Slide Locating Imagination April 2017

To clarify, this paper forms a part of my doctoral thesis, which is entitled ‘*The place of music festivals in an era of digital music abundance’* and as you can see I am researching UK music festivals within their wider economic and social context.

Slide Suppose they gave a festival and nobody came

I think I should begin by talking a little bit more about my title. It is appropriated from a popular slogan of the 1960s ‘Suppose they gave a war and nobody came’ and as such it is bound up with the iconography of events in the United States of that time. While the Vietnam War continued, events such as Woodstock Music and Art Fair and the Altamont Free Concert both in 1969 are seen by Nicholas Gebhardt as large-scale expressions of the countercultural ideals that were prevalent in that period. This is perhaps most neatly symbolised by Country Joe & The Fish’s Woodstock performance of ‘I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die’ and its strong anti-war sentiment. Many modern festivals are still mediated through those signifiers of freedom and anti-establishment - or as Timothy Leary expressed them ‘turn on, tune in and drop out’ – and festival attendees still often hold to this ideal, even if it’s just for two days standing in a muddy field with chemical toilets and overpriced and understrength beer.

Slide Promoters

However, before the artists and the audience can enjoy their performative activities in Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque or as liminal spaces for transgressive behaviour, the festival organiser, producer or curator must first exercise their imaginations in conceiving, planning and constructing the festival and the festival site. This process may itself be a distinctive type of identity formation, such as Frith and DeNora observe in other musical practices but it can certainly be seen as the exchange of capital, usually in the form of financial for social or cultural capital and not always on fair or equitable terms. As Frith states:

Live musical performance matters, then, for two reasons. On the one hand, it is a public celebration of musical commitment, a deeply pleasurable event at which our understanding of ourselves through music is socially recognised. On the other hand, it is a site in which to explore—for ourselves—how performance works. And, of course, where there are social desires, there will be entrepreneurs—promoters, ready, at a price, to meet them.

That price is often in both the rising costs of tickets and the effects on the promoter, especially the festival promoter. Simon Frith has expressed that music promotion makes almost no business sense at all, with all the risk centred on the promoter and simply by the increase in scale, the work of the festival promoter must make least business sense of all.

Slide Disintermediation

The recorded music industry around the time of Woodstock or the Isle of Wight festivals in the UK was in rude health and live music considered to be a largely promotional activity. However, whereas previous advances in technology such as the seven-inch single and the compact disc had enhanced revenues, the emergence of a new digital format in 1999 for storing music proved a game-changer for the industry. The MP3 offered the ability to compress and transfer music files and allowed music to be shared across national and international borders. As Andrew Leyshon observed in the 2001 article *Time-space (and digital) compression: software formats, musical networks, and the reorganisation of the music industry* this process of disintermediation proved particularly disruptive. In particular, it was estimated that the peer-to-peer file sharing software Napster, which allowed users to share music files between personal computers, was being downloaded in US universities around twenty million times a day by June 2000. While these downloads, considered illegal by the music industry, did not equate directly to lost sales, a pattern of reducing the amount that consumers were willing to pay for recorded music in the digital age was set and Alderman’s prediction of music industry suffering came largely to pass.

Slide Four Networks

In 2001, Leyshon identified the music industry as comprising of four networks: a *network of creativity* incorporating composition and repetition, (or performance and recording); a *network of reproduction*, including vinyl, cassettes and compact discs; a *network of distribution*, which delivered the finished goods from the manufacturer to the point of sale; and a *network of consumption*, which he broadly equates with retail, He reports how one prescient senior executive of Virgin Megastore at that time believed that “a shift to digital distribution would undermine margins sufficiently that firms such as his might be forced to withdraw their investments and move out of the industry altogether.” Although these grave concerns for the recorded industry were well-founded, what Leyshon did not foresee at that time, although acknowledges in 2014’s *Reformatted: Code, Networks and the Transformation of the Music Industry*, was how a swing back towards the live industry might serve somewhat to address the forthcoming loss of revenue.

While the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) were reporting global industry revenues down around 30 per cent from 2004 to 2009, the decline in the live music industry was reversed. This was most clearly evidenced in the fourth edition of PRS for Music’s annual report ‘*Adding up the UK Music Industry 2011’*. In this report, Page and Carey calculated that revenues from live music had grown to a record high of £1.6bn, and was therefore the first time that the live music sector had outperformed the recorded sector since the era of large-scale mechanical reproduction. Leyshon does acknowledge in 2014 that “since at least 2008 more revenue has been made from performing music in front of an audience than from selling recordings of it” and this can be seen as both a profound shift in patterns of consumption and the actions or reactions of the music fan to new ways of connecting with the artist. It is interesting to note how in Leyshon’s scheme there is no direct-to-fan model, or that the place of consumption was conceived to be before the sound recording had even been taken away and played. So it is this new digital landscape of disintermediation that the role of festival organisers as new tastemakers or gatekeepers can be seen to emerge.

Slide Methodology

The research sample saw participants drawn from practitioners that differ in the size of their event audience, the location and duration of their event and also the number of years that the event has taken place. In order to aim for those with sufficient relational knowledge, all participants have been involved in their events as either founders, owners or managers, or have long-standing industry experience in a related field. It may be noted that although no distinction was made in the selection of the sample according to demographics such as age and gender, interesting differences have been seen in their responses. However, at this stage it is not considered to be part of the study. One further note, apart from the Glastonbury team of father and daughter Michael and Emily Eavis, festival organisers usually operate behind the scenes and it has been difficult to pin down the interviewees.

Slide Personal Interest

My own interest dates from 2003, when I was the co-founder of the Green Man Festival in Wales. As Robinson notes this was the beginning of the boutique festival in Britain, although I can’t say we were fully aware of this at the time. We had been recording artists and along with many others were subject to the ‘disruption’ of Napster and its effect on the music industry. What particularly interested me when I see the title for the Conference was my own experience in the imagining of a new event from its conception, through to location, programming and staging. This prolonged activity is one which I see as such an act of social constructivism that, in the way in which temporal and imagined communities are formed after this process has taken place, it could be more properly termed a constructed society.

From the site plan, you can see how we had imagined our first year should look and how the areas would be named. Of course, we did not know then if anyone would attend and were eternally grateful for the 350 people who did make it along and ensured that we only lost £9.10, or around 10 Euros.

However, one of my respondents S, who was not a music industry professional when she began her festival said:

“I think the financial risk is a huge challenge, especially in the early days. Obviously, we lost £300,000 in that first year that we did.”

The Emic and Etic viewpoint is something that might also be useful to explore further as S admitted that she had undertaken such a significant project without any real knowledge of how festival promoters even booked their artists.

Slide Growth of music festivals

The first question was to try to ascertain why the organisers felt that festivals had grown to be such a big part of the music industry economy and what they perceived the audience’s motivations to be.

Many respondents paused and described this as a ‘good’ question indicating that it was something they had perhaps thought about but were not in the regular habit of discussing.

The themes that emerged were grouped in a number of categories:

Firstly there were the industry focused responses such as H:

people will sell less magazines and people will have more niche things created for them and I think that’s certainly happened in music and in festivals.” (H)

Others saw it is part of the growth in the live music sector, including further sub-division into niche events.

Many respondents talked about the music tourism perspective, discussing audience experience, or escapism and a move to holidaying at home.

Other topics of note were around how changes in technology allow now for the wide dissemination of information about events and how the processes of mediation may continue to affect the music festival sector:

As H further observes: “it’s like everything, everything seems quite achievable now, once you’ve got a Mac, you can make a film, make some music, anything.”

Slide Co-creation

The audience perspective was certainly prominent in a number of responses. As discussed, music festivals are nothing without the fans, or as D., a full-time music industry professional puts it:

“The two fundamental things I think about any festival are people and entertainment. Without the other, what have you got? Nothing.”

M., who organises a regional classical music festival, demonstrates how the organiser needs to put themselves into the imagination of the audience before the event takes place:

Even if it's not completely full, I don't think that's an issue as long as the audiences are enjoying themselves, and it's the kind of thing that they're expecting and what they want.

This ability or desire to predict what the audience want resonates with the service dominant logic of the experience economy and highlights one of the particular stresses that festival organisers face, in trying to ensure that they maintain the event’s appeal and relevance year on year in the face of increasing competition.

Slide Place

Getz and Page state:

As the event experience is shaped by interactions of place, setting, people and management, the implications for design and marketing are substantial.

So it is no surprise to find all respondents have a very clear sense of the importance of location:

D. beings his response with the oft-repeated “I think location, location, location is everything” though he quickly qualifies this by stating “But also, your event has to fit the location”, pointing to the need to balance a multitude of factors.

As S. describes:

When we started our festival, we were very conscious of what we wanted our location to be. We wanted it to be right slap bang in the middle between Brighton and London, because that way it would be logistically super easy for a huge amount of people from London and Brighton - we know there are so many music lovers there - it would be easy for people to get to the festival. But we couldn't find the right venue looks-wise, and feeling-wise and aesthetics. We're very conscious of our venue in that sense as well. So we ended up having to go for a location further away from easy access to the big numbers of people because we valued the looks and the beauty of the site.

M. too sees both the aesthetic appeal of her site, which is in an area of hills and valleys, operating in a number of ways. As it features visually in all the promotional material it is for her ‘a big marketing tool’ but one of the key attractions in the staging of the event is the use of a variety of unusual spaces such as churches and country houses. As M puts it, this is attractive to the fans as “people like to be a bit nosey”

One phrase which seemed to capture the essence of this balancing act was what C termed “location capability.” As her first festival organizational experience was gained in one summer, where she volunteered at thirteen separate events, her understanding of locations was highly tuned.

Slide Future Trends

A last theme regarding location is the discussion around the future of the music festival sector and the identification of trends in this area. Moving on from the mediating influences of the counter-cultural ideals on which many festivals based their mythological narrative appeal, it seems that other factors are now coming increasingly into play.

F is a music industry professional based in the Midlands region of the UK. His work is focused on a number of small music festivals that are characterised by a strong emphasis on the programming and curation.

it does seem across the world, really, whether it is social media or whatever, that people are keen for convenience . (F)

This convenience was identified by almost all respondents as a move towards urban festivals, commonly taking place for just one day. This convenience is not just related to access, but also lowers the risk factor for both the promoter and the audience attending a new event:

As C states:

I think people start off being like, oh, I'll go to this one-day festival, and then realise that actually they really enjoy the festival scene and can continue that into picking a bigger festival to go to and investing their time and money into going.

Slide Location and Imagination

I want to conclude with an example that I think captures the very essence of locating imagination for the festival organiser. S who you may recall lost £300,000 in the first year of her event, yet still describes the feeling she gets as she travels around:

Sometimes when you are a bit of a dreamer, or you have a creative mind, you'll see a field as you're driving past some beautiful countryside and be like, oh yeah, that would be the perfect location. (S)

And this response from D, which shows where a combination of location, imagination and audience can take you:

When it goes well, you can't think of doing something better. Standing on the side of a stage, seeing 10,000 people having a good time, and you think, ‘I've done that’.