ed.) *Cassette Mythos*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, pp. 133-132.

Straw, W. (1991) 'Systems of articulation, logics of change: Communities and scenes in popular music', *Cultural Studies*, 5(3), pp. 368–388.

Straw, W. (2004) 'Cultural Scenes', *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure*, 27(2), pp. 411–422.

Straw, W. (2019) 'Visibility and Convivality in Music Scenes' in Bennet, A. & Guerra, P. (eds.) *DIY Cultures and Underground Music Scenes*. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 21-30.

Taylor, P. (2016) 'The Genesis of Power Electronics in the UK' in Wallis. J. (ed.) *Fight Your Own War: Power Electronics and Noise Culture*. London: Headpress, pp. 11-18.

Taylor, S. (2023) 'Methodological challenges of researching an emerging scene: Experimental electronic music in contemporary Manchester', *DIY, Alternative Cultures & Society*, 1(2), pp. 138–150.

Teruggi, D. (2019) 'Spaces of Mind' in Bonnet, F. & Sanson, B. (eds.) *Spectres: Composing Listening*. France: Shelter Press. pp.85-90.

Toop, D. (2016) *Into the Maelstrom: Music, Improvisation and the Dream of Freedom*. London: Bloomsbury.

Thompson, M. (2017) *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism*. London: Bloomsbury.

Thornton, S. (1995) *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Cambridge: Polity.

Threadgold, S. (2018) 'Creativity, Precarity and Illusio: DIY Cultures and "Choosing Poverty"', *Cultural Sociology*, 12(2), pp. 156–173.

Vale, V. (1992) *Industrial Culture Handbook*. San Francisco: Re Search.

Verbuč, D. (2021) 'Nonmusicians as "Pillars" and "Icons" of US DIY Music Scenes', *American Music*, 39(3), pp. 365–390.

Verbuč, D. (2022) *DIY House Shows and Music Venues in the US: Ethnographic Explorations of Place and Community*. New York: Routledge.

Verbuč, D. (2023) '"A whole society, with its own economic system": the reciprocal and capitalist configurations of American DIY music scenes', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 32(1), pp. 5–27.

Verbuč, D. (2024) 'Social Life of Zines and Other DIY Micro-Media Constituting American DIY Communities and Scenes', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 53(4), pp. 544–581.

Walsh, J. (2025) *Amateurs: How We Built Internet Culture and Why It Matters*. London: Verso.

Walker, J. (2023) 'Participants, Punters or Perverts? An (Expanded) Relational Understanding of Simon Waters' Performance Ecosystem', *Contemporary Music Review*, 42(4), pp. 488-502.

Watson, B. (2013) *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*. London: Verso.

Watson, B. (2007) 'The Esmeplasm: Insider, Outsider, Art?' in Tarbuck, J. & Hearn, M. (eds.) *This Will Not Happen Without You: From the Collective Archive of The Basement Group, Projects UK and Locus + (1977 – 2007)*. Sunderland: University of Sunderland Press, pp.132-137.

Wehr, K. (2012) *DIY: The Search for Control and Self-Reliance in the 21st century*. New York: Routledge.

Webb, P. (2007) *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures*. Oxon: Routledge.

Welch, C. (1995) *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*. Calgary: University of Calgary press.

Wharton, M. (2010) 'Culver', *Idwal Fisher*, 16 July. Available at: https://idwalfisher.blogspot.com/2010/07/culver-they-killed-suzie-carter-hyster.html (Accessed: 27 September 2025).

Whiting, S. (2021) 'The Value of Small Live Music Venues: Alternative Forms of Capital and Niche Spaces of Cultural Production', *Cultural Sociology*, 15(4), pp. 558–578.

Wilkinson, A. (1995) 'The Mighty Termite', *Resonance*, 3(2), pp.22-24.

Wood, A. & Howcroft, D. (2020) 'Get on your hobby horse', *The Wire* (433; March), p. 6.

Woods, P.J. & Ortega, Y. (2024) "Scenes of entanglement: Towards a posthuman understanding of the transglobal noise music scene," *DIY, Alternative Cultures & Society*, 3(1), pp. 3-17.

Worley, M. (2024) *Zerox Machine: Punk, Post-Punk and Fanzines in Britain, 1976–88*. London: Reaktion.

Zhao, S. (2024) 'Rethinking Materiality of Music: The Transformative Practices of Music Streaming', *Cultural Sociology*, *0*(0)