



Audiences, and in particular fans, built and colonized the internet from its earliest incarnations – the first mailing list ever was SF-Lovers. We’ve now got 20 years of research documenting the range of things that audiences do online and the use of the internet as a way to participate in cultural co-creation more generally.

But only in recent years have creators caught on to this phenomenon en masse, making audience’s participatory practices integral to how entertainment and culture industries operate and, as I’ll argue today, to what being a creative performer now means.

What I want to do in this talk is broaden the discussion beyond what fans do to consider the richness of the ways those practices affect artists and creators. My goal is to stimulate thinking about how we might extend our understandings of “participation.” What I’m going to do is share excerpts from the project I’ve been working on for the last year interviewing musicians. I’ll talk about audience practices they see as particularly significant and how those practices impact them in ways that are not always publically visible.

I want to start with a couple of examples of musicians who figured out what was going on very early.



The Grammy-award winning Christian rock band Jars of Clay were early to engage their audiences online. Their guitarist Stephen Mason’s quote demonstrates several of the phenomena I want to point out today – the impact of being able to see what their music means to others, and the multifaceted and contradictory emotional and personal responses listening to their audiences online evoke for them.

CIRCA 1994

“A guy from Canada said, "Oh well, why don't we raise the money for you to come and tour? [...] they raised about \$60,000. [...] I suppose that was our first realization of the power of the Internet and how rabid fans can change things, make things happen.”

- Mark Kelly, Marillion



Another early example of a band who found their audience online is the British band Marillion, who have been together for more than 30 years and were possibly the first to be funded by fans on their own initiative through the internet. As Mark Kelly's story suggests, the consequences of engaging an audience online can be financial, but can go beyond that to be influential in other ways as well. As he told me:

“[The fan mailing list] was run by a guy in Holland. Very interestingly, the vast majority of the fans on that list were Americans. I think mainly because they probably adopted the whole Internet thing a bit earlier than the Europeans [...] So somebody printed out some stuff from it and this was when we were recording *Brave* which would have been 1993 I suppose. And I just thought it was quite interesting that there was all these fans. I think there was only about 1,000 of them on the list, but just discussing Marillion, Marillion songs, lyrics, what we were doing. And so I signed up to it when I had Internet access or dial-up [...] And I used to just read it and I was a lurker - nobody knew I was reading it. And after a year or two I blew my cover. I can't remember why but it was probably to correct somebody who said something that was completely wrong <laughs> And so in the process starting to get all the questions from people about why we weren't touring the States and all that sort of thing. And I tried to explain that we didn't have a record deal in the States and every time we did tour in the past it had always been with money from the record company, tour support money. So then there was a guy from Canada who said, "Oh well, why don't we raise the money for you to come and tour?" And I don't know if you know this story but they opened a bank account and everybody who was interested donated money into it and then they raised about \$60,000. Actually, by this point, once they had said all this I was like, "Well I think you're a bit crazy but if you want to do it. I mean, obviously we can't have anything to do with it, but if you guys want to go ahead and organize it, we're not taking the money." Some guy said, "I'll set up an escrow bank account and we'll put it all in there." Anyway <laughs> within a few weeks it had about \$20,000 and I hadn't even told the rest of the band at this point what was going on, so I had to sort of break the news to them how we'd gotten into this situation -- I think I said we'd need about \$50,000 to make it, break even. Anyway, we did the tour. And I suppose that was our first realization of the power of the Internet and how rabid fans can change things, make things happen.”

## “Legacy Artists”

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- **US:** Jon Ginoli (Pansy Division), Kristin Hersh (Throwing Muses/50 Foot Wave), David Lowery (Camper Van Beethoven/Cracker), Jonathan Segel (Camper Van Beethoven), Jill Sobule, Gary VValeik (Big Dipper).
- **UK:** Billy Bragg, Lloyd Cole, Mark Kelly (Marillion), Roger O'Donnell (ex-Cure), Brian Travers (UB40)
- **Canada:** Michael Timmins (Cowboy Junkies)

The primary focus of my interviewing was what one of the managers I spoke with referred to as “legacy artists,” those who had been in the business since the 1980s or before and (most of whom) who are still professional musicians. I sought these people because they are particularly well positioned to reflect not just on how the internet plays out in their interactions and relationships with audiences, but also on how social media have changed those dynamics.

## “The Last Generation of Analogue Musicians”

- **US:** Ahmed Best (Cosmic Ghetto/STOMP!), Honeychild Coleman (Apollo Heights/Pollen), Zöe Keating, Erin McKeown, Stephen Mason (Jars of Clay)
- **UK:** Stuart Braithwaite (Mogwai), Steve Lawson
- **Sweden:** Johan Angergård (Club 8/Legends/Acid House Kings), Jonas Fårm (Starlet)
- **Canada:** Richie Hawtin (Plastikman)
- **Norway:** Sivert Høyem, Thomas Seltzer (Turbonegro)
- **Spain:** Nacho Vegas

I also spoke with artists who got their start in the late 1990s, what Sivert Høyem, one of the Norwegian musicians with whom I spoke referred to as “the last generation of analogue musicians.” These artists too experienced the shift from encountering audiences primarily at shows and through mass media to encountering them directly through social media.

## The Post-MySpace Generation

- **US:** Nathan Harold (fun.), Greta Salpeter (Gold Motel), Kate Schutt, D.A. Wallach (Chester French), Sydney Wayser
- **Sweden:** Gustaf Kjellvander (The Fine Arts Showcase), Rickard Lindgren (Hell on Wheels)
- **UK:** S-Endz (Swami)
- **Australia/Germany:** Rick Bull (Deepchild)

Finally, I spoke with a number of musicians who got their start after MySpace had already started in 2002. This group had never been professional musicians in a time when engaging social media was not germane to the job. For some, like Sydney Wayser, the idea of not having to engage an audience directly seemed unthinkable.

## Genres

- Singer/songwriter
- Indie
- Rock
- Pop
- Electronica
- Punk
- Alt Country
- Jazz
- Desi
- Reggae
- New Classical
- Ambient

Most of the people with whom I spoke could be loosely categorized as indie or alternative rock, but, as this list shows, I spoke with artists in a wide variety of genres. Several important genres are not here, however, and others are minimally represented. Only nine of the people with whom I spoke were women, reflecting in part the gender dynamics of popular music. Just three were non-white. As you saw in the previous slides, I spoke with people from several countries, though all were North American or European. I continue to interview in hopes of achieving greater breadth. [If you are reading this and can connect me with people who would help in this, write and connect us please!]



## This analysis

- What do the musicians describe audiences as *doing* through social media?
- How do they *understand* and *respond* to those activities?
- How might this affect our understanding of *participation*?
- And now: A high speed tour of Things Audiences Do That Affect Musicians

Thus far I've interviewed approximately 40 people, including artists, managers, and people in related fields, resulting in about 800 pages of transcripts. In the interviews I used the term "audience" rather than "fan" in order to provoke the widest possible interpretations of "audience" from the artists.

In this talk I am going to focus specifically on the most salient things that artists say audiences DO, how they understand and respond to those things, and hopefully provoke thoughts from you about how their experience might shape our understandings of 'participation.' This is very much work in progress, so I welcome your perspectives.



# Audiences Congregate

I don't need to convince you that people form interesting and engaged groups on their own online.

“On the Kontakt tour we gave people RFID chips and they could go to a particular place where there was a cube and swipe their chip and check in and then they could participate and send each other messages even if they weren't there. So people were getting and sending messages to people all over the world.”

- Richie Hawtin



I do want to note that although we audience researchers tend to focus on unofficial spaces, for many artists the engagement that is happening on their official forums is what is most important whether they are relying primarily on their websites, blogs, Facebook, or innovating new ways to connect their audiences. Techno multimedia artist Richie Hawtin is an extraordinary cutting edge case of using – in his case inventing – new technologies that enable audience-to-audience communication.

“There's more give and take now. [...] back when people would send you letters, there'd just be this one-way street [...] you'd send out your music, and these letters would come back. Now [...] there's more chances of reaching people on different levels, not just musically. And so people are reacting not just to songs now but also to what you've written or what you've written about or what you mention in your latest blog.”

- Mike Timmins, Cowboy Junkies



As artists use social media to provide more platforms for people to localize around them, the range of interactions they can have and topics they can discuss together widens.

"It's real autonomous and sometimes they get pissed off with me [...] But they like getting together at Billy Bragg gigs, that's what they do. They might not like Billy Bragg. I mean I spoke to one of them the other day and she's absolutely clear she's not listened to an album I made in the last ten years. That's cool, I'm not worried about that, that doesn't bother me, the fact that I provide them with a social framework."

- Billy Bragg

nick\_r



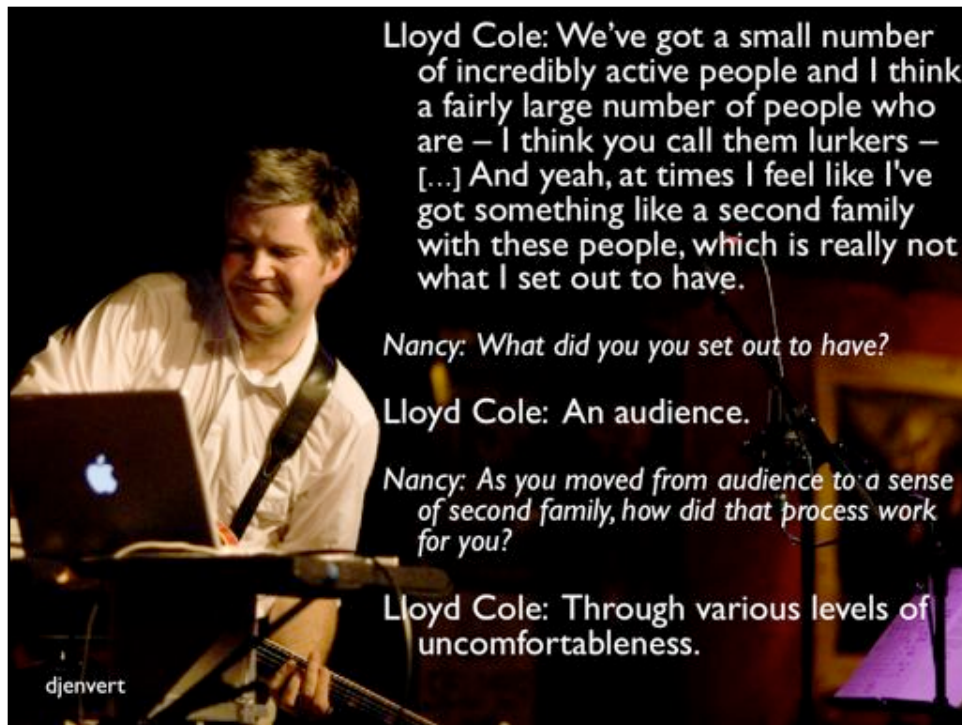
The older artists tend to be well aware that over time the social groups that form around them come to transcend their relationship to the musicians or to the music, what Billy Bragg describes as “providing a social framework.” Many of them view the development of this community as integral to sustaining a career over the long haul.

"I do like discussions that have nothing to do about me. [...] I might see something in Sweden, they don't seem to mind their healthcare. And I've got like a couple that always talk - right wing, really right wing fans. So they're so provocative because they know me and they know my fans. So on my Facebook I'll say, you know, my update will be something like that, and there will be like 100 comments to each other. [...] They're mostly funny."

- Jill Sobule



Many artists recognize that ongoing interactions about varied topics foster stronger connections amongst audience members and between audience members and themselves and they consciously use their online presence to stimulate broader discussions. Talking about other people's music is a safe topic, as is sports, but many of the people I spoke with got into or encouraged political debate with and within their audiences. Sometimes, as we'll see, the apparent opposition implied in these arguments can give way to the most profound later one-on-one interactions.

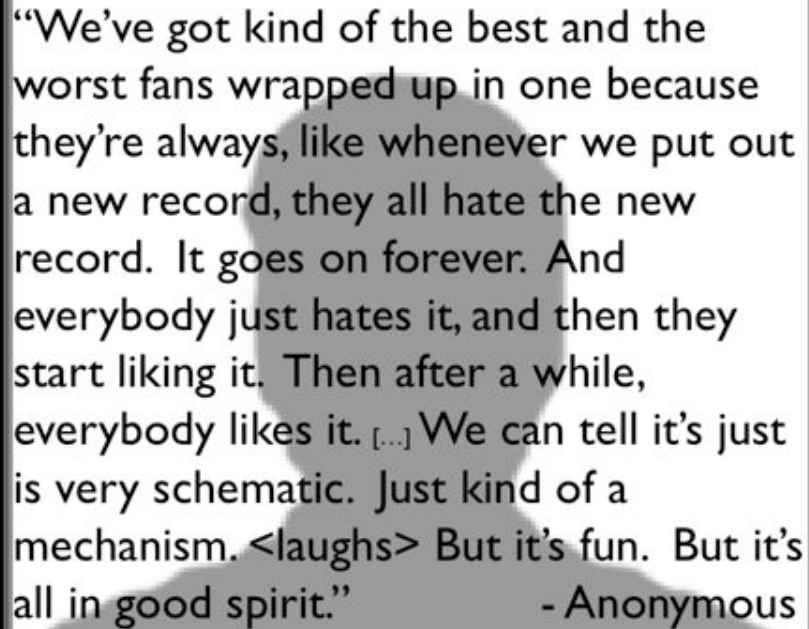


For musicians, witnessing these groups become communities and finding their own place within them can be both fraught and rewarding. To an extent this congregation has always happened, but only become visible to artists when those groups or people from those groups met before, after or during concerts. I spoke with four people who perform at large regular multiday get-togethers that draw hundreds or thousands of their fans, sites where they move between being on stage and being just another guy in the crowd. Socially-mediated communities are an everyday continuous presence that allows for the development of group norms, relationships, tendencies and conventions that force artists to navigate new paths between being the center of attention and stepping out of that center.

## Audiences Criticize

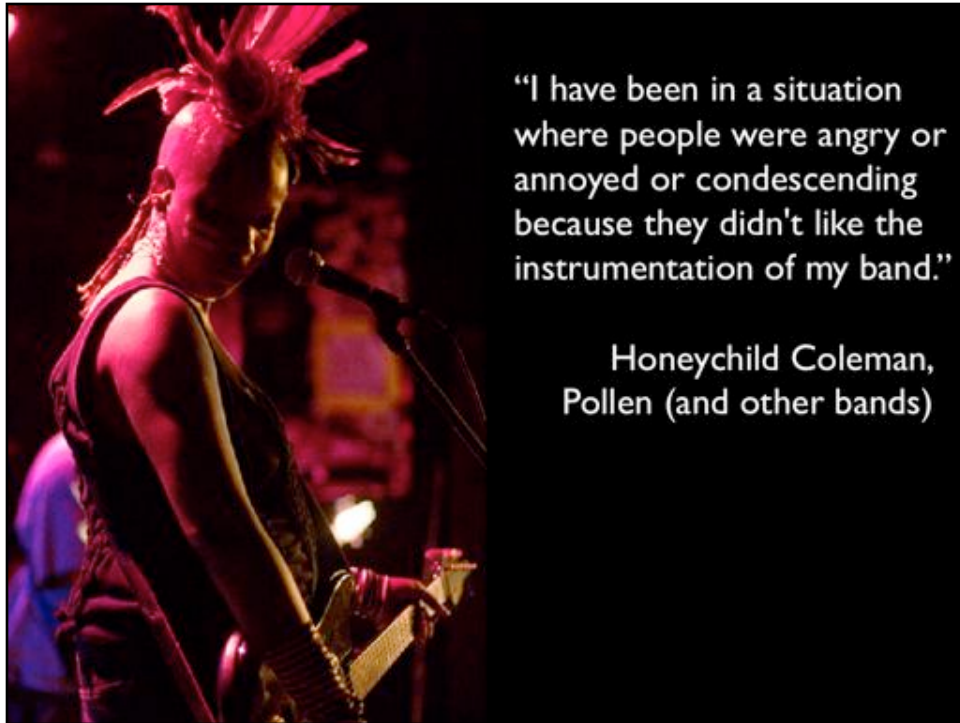
As we all know, where audiences gather, audiences criticize. Sometimes their criticism is born of love for the music, other times it's purely antagonistic. Artists who listen to what people say through social media regularly encounter both negative artistic feedback and personal attack.



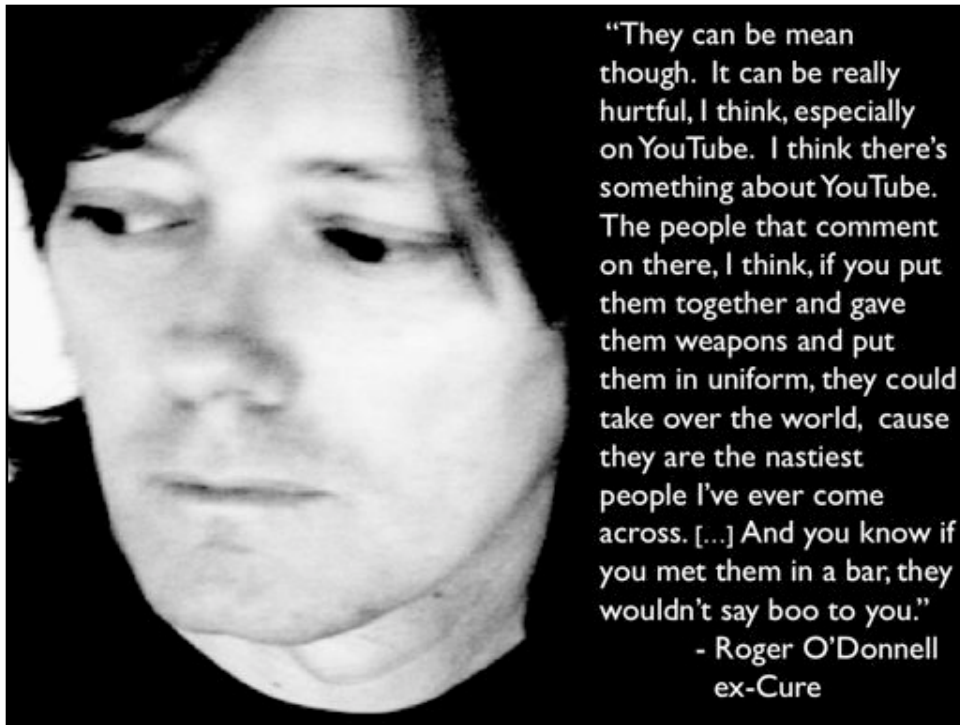


“We’ve got kind of the best and the worst fans wrapped up in one because they’re always, like whenever we put out a new record, they all hate the new record. It goes on forever. And everybody just hates it, and then they start liking it. Then after a while, everybody likes it. [...] We can tell it’s just is very schematic. Just kind of a mechanism. <laughs> But it’s fun. But it’s all in good spirit.” - Anonymous

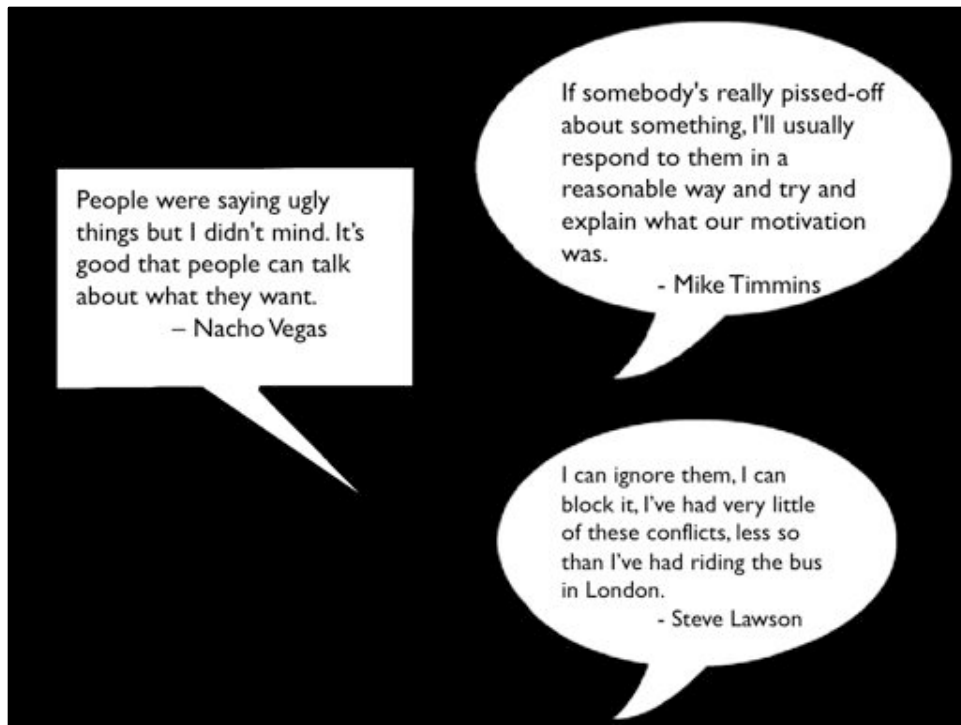
Audience criticism, from both fans and antifans, has patterns of which artists are well aware. The schematic quality of this criticism can make it easy to discount. By the same token, schematic expressions of affection and praise may be just as easily discounted. Sivert Høyem, whose Facebook page is filled with people telling him he has the voice of God and they want to marry him and bear his children, laughed such comments off as something that “can kill with kindness” and which he “can’t take seriously.”



Audience criticism can often be seen as unwelcome attempts to keep artists boxed in to audiences preconceptions, thereby limiting the artists' creativity. These limitations can be based on genre as well as social characteristics like race and gender. People who push boundaries – like Honeychild Coleman, a black woman who plays guitar, or Zöe Keating, who plays instrumental cello music and does not sing – are particularly likely to be exposed to and irritated by this kind of critique.



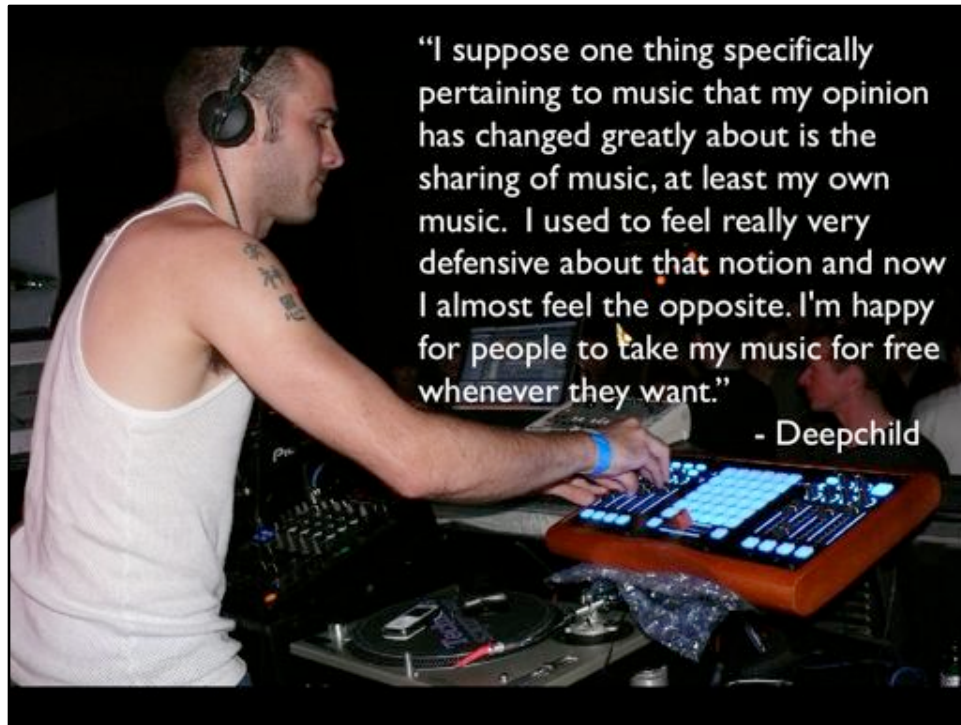
Social media's reduced social cues can also free people to be hurtful. People who don't like music may attack the person who made it. As ambient solo bass artist Steve Lawson told me, "I've had people on forums going 'you're such a dick, I hate what you do.' I go 'you're not liking my music, none of us like most music, but I don't hate the people who make it.'" "You also have people who are just angry and sitting at their computer," says 23-year-old singer songwriter Sydney Wayser, "since I don't know who they are and they don't have to live up to what they're saying, they just say awful, awful things [...] I have a really baby looking face and my friend Will has this giant beard and long hair and they said something like, he's a pedophile and I'm the little girl that he's about to take advantage of. Just like ridiculous, awful, awful things."



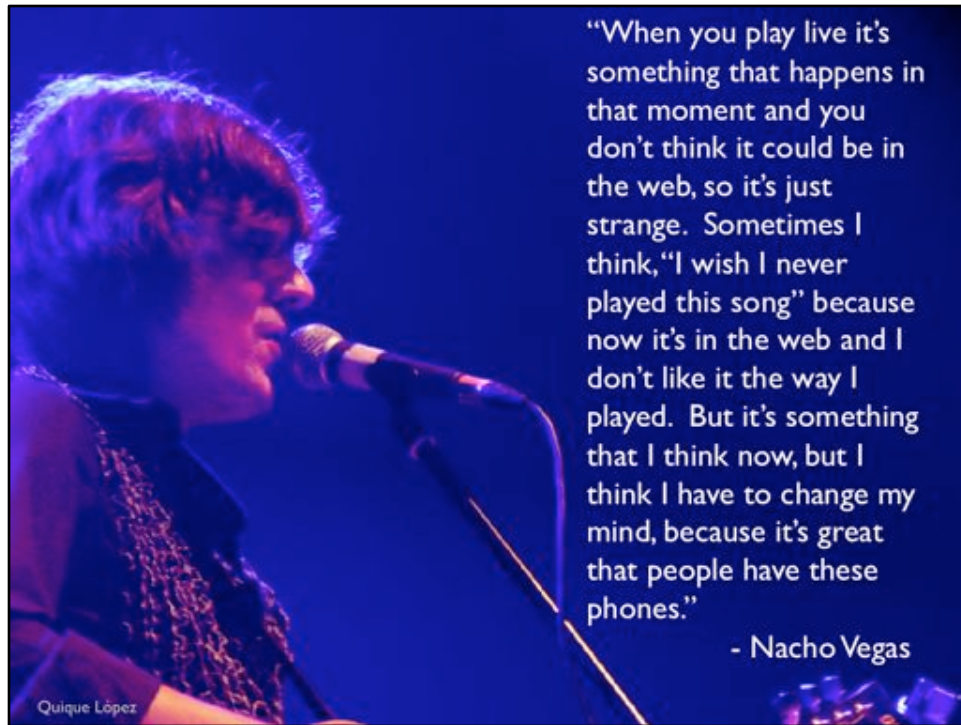
The artists I spoke with, especially the older ones, have developed strategies for dealing with this kind of antagonism that include blocking it, ignoring it, responding to it, and celebrating it, sometimes simultaneously. Billy Bragg, like Mike Timmins, spoke about writing directly to someone who spewed what he called “unsolicited invective.” For both artists, the personal responses they sent ameliorated the situation as the attackers realized they were dealing with real people, and nice interactions followed.

## Audiences Share

Discussions of music fans' online practices tend to focus on "piracy" (a term I loathe for its presumption that sharing is equivalent to violent crime) and frame sharing in terms of property and commerce, while some researchers recast it as ethical subcultural gift giving. Although there are musicians who react with take down notices and law suits, for those I spoke with, the sharing of materials is more complicated than lost sales or creative control can capture.



Most of the artists I spoke with have no problem with the unauthorized sharing of their music, although some will not give it away themselves and all but the wealthiest of them worry about how to continue making money when they can't depend on music sales. The only musician I spoke with who indicated any resentment about the sharing of recorded music specifically complained about people who leak records in advance, especially when they leak then criticize it.



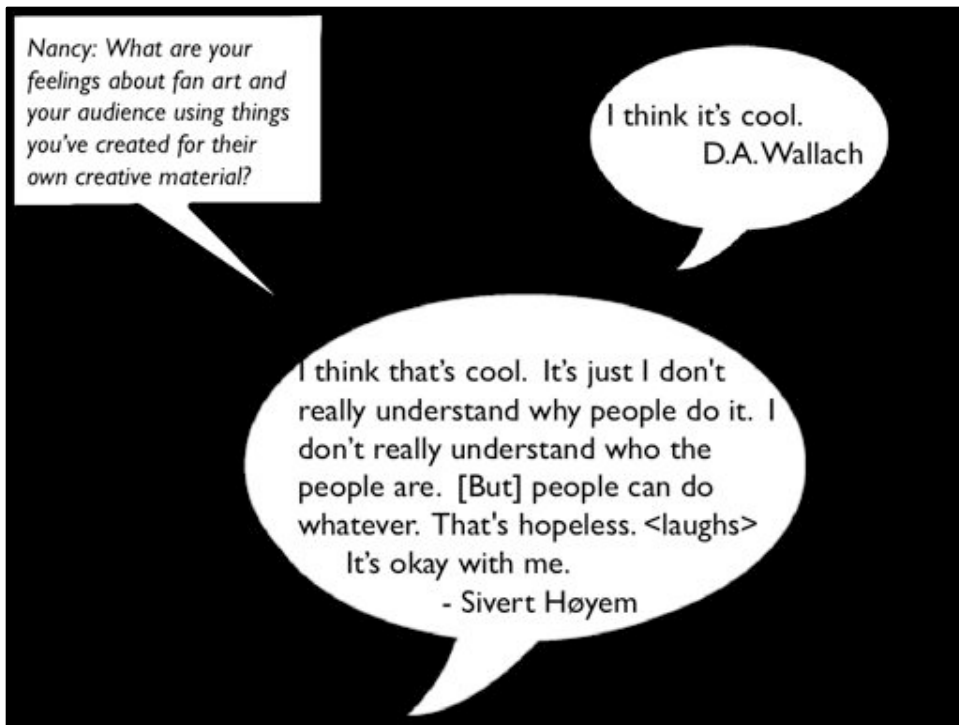
Nacho Vegas, a politically-engaged left-leaning Spanish singer-songwriter, expresses ambivalence as he simultaneously rues the sharing of his live performances online and celebrates the audiences' power to do this. (When I asked another performer if he felt this way, his response was that those who do should "practice more.")

There are other things audiences may share with one another that make artists more uncomfortable, such as videos or pictures of the artists' children. This kind of sharing of private or personal material is particularly problematic as it impacts not just them, but their loved ones as well.



# Audiences Create

We know that audience create, and most of the work about 'participatory culture' has focused on this, as does this conference.



In general, the artists I spoke with think audience creativity “is cool,” though, as Sivert Høyem indicates, its origins and motivations may be opaque to them.

“I think it’s cool. I mean, honestly, it’s people getting involved and interested in finding ways to - in its own way, it’s a response. It’s a response, and so I don’t know - these days, it would be foolish to just say anything, other than, “I’m excited that people are engaging.” [...] Art, you know, can continue to grow and develop into into new things, all the time, all the time depending on how people engage it.”

- Stephen Mason

Others view audience creativity as a contribution to the music itself, a response that helps their art grow, develop and remain alive.

“I didn't know they'd be willing to come through with their own projects like remixes of my songs, time lapse paintings to my music, films, covers, all of that sharing they do, all that effort and all that involvement. It's one thing to be made someone's soundtrack for a while, that is truly the highest honor I could ever hope to achieve. And they go one step closer to making the music together by actually making the music together.”

- Kristin Hersh

Hunter-Desportes



For some, like Kristin Hersh of Throwing Muses and 50' Wave, witnessing the expansion of audience creativity around their work moves them closer to the ideal they are seeking through music making in which their art becomes a truly co-creative shared experience.

"Fan fiction really creeps me out. [...] I have Google Analytics [...] And sometimes fan fiction will come up, and there's one that's so disturbing that I read last week, where it was a lesbian love scene between me and a girl who's in a band called the Like, the drummer, Tennessee, who's one of my acquaintances, and I really like her. And it was just this really, really disturbing sex scene between us. And then at the end, you know, all these kids can comment on it, and someone says "Oh, that was very smart and very classy." And then another girl goes "Oh, what a great pair: I never thought of Greta and Tennessee." And that kind of thing just really, really weirds me out. I haven't seen Tennessee yet since I read it, but I'm probably going to feel weird even when I see her, even though she's not involved in it at all."

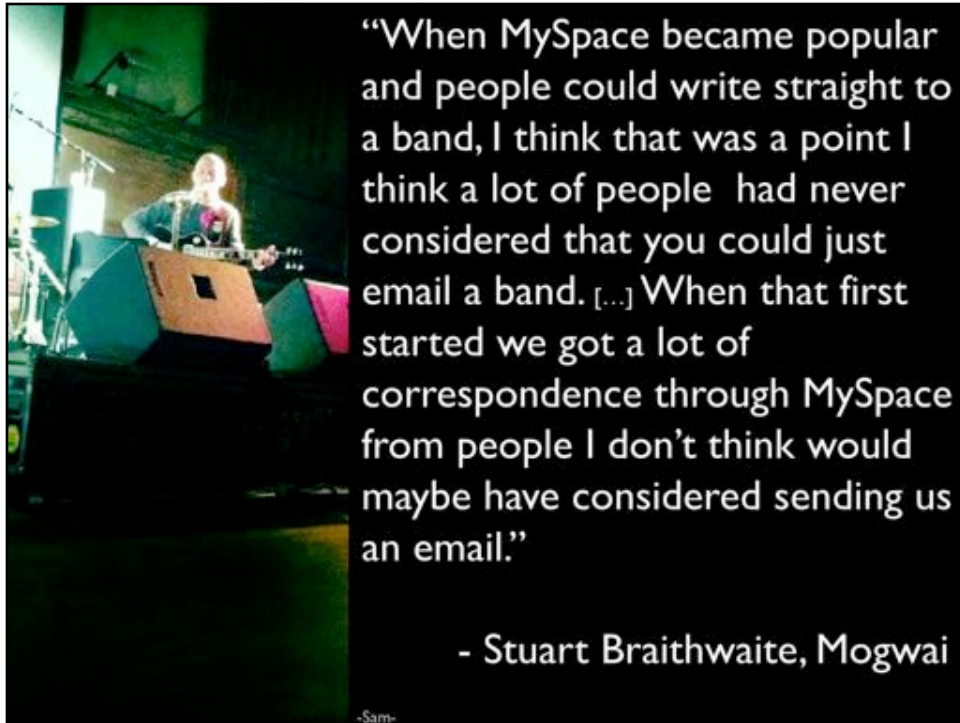
- Greta Salpeter, Gold Motel



But even when one accepts audience creativity, particular works or kinds of fan art can still be disliked or unwanted. For instance, Kristin Hersh complained about drone remixes that put her voice over a techno beat, something she dislikes only because it reveals the "limited vocabulary" of their makers. More difficult are things like the fan fiction Greta Salpeter ran across that feel like personal violations and which, as she explains, can have real personal and relational consequences.

## Audiences Reach Out

Thus far I've focused on the practices that audiences engage in with one another. Social media make these practices visible and in some cases possible. But social media also allow audiences to reach out to artists directly in interactions that are not visible to researchers or other audience members.



Musicians get many more one-to-one messages directly from audience members than they used to. The content of these messages is often considerably more personal than the content shared in public audience forums and these audience practices, and the impacts they have, may also not be displayed in public.





“Twitter has changed a few things, and Facebook's changed a few things. We are - you can kind of be subject to some kind of crazy people. And that could get to you.”  
- Brian Travers, UB40

While much of this reaching out is welcomed, and I will talk more about that in a few minutes, artists also have to contend with very difficult interpersonal interactions more often now. Almost everyone I spoke with had some one-on-one experience with “crazy people” who were able to exploit the access new media provide them in ways that artists felt went too far. D.A. Wallach, from the young major-label-signed band Chester French, was one of several who talked about “people who just won’t stop writing you and it turns into crazy shit and you end up hearing about their abusive father or whatever.” Sivert Høyem spoke about some fans’ sense of what Stephen Mason termed “false intimacy”: “if people want to get a hold of me, they can-- so some people-- you just start communicating with people and they just kind of-- it can take up a little bit too much of your time, because they write back all the time, and I don't want to be rude, and it can get a little too friendly.”

However, if new media make artists vulnerable to more challenging audience fixations, at least those people generally remain physically distant. As Kristin Hersh said, “Sometimes I'll get the equivalent of a fan letter or someone who seems particular confused or needy. I feel for them but they can't hurt me from there. The only ones that concern me are when they're really drunk and it's the middle of the night and I'm alone.”

## Audiences Help

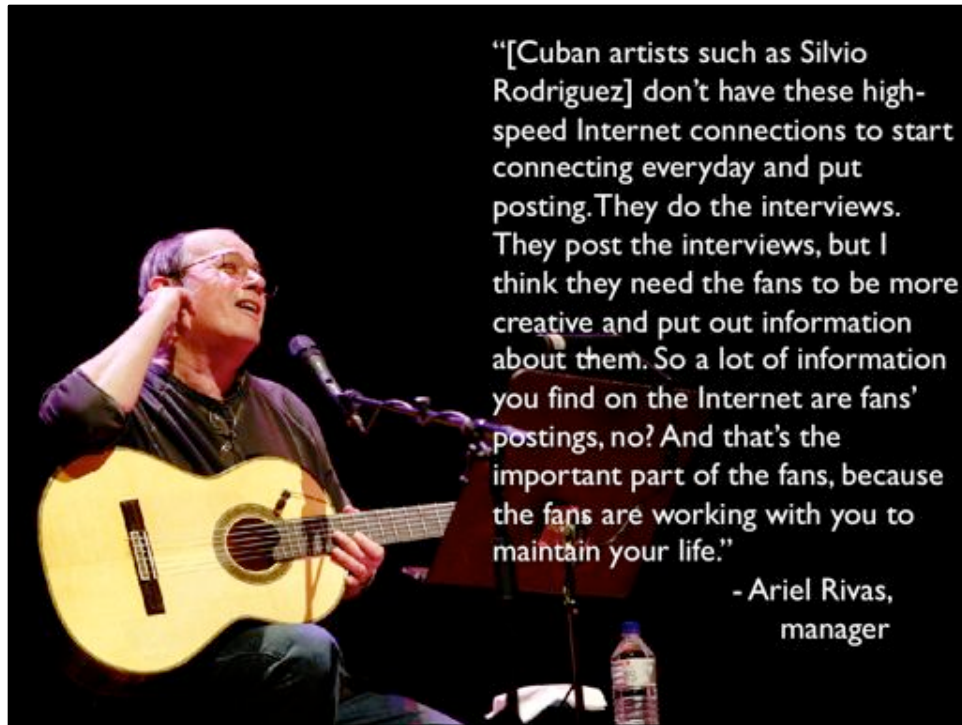
The messages audiences send to artists directly and indirectly can help artists. Audiences may also help in very concrete ways.

“If the word about Starlet is active, Starlet exists outside of my head. Starlet hasn’t released an album since 2001, still there are people talking, listening, emailing.”

- Jonas Färm, Starlet



Jonas Färm, of the Swedish band Starlet, which may or may not still exist, speaks to the fact that ongoing fan discourse creates a continuous presence for bands between – or after – recordings, giving their bands’ art and very existence continued life.



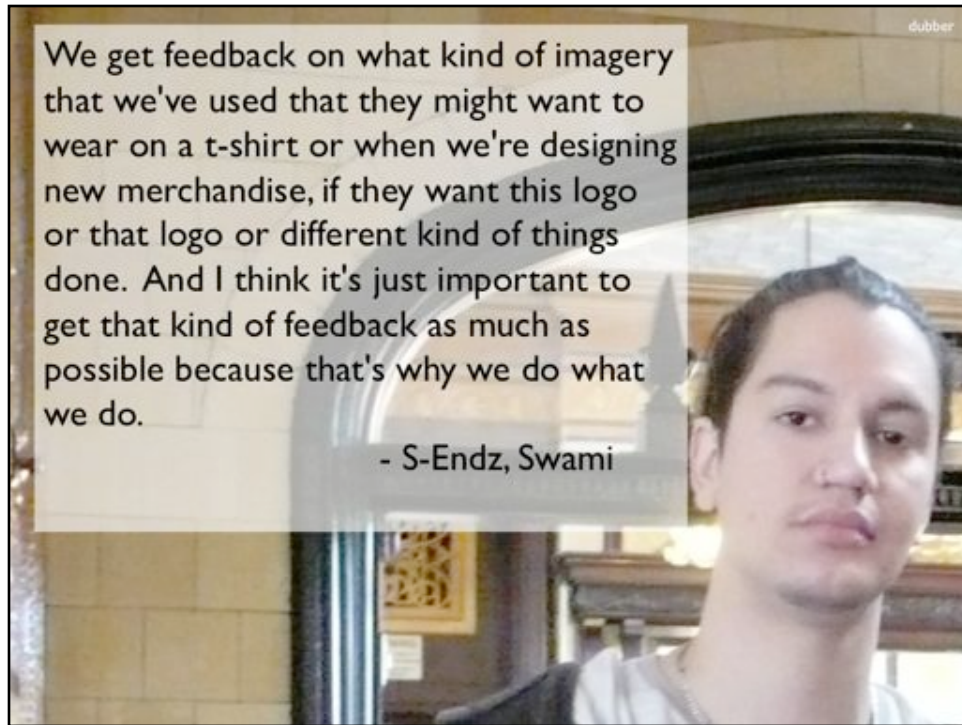
“[Cuban artists such as Silvio Rodriguez] don’t have these high-speed Internet connections to start connecting everyday and put posting. They do the interviews. They post the interviews, but I think they need the fans to be more creative and put out information about them. So a lot of information you find on the Internet are fans’ postings, no? And that’s the important part of the fans, because the fans are working with you to maintain your life.”

- Ariel Rivas,  
manager

This may be especially important for artists based in locations with – or preferences for - limited internet access.

"My community's been a great help to me. After I shut it down, I got an email, or notes through my website, from various people saying, "If you'd like, we'll run your MySpace page for you." So they do. I have a guy in Glasgow called Paul who runs my MySpace page, and he puts all my-- anything I put on the website to do with concerts, he keeps it all up to date. He puts the-- he uploads the latest songs and things. I basically have a great MySpace page, and I don't do anything. He also actually helps me with Google Maps for the venues when the tours are announced. He puts all the venues on my Google Maps so that I can plan hotels and things [...] I've got several volunteers who do various things. I've got this group called the Young Idealists, and they sell CDs for me at concerts and they put up posters in coffee shops and bars and things. And one of them actually is a JavaScript expert. I did nearly all of the coding at my website, but I couldn't make the music player work with Flash, and it turned out to be a JavaScript problem, and another Paul in Glasgow, who his regular gig is a philosophy professor and he's a part-time web designer, he fixed the JavaScript issues for me. So he's another person I'm greatly indebted to." - Lloyd Cole

Lloyd Cole, who you will remember as expressing discomfort about having a “second family” in his online community, nonetheless takes advantage of and is deeply grateful for their many offers of direct and specific assistance.



We get feedback on what kind of imagery that we've used that they might want to wear on a t-shirt or when we're designing new merchandise, if they want this logo or that logo or different kind of things done. And I think it's just important to get that kind of feedback as much as possible because that's why we do what we do.

- S-Endz, Swami

Audiences can also act as focus groups, helping musicians develop products that audiences will want to buy.



“But was I in an ongoing conversation with myself and my fans about what makes a great song? Yes. Their letters were the reason I was doing that. Now, I always have that going on in my head when I'm writing. I mean, I'm critical. I'm a critical reader and thinker about - and so do I always have that going on? Sure, I do. But I had a reason to do it, you know, every week. So do I think it made the songs on *The Telephone Game* what I consider to be my strongest songs yet? and my most pers- that most sound like me, where I hit the target of what I'm trying to do more closely, you know, closer to the center? Yes.”

- Kate Schutt



There are also ways in which audiences can directly fuel creativity. Kate Schutt, a jazz artist, wrote and recorded an album where she asked people to send her love stories. Although she did not use their ideas directly, she describes it this way:

“It was a cool thing. I had incredible conversations with the people, with my fans that submitted things by email and one of the things was that I would update the project like every couple weeks. [...] one thing that shocked me, totally shocked me, people submitted the most honest, heart wrenching, beautiful, they were so-- I don't even know how to describe it. They were so forthright and so willing to share some very deep, personal moments with me. I was shocked, and I never thought I would get what I got. You know, beautiful sort of stream of consciousness elegies to-- and you could submit-- the love story could be about anything. It could be about a place, a person, a street, a time period in your life, a person living or dead, famous, not famous, family not family, whatever. And so, I got beautiful first person stream of conscious elegies about somebody's dying grandmother to little scribbled notes about a street corner to like I said, works of art to love affairs, you know, secret love affairs, to total erotic things that shocked my pants off, anonymously submitted soft porn, basically. I mean, you know, I was shocked. I was totally shocked. It was so cool. [...] could I take a letter and you know, we mark that A and take a song of mine for the new album and mark that B and draw a straight line between them? No. We can't do that. But was I in an ongoing conversation with myself and my fans about what makes a great song? Yes. Their letters were the reason I was doing that. Now, I always have that going on in my head when I'm writing. I mean, I'm critical. I'm a critical reader and thinker about-- and so do I always have that going on? Sure, I do. But I had a reason to do it, you know, every week. So do I think it made the songs on the Telephone Game what I consider to be my strongest songs yet and my most pers-- that most sound like me, where I hit the target of what I'm trying to do more closely, you know, closer to the center? Yes.”

“Preordering an album on the surface looks like a leap of faith or trust in a band - we could have just run off with the money. But we've been around long enough and they've grown to know us in a way that meant that they trusted us and also trusted us to give them something that they would like. So there was a sense of- we did have a sense of pressure I suppose that we made an album that hopefully was going to be well received because there would be nothing worse than people going, “I paid £13 for this and it's shit and I waited a year for it.””

- Mark Kelly

Finally, as I indicated at the outset, fans provide money. Increasingly, this may happen through up front fan funding – the site Kickstarter funneled 13 million dollars into the music economy last year. As Kelly described, fan funding speaks not just to the financing, but to the relationships between artists and audience and their sense of involvement with and accountability to one another.

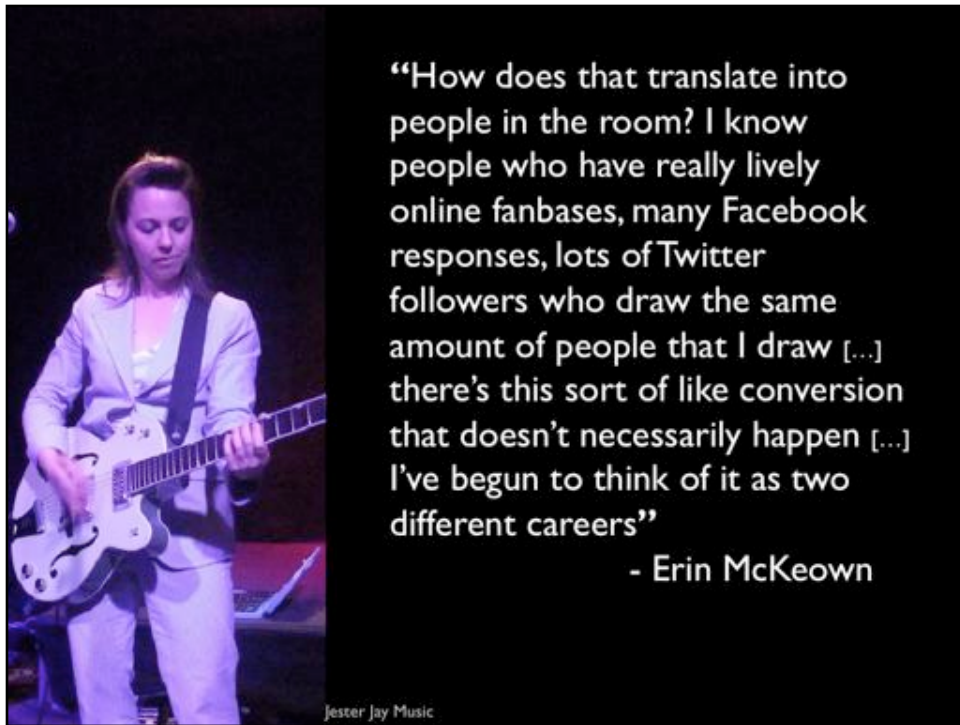


“I get these emails a lot like people have been listeners for a while and then it wasn’t until they got to know me on Twitter that they bought my album.”

- Zöe Keating



Indeed, forming a relationship is increasingly integral to earning money. Zöe Keating won't give her music away, insisting it is worth money. However, she accepts that it circulates without payment and views social media as a means of increasing audience's awareness that she lives on albumsales and, as they get to know her, increasing their financial assistance.



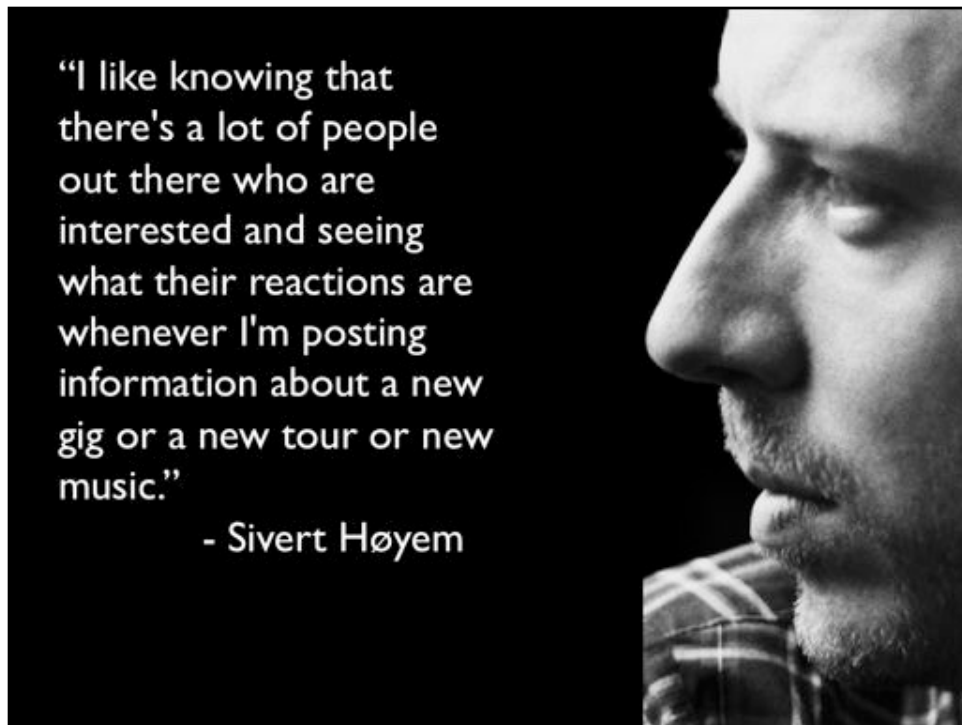
“How does that translate into people in the room? I know people who have really lively online fanbases, many Facebook responses, lots of Twitter followers who draw the same amount of people that I draw [...] there’s this sort of like conversion that doesn’t necessarily happen [...] I’ve begun to think of it as two different careers”

- Erin McKeown

But the connection between online connection and financial reward isn’t clear to everyone. As Erin McKeown astutely noted, there is no easy conversion that maps online interactions into fans’ loyalty or money.

## Audiences Show Interest

These ways that audiences help artists can be understood easily in terms of content production, dissemination and purchase. But audiences also provide more ephemeral intellectual and emotional rewards through the things they do online.



“I like knowing that there's a lot of people out there who are interested and seeing what their reactions are whenever I'm posting information about a new gig or a new tour or new music.”

- Sivert Høyem

Musicians often spend time alone – writing, recording, or between shows on tour – and for many, it is important simply to look at the internet and be continuously reminded that people care about what they do. According to Timmins, the internet’s immediacy encourages people to reach out with “quick notes” that “help. It just is a sort of-- especially when you're on the road and you're grinding it out and you get a few of those, and it's like ‘Oh, wow, okay. So we did-- we touched some people last night.’ So that sort of stuff does help.”

Emily White, manager of the recently reunited Urge Overkill, describes their songwriter’s reaction to seeing audience response online: “Eddie would say, ‘Yeah, you know, I’ll be at home writing songs and does anybody care?’ And then he’s like, ‘But then I post on Twitter and Facebook and all these people respond immediately. And I’m like, ‘Wow, people really care.’”

“When you do music,” said one musician I interviewed who preferred to be anonymous, “it’s hard to get any-- I guess any real positive feedback, I guess. [...] It’s like you do a record and no one hears it and you slave over it. It’s really hard to do. You do that for six to nine months. And then people start hearing it and playing live shows really ties all of that together. But also it’s good to see what people are actually thinking about it.”

As this last quote suggests, the kinds of discourses made visible online provides a depth of feedback that even a live audience cannot.

We thought, "Okay, we really burned out our audience," we did so many tours, we put out so many records. So after a year people missed us and that felt really good. There was this groundswell, like, "Hey, where did you guys go?" [...] And that was really helpful because at that time we were kind of feeling doubtful that we had anything more left to do and thought, "Well, should we break up?" and then we thought, "No, this band's too much fun, let's just keep going with it."

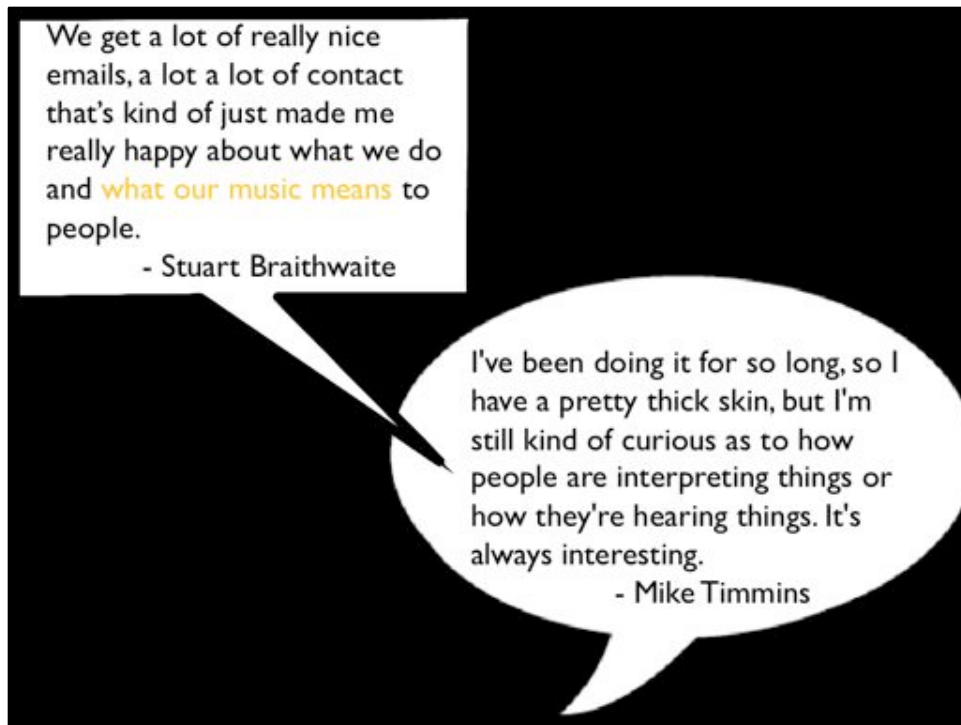
- Jon Ginoli, Pansy Division



Unsolicited audience feedback received online can even motivate bands to stay together, as was the case for Pansy Division, or can help even-obscure bands understand that their work had continuing importance. Gary Waleik, of recently-reunited band Big Dipper, who sold only 2,000 copies of each of their records in the late 1980s despite eventually being signed to a major label, told me "I hear from people more now than when we first broke up in '92. I was sure for a long time that we were just sort of one of the many little flashes in the indie scene and I was, you know, I was fine with that, I found lots of other things to keep me happy and occupied, but after a while I started thinking, "gee were we really that insignificant?" I mean we did some pretty good records and influenced some people maybe. And so it was really interesting."

## Audiences Tell Their Stories

Artists thrive on seeing audience's interpretations of their music, and can be affected by the stories their audiences tell them.



Many of the artists used the term “interesting” in describing reading audiences’ interpretations and seeing how their songs take life in others’ lives. Zöe Keating, whose music has no words, explains “I feel like a piece of music really succeeds when it could be a lot of different things. And I get those e-mails like I played this piece when my father dying or I played this piece when my son was born or I played this piece -- you know, there’s people who have all of these meanings of the songs and they write to me about them.”



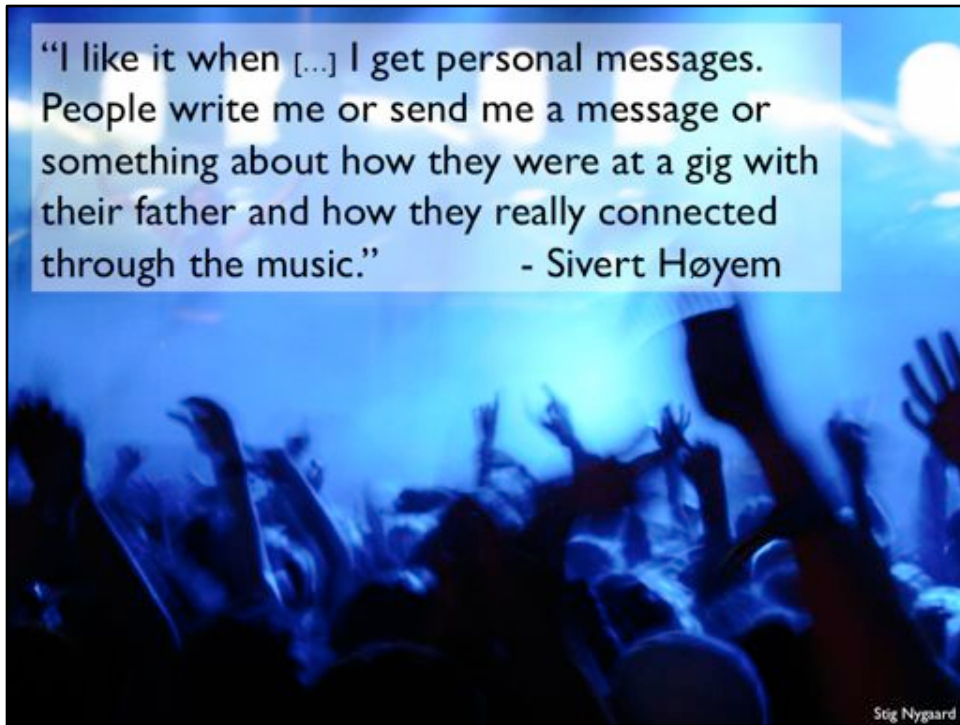
“Somebody wrote that he was in Iraq. He said he and his mates, his buddies, they liked to listen to my music while they were driving their tank across desert in Iraq. And I was just imagining what that must be like. And I often think I make music for big open spaces [...] And I was thinking that gosh I hope that that makes it so that if they see somebody running across their field of view maybe my music would make it so they don’t shoot.”

– Zöe Keating

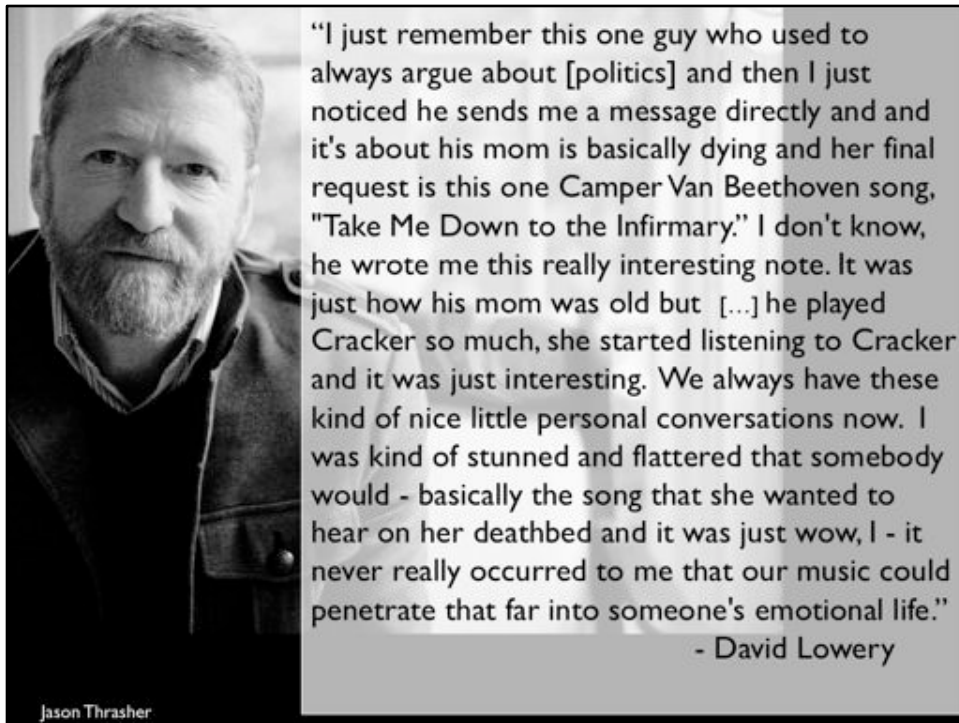


She continues with an example of a story that stood out to her as particularly rewarding – one of two I heard about the power of hearing from soldiers at war who listen to their music.





The stories that move artists are often about connecting people to one another. Several spoke about how rewarding it is to hear that their music connected people more closely.



Perhaps the most valuable thing artists can hear from audiences is that their music helped someone deal with death. As David Lowery says in this quote, it had never occurred to him that his music could touch someone that deeply, a realization which, in turn, touched him profoundly. When I asked artists to give me an example of an interaction with audiences that they had found really rewarding, the most common answer was hearing stories about their music helping audience members through death. The music anthropologist Wendy Fonarow notes that musicians' work is often considered entertainment, and their own practices referred to as "play." Hearing stories like this makes it clear to artists that they are engaged in much more than frivolities. For some in the audience, their music is literally a matter of life and death.

“Most musicians have gotten into it because as fans they'd been deeply touched by music in some way or another, and usually by a handful of bands or musicians, and they have their own stories as fans. So when that gets reversed and somebody's coming up to you and telling you their story and how your music and what you've written or sung or played has deeply affected - it's often extremely private and personal sections of their lives. It's really amazing. **It does validate the whole thing for you.** You know, you go through periods where you think “What the hell am I doing this for, and who's listening?” and then you only need one or two of those, and you go “Okay, well, right there that makes it - that's worth it right there.” So it's very important to hear those stories, I think.”

- Mike Timmins

Mike Timmins describes the stories fans tell as “validating,” a sense shared by all the artists I spoke with. Lloyd Cole, who insisted that the reward he found most powerful was the applause at the end of his shows each night, told me that he understood it was important for fans to tell him these stories, yet even as he insisted he didn't need these tales, he did describe them as validating. What is being validated here is more than the music, it is the musicians themselves, who see that their efforts to communicate through music have reached others, and that their lives have thus helped the lives of others.

However, like all that I have discussed, even this can be complicated and provoke mixed emotions in artists. Greta Salpeter talked about a song she wrote on her last band's album about a close friend who had committed suicide: “While I never really talked about the fact that it was about a suicide, and it's really kind of hidden in the lyrics, the audience kind of picked-up on that, or at least people who had lost someone to suicide were-- they were able to pick-up on that. [...] that's something that I dealt with that took a long time to deal with, and I wrote a song, and I put it out there, and I recorded it, and I kind of buried that emotion. You know, it's gone. And so when people bring that kind of thing up all the time, it brings this wave of emotion up in me, and I don't want to talk about it all the time. So I appreciate that people are being open with me and that they're confiding in me, but I don't necessarily want to focus on those emotions all the time.”

## Audiences Complete

I've run through many ways in which audience practices go beyond responding to music or taking it up on their own terms to feed back into artists' emotional, creative and personal lives in ways that can be powerful and generative, if complicated and sometimes unpleasant. Ultimately, some artists understand what audiences do online as completing the musical process itself.



“They’re just letting me do what I live for. I just live and breathe music, I’m obsessed with it to the point where it’s Gods and Devils and Monsters to me, it’s so important. And I know I can play without anybody listening, but like I said at the beginning of this call, it’s unfinished then. It’s almost like a kid, you don’t want to keep it in the closet. You grow it up maybe but then when it’s grown up it goes out and makes friends and is effective in the world. And you’re not done raising the kid until the world has accepted it.”

- Kristin Hersh

Kristin Hersh, whom I quoted earlier as saying that when fans create it brings them and the artists closer to making music together, likens making music to raising a child. “You’re not done,” she says, “until the world has accepted it.”



*Participation?*

*Audience?*

I've only managed to address some of the many ways in which the audiences' online practices impact, move, influence, trouble and inspire the musicians I've interviewed. What I have described here is not unique to the internet. All of these practices happen offline as well. The internet enables them to be amplified and made visible and, in doing so, transforms their impact.

In closing I want to suggest that looking at these practices through artists' eyes draws our attention to different ways audience activity is meaningful that our current conceptions of participation do not fully capture. In particular, audiences' ability to shape the personal and emotional lives of artists in new ways is powerful in ways that lenses of commerce or audience community do not provide the language to discuss. Audiences participate not just in creativity, but in life. The audience is not just the people who listen to the music, the audience becomes the artists who listen to their listeners as well. Each is audience for the other, each becomes a participant in the emotional lives of the other.

Thanks.  
Feedback?  
Questions?

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