

'With a little help from my friends': Peer production and the changing face of the live album

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Abstract

The live album is an important artefact in bringing together recorded music and live music. As the popularity of live music grows in tandem with the decline of recorded music, the role of the live album is explored in the context of a digital era. By exploring the recent phenomenon of peer production (or crowdsourcing), and with reference to various examples, the future of the live album is explored as one which blurs the boundaries of creation and ownership. Posing that this new era of voluntary participation may benefit musicians commercially, the article concludes that future research into peer production may inspire new ways for the music industry to appease changing consumer preferences in a time of rapid technological change.

Keywords: Crowdsourcing, peer-production, music, digital revolution, Internet

1 Introduction

Changes in technology inevitably encourage a shift in consumer preferences. Rarely has this been so markedly observable than in the case of recorded music, with North, Hargreaves & Hargreaves (2004) suggesting that rapid technological advancements have led to a decrease in the value of music. Whilst this shift is often cited as starting with file-sharing giant Napster, created in 1999, the development of the iPod just a few years later is often overlooked. Presenting music fans with a device,

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which could store large volumes of music, this development, along with subsequent advances in online modes of piracy has ultimately led to a sub-culture of pirates who choose not to pay for music (and other digital media).

A likely result of the increasingly huge storage of mp3-players and hard drives (along with their falling cost), Holt & Morris (2009) confirm mp3-player ownership is significantly linked with piracy. Holt & Copes (2010) observed through qualitative enquiry that pirates claimed not to watch or listen to all of the content that they downloaded. A wider implication of this shift, to focus specifically on music, is that music listening has become more passive. Krause & Hargreaves (2013) reveal frequent use of the 'shuffle' (or random) function on iPods, with Greasley & Lamont (2011) observing most music listening as now occurring through computers. Such examples do indeed suggest less attentive listening.

In this article however, active participation of an influential sub-culture of music fans point towards entirely new modes of production, both to the benefit of creator and to musicians alike. These practices are far from passive. The cultural and commercial implications of such changes are argued are particularly worthy of investigation in light of the present downturn in sales of recorded music as a result of widespread music piracy. Yet, there has been a dearth of discussion on the phenomenon of peer production as a means to create and distribute live albums.

This article formally introduces this niche research area into academic discussion, establishing fruitful lines of enquiry for scholars of various disciplines.

2 Fixing a hole: The live album and an in-depth introduction to peer production

The live album effectively promotes the live concert experience. Listening to your favourite artist perform live allows the listener to gain an insight, albeit limited, into what it was like to be there. In instances where the listener was in actual fact present, the live album provides a means to re-experience the concert.

Live albums have long been a staple of the release catalogue of major artists, along with singles collections and B-sides/rarities compilations. Historically, there has been a thriving market for unofficial bootlegs, often encouraged and tolerated by artists including so-called jam bands (see Shultz 2006). With a long tradition, these distinct cultural artefacts (Marshall 2004) document artists in a live setting. Crucially, fans are heavily involved in their creation and subsequent distribution. Today, the word still persists (much like B-sides), where official bootlegs are now commonplace. The trading of bootlegs (see Kernfeld 2011) is now much easier due to digital technologies, with their popularity a testament to the continued interest in live music.

In recent years, there has been a marked shift in the ways in which the live album has been produced and distributed. In their book "Macrowikinomics" (2010), Tapscott & Williams explain that mass collaboration using new technologies by voluntary participation has redefined newspaper, movie and music industries. This is the essence of peer production. In perhaps the most high profile example of peer production, *Star Wars Uncut* (2010), hundreds of fans recreated 15-second excerpts from the original 1977 George Lucas film accompanied by the original audio content to effectively remake the film. Winner of the Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Interactive Media, Tapscott & Williams (2010: 247) note that: "*The question shouldn't be why did Lucas film approve this – but rather why have most other companies and content creators been slow to follow suit?*"

The time and effort involved in such projects are indicative of a wider cultural shift to engage in new technologies in creative ways to collectively create and distribute content. Whether or not it represents a concrete ethos with the potential to rival current modes of production remains to be seen; it is an under-researched phenomenon. Brabham (2008) explains that whilst peer production (known as crowdsourcing in his article) has benefits and costs, it is nonetheless a viable model, which is able to reduce both the time and cost of various problems. Indeed, much scientific research now benefits from the contributions of the general public, with a particularly notable presence amongst astrono-

mers to collect and collate data under the emerging guise of 'Citizen Science'. More commercially, many successful businesses such as Apple benefit from user-generated content on their websites. Whilst the music business may be a likely contender to benefit from voluntary participation projects similar to those listed above, the likelihood of them being implemented in a commercial way remain questionable.

The live music economy has emerged during the decline of the media economy (Holt 2010). Festival popularity, in particular, has been boosted through greater information available through the Internet (Stone 2008), the same technology, which also allows for illegal downloading of recorded music. While it is frequently claimed that the music industry is under threat, Williamson & Cloonan (2007) argue that it is one of the music industries, which is struggling to come to terms with the new business environment which has been created by technological and communications advances.

Whilst technology has forever changed the way in which music is consumed, enjoyed and valued, the notion that that the Internet is and always will be the nemesis of recorded music is misguided. Many artists such as Nine Inch Nails demonstrate not only the benefits of online music distribution, but also that that the Internet offers rich ways to interact with fans (see Brown 2011). For example, launching a mobile application called NIN Access in 2009, fans of the band were able to post messages and photos marked with their location (including concerts), allowing them to engage in online discourse with other fans. Akin to microblogging service Twitter that has since risen to prominence in facilitating online discussion of live events, Bennett (2012) explains how notions of liveness at live music concerts are changing with such applications, with fans posting set lists as they unfold in real time.

Another way in which the Internet has drastically changed live music (and to move discussion closer to the focus of this article) is with webcasts. Now commonplace², webcasts allow fans to share judgements

² For example, dance/punk New Yorkers LCD Soundsystem streamed their final ever performance at Madison Square Garden live via the internet, hosted on alternative music news website Pitchfork.com. The move was a welcome one for fans who were unable to attend the performance, with tickets selling out in 15 seconds (Kitamura 2011), thus indicating a way of connecting with fans using

of performers and meet likeminded people in an online environment, chatting using new communication mediums. Regardless of technological developments and massive media consumption via iPods and YouTube, for example, it is still considered that being at a live concert remains a different kind of experience; measurable in the atmosphere, the artistic performance and in social interaction (Holt 2010).

As an experience good, music must be enjoyed before it is bought. Beyond radio, alternative means to sample music now exist which may contribute to a newfound reluctance in purchasing recorded music. No speculative risk is present anymore when purchasing recorded music. Live music however, is intrinsically risky, where a variety of factors can contribute to the relative success of a concert. While fans are unable to 'try' live music before they 'buy', the live album and the live DVD as is now more commonplace, offers fans the opportunity to experience what it was like to be there. In this way, they can serve the same function as movie trailers. While even the best home stereo set-up will never quite accomplish this fully, some live recordings come close, with The Chemical Brothers' recent Grammy nominated live album *Don't Think* (2012) being a strong example. This included a DVD/Blu-Ray component, initially distributed on a limited cinema release (also now widespread).

With little reproduction values, live recordings of concerts simultaneously interest both fans who were and were not at a particular concert. To this end, grunge veterans Pearl Jam released a documentary film called *PJ20* (2011) to celebrate their 20th anniversary. On limited release in cinemas, this film would have captured the attention not only of fans who have not seen them live, but also of those who have; in the hope of capturing a glimpse of recordings from shows they attended. This would enable them to relive the experience again and again. Added to this, the band released a book to tie in with the film along with an official soundtrack complete with rare recordings. Without releasing a single new

the full capacity of technology. More recently, Nine Inch Nails side-project 'How to Destroy Angels' streamed their first ever major live performance at the 2013 Coachella festival. Entire music festivals are now often streamed live online.

song, Pearl Jam offered up a variety of relics to their fans and thus diversified their revenue streams.

3 Being for the benefit of ... (musicians)

Exploring the role of technology in further changing the nature of the live album, the internet has adjusted the level of interaction between artist and fan where, for example, throughout her 2005 Beekeeper tour, Tori Amos requested suggestions from fans for cover songs via her website, performing at least two of those chosen (Amos & Powers 2005). Exploring the success of Amos' use of official bootlegs, Farrugia & Gobato (2010) argue that her efforts in personalising each show increases the perceived value of their subsequent recordings to those in attendance and thus increasing the likelihood that these will be purchased. Other bands such as Muse have also conducted polls on their websites for fan requests, with Pearl Jam recording (almost) every single performance as an official bootleg since 2000.

The variation in live performances by live bands such as Pearl Jam will inevitably capture fans' attention, stirring interest in live recordings – legal or otherwise. The likes of Pearl Jam and Tori Amos who have successfully monetised bootlegs of their live shows demonstrate a new-era of jam bands, defined by Shultz (2006) as bands whose live sets centre on improvisation and variation and most importantly, who allow their fans to record their live shows, copying and distributing them freely. Whilst both acts now profit from their official bootlegs, they can still be obtained illegally for free and many fans are likely to do so, without affecting ticket sales. Those who do pay for them are the hardcore fans who enjoy bootlegs (Naghavi & Schulze 2001) and circulation of their live recordings both legally and otherwise form part of the reciprocal relationship between artist and fan, with reciprocity forming the basis of Shultz (2006) research into jam bands. In his own words: *"The music industry thus needs to think in terms of building loyal communities that have reciprocal relationships with artists rather than simply moving physical products into the hands of consumers"* (Shultz 2006: 657).

In the case of the aforementioned Nine Inch Nails, and in keeping with reciprocity as the glue which binds together fan and artist, the best illustration of how important this working relationship is can be found in the organisation This one is on us, an international group of Nine Inch Nails fans who have filmed and produced a series of live concert films; with high quality audio provided by Nine Inch Nails alter-ego Trent Reznor himself. The commitment to work towards a shared goal is indicative of their loyalty to Nine Inch Nails, revealing the core driver of engaging in this voluntary behaviour – a shared musical identity.

The nature of the relationship above is becoming more widespread with similar projects for Radiohead (a fan-shot concert in Prague in 2009) and Johnny Cash (a posthumously released fan-created music video of the song 'Ain't no grave' in 2010) further blurring the boundaries between fan and artist and indeed supply and demand. YouTube also boasts a fan-compiled video of Pearl Jam's legendary performance at the Wachovia Spectrum Arena, Pennsylvania on Halloween 2009. The final night of a four-night residency, Pearl Jam was the final band to play at the venue just days before it was demolished. Their set list included rare performances including songs, which have never been played, along with use of a string section and (as it was Halloween) costumes³. With fans seemingly disappointed at no video release for this concert, they simply made one themselves using the audio from the official bootleg the band did release in conjunction with fan-shot videos (mostly from mobile phones).

4 Come together: Co-creation

The community spirit outlined above echoes the ethos which drives the open source movement online with self-sustaining websites such as Wikipedia and Yelp proving that if a clear common goal is shared by individuals, they can and will commit time to ensuring it is met. Related research on consumer involvement indicates that increased value is attached to both utilitarian and hedonistic products, which are self-

³ Dressing up in Devo suits, covering the new wave bands hit song 'Whip it' (1980).

made as compared to otherwise identical products, which were not self-assembled (Norton, Mochon & Ariely 2011). In other words, fan-generated live concert films may be perceived as more valuable than those put together professionally.

Co-creation is an integral part of many successful companies' business models. Offering no incentive for such participatory behaviour, this new era of selfless contribution to websites such as Trip Advisor has emerged as a dominant aspect of Internet culture. Extending this principle to the creation of fan-made compilations of live recordings, musicians could in actual fact create releases, which are more valuable to fans, costing them nothing to produce. Whilst the potential benefits of this remain unknown, the cost and effort with which this can be accomplished, suggests that it is a worthy pursuit.

5 Revolution: Bootlegging for the 'Millennials'?

Another way to consider the emerging shifts on creation explored above is to reconsider crowd-sourced live concert films as a new form of official bootleg. Championing the benefits of bootlegging, Marshall (2004) explains that as bootlegs do not substitute existing recordings, artists are not the subjects of piracy as such. Indeed, bootlegs act as a promotional tool and often an indicator of demand, which often leads to successful subsequent official releases. Marshall, who has written extensively on bootlegs (including a dedicated 2005 book "Bootlegging: Romanticism and Copyright in the Music Industry") explains that where the CD facilitated distribution of bootlegs in the 1980's, the mp3 has similarly afforded a newfound ease with which to make and share bootlegs. Throughout, the interest in the music itself has been a constant. Nowhere is this more marked than with Deadheads, fans of American jam band Grateful Dead. Travelling from show to show, these individuals recorded live shows and distributed them amongst themselves for later enjoyment. Encouraged by the band, this action is noted as largely contributing to their on-going success. In a recent case into the band, Berg (2013: 189) reveals that: "*The history of the Grateful Dead is full of pio-*

neering moments in recording, performing, live sound, and audience building". The article exposes the commitment of fans to engage in peer production, highlighting issues concerning copyright and ownership in the process.

6 Let it be: Some concluding remarks

Debating the consequence of the Digital Rights Movement in reshaping the relationship between the creative industries and consumers, Postigo (2012: 1180) argues that as: "*Culture is participatory, the relations that exist (in terms of ownership of the means of distribution and production) would be reconfigured to help create a mass culture in which people can participate*". This sentiment is captured in the discussion above, where the same individuals who have been historically condemned for posing major threats to the future of these industries have been shown to perhaps pose a real benefit to them. With no data to confirm this assessment, such a claim remains hypothetical.

Regarding the artefact that is the live album itself, content creators have recently moved beyond audio recordings of concerts to include visual components⁴. Fans have similarly made inroads into not merely bootlegging audio recordings but in creating audio-visual recordings, with and without the blessing of musicians themselves. Live albums are an economical way of generating revenue where a willingness for fans to use peer production to create live albums via reciprocal relationships with artists could lead to a new generation of even more economical live albums and films. Facilitated by mobile phones, it is not unreasonable that fans will be able to stream their concert experience live from handheld devices in the future, further changing what Bennett (2012) calls notions of liveness.

The live album is an important addition to any bands repertoire, as is the live film. They capture what it was like to be there (with varying

⁴ American hip-hop artists Beastie Boys released a live video *Awesome; I Fuckin' Shot That!* (2006). Perhaps the first (at least high-profile) example of co-producing a live concert film, 50 fans were given camcorders to film a sold out 2004 performance in their hometown New York.

degrees of success) and effectively demonstrate the capabilities of an artist to perform in a live setting in such a way as to encourage (or perhaps discourage) future ticket sales. Live albums have a long and rich history in popular music, with seminal albums like 'Live at Leeds' (1970) by The Who and 'Alive!' by Kiss, exemplifying their particular presence in the 1970's. Often cited as a 'cash cow', live albums were often released in this era to counterbalance the reduced sales of vinyl (with their rising costs). They proved so popular, that Peter Frampton's 1976 release 'Frampton comes alive' was the biggest selling album in the USA that year. In an era of widespread piracy (marked by reduced purchasing of recorded music), the live album could accomplish the same feat in the present day.

Piracy affects artists differently (Mortimer, Nosko & Sorensen 2012; Piolatto & Schuett 2012), where Mortimer et al. discovered greater awareness of smaller artists as a result of piracy, with increased demand for their live concert performances. Furthermore, Gayer & Shy (2006) argue that demand for live performances is reduced when piracy is prevented. Such observations support the controversial notion that it may indeed be beneficial for artists to give away music for free, where a tolerance of fan-shot concert videos posted to YouTube may prove a particularly beneficial strategy. With fans actively taking the time to do so, free labour is effectively being offered to musicians to promote their output. With 800 million active YouTube users globally, and with nine out of ten of all videos on the video service being music-related (IFPI 2013), artists may face real struggles to profit from live concert films. As North & Hargreaves (2008: 254) note: "*Music piracy is an economic process, but it a psychological process also, and other factors such as the desire to be involved with the music can only be addressed by non-price related measures*".

Given the potential revenue from live performances and the low reproduction costs, which as mentioned above, are nearing zero in some instances, the future of the live album is considered secure; though ever

changing in its creation and distribution⁵. As technology expands, the potential for fan-shot recordings of live performances can only improve, thus addressing the desire for good quality video recordings amongst consumers. Given also the culture of documenting one's social life⁶ using social networking services etc., a potential market exists for high quality recordings of live performances for fans to relive their concert experiences. Pearl Jam have reaped the benefits of this strategy for over a decade, with no other contemporary artist having made such an effort to capitalise on the benefits of offering fans documents of their concert experiences. A high-profile and one-off exception was British rockers Blur, who released what was billed to be their final concert in 2012 as a download just hours after it was finished. Potentially proving more lucrative than crowd-sourced equivalents, this relatively recent trend may emerge as common practice in years to come. Brown's (2011) aforementioned case study of Nine Inch Nails exposes some of the reasons why certain artists may engage in activities such as this, but not others (re-marking on 'artist autonomy').

7 Tomorrow never knows: Suggestions for future research

Empirical research into what drives the creation of user-created live albums would benefit literature on both fan fiction and musical identities. Related research into guitar shred videos by Skågeby (2013) reveals one such avenue to further the knowledge of these new practices. An overlooked area of research, Skågeby explores the phenomenon of shred videos where videos of live music are overdubbed with original

⁵ An emerging trend for remixes (both authorised and unauthorised) of recorded music should be considered as another important shift away from fans as merely passive consumers. To this end, the remix applications released for the 2012 Bjork album 'Biophilia' are particularly notable as well as the curious phenomenon of '8-bit' versions of albums (arranged to sound like early video games).

⁶ Interestingly, gamers (individuals who enthusiastically play video games) actively share videos of themselves engaged in gameplay on the Internet, and in particular, on YouTube. New games consoles from Microsoft and Sony have in-built 'share' functions to facilitate this growing trend. Given the exponential growth of the video game industry, it may be beneficial for the music industry to evaluate the strategies employed by games developers to interact and engage with their target audiences (beyond making video games difficult to pirate).

performance. This is an example of casual piracy, which does not displace sales or overtly affect musicians in a negative way, as is the case with bootlegs (including user-created live albums).

A recent article by Blank (2013) sheds some light on who actually creates web content. Drawing from a large random sample in the UK, Blank defines three types of people producing online content: skilled content, social and entertainment content, and political content. Individuals engaging in these different types of content were noted as possessing different characteristics, with social and entertainment content created by younger, technically skilled people who have lower incomes, for example. More research in this vein may uncover the motivations of why such individuals actively commit time and effort to creating the sort of content discussed in this article. The brief review above suggests that for a significant sub-culture of music fans, the ability to actively get involved in music is important to them – they are not passive consumers. With the sophistication of tablets and smartphones continuously evolving, this wish to get involved can only expand.

In Brabham's (2008: 87) words: *"Crowdsourcing is enabled only through the technology of the web, which is a creative mode of user interactivity ... it is now the challenge of communication studies, science and technology studies, and other scholars to take up this new, hearty agenda for research"*. It is also significant to highlight that live music is particularly under-researched in the field of music piracy, with Dilmperi, King & Dennis (2011) arguing that as live music is the only paid-for music which is rising, future research should investigate the antecedents of live music attendance⁷. Much can be learned from further investigation into the cultural shift which has changed live music practices more broadly, occurring via digital communication advancements and whether or not, as proposed in this article, they can be used for the benefit of the music industry.

⁷ Research (Bowen & Daniels 2005; Henderson & Wood 2009) has shown that a significant volume of festivalgoers express little interest in the music itself. With this in mind, and working on the assumption that musicians would be most interested in encouraging listeners who are unfamiliar with their music to come and see them live, the extent to which peer-produced live albums may inspire increased attendance when performing festivals appears dubious.

Explaining that the digital revolution has altered previously held notions of ownership, sharing and copying, Williams, Nicholas & Rowlands (2010: 283) argue: "*New and creative business models are needed to resolve the problem*", rather than legal changes which may criminalise millions of people. Allowing fans to collectively create and distribute fan-made concert films may be one of them. Without further research into this area however, the suggestion that peer produced live albums may benefit musicians in any financial way must remain speculative.

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