

# *The Labor of Sound in a World of Debt*

Adam Harper

Now, even less than in decades and centuries past, it cannot be denied that sound and music are deeply embedded in economic and material networks of exponentially increasing complexity. Sound and music are not abstract concerns, floating free from a politically charged context of labor, power and society, and neither are the messages and joys they bring. It is dependent on, determined by, and reflective of the work that made it and the world into which it is born. Creativity in the 2010s, especially underground, has become intimately aware of its origin and complicity in power structures and the attendant aesthetic motivations that extend all the way to the most corporate and international levels, and might even be subverting them. At Berlin's 3rd festival in December, we will be asking what the labor of sound is today, what its causes and consequences are, and how it might make its way forward in a world where individuals, artists, and cultures are living with systems upon systems of debt.

To begin with, it is not at all clear what

*"The increasingly ambiguous status of musicking between 'profession' and 'hobby' is exploited, such that audiences expect to pay less and music-makers pay costs for the 'privilege' of what they do."*

sonic labor is - the days of professionalised musicians who merely interpret a given score or brief might well be waning. Artists are encouraged to work for free, or for 'exposure,' which would be a lot to ask even if rents and costs weren't sky high and rising fast. The increasingly ambiguous status of musicking between 'profession' and 'hobby' is exploited, such that audiences expect to pay less and

music-makers pay costs for the 'privilege' of what they do. Unfortunately, these music-makers already live in a world in which time is most certainly money, and after long hours in the office or call centre, who has the time and energy left to make good music, let alone free music? Ideally, of course, music, along with all sorts of other things in society, would be 'free,' but those are not the societies in which we live today.

What's more, it is not even clear what music is. Traditionalists emphasise the importance of the work, chiefly the album in its physical form, and while this remains an important mode of engagement with music in a culture of fleeting digital encounters, it does prop up an industry of commodities, not to mention shrinking the finances and living spaces of young people still further. What does today's debt-ridden twenty-something want with a heap of plastic as they flit from house-share to house-share, no matter how 'authentic' it makes their relationship with music appear? Yet at the other end of the spectrum is streaming at the hands of Spotify and Apple Music, who would have you discard your collection entirely only to rent their servers and pay their data charges, with shockingly low pay-outs to musicians. In between are platforms like Soundcloud and Bandcamp, who put more power in artists' and listeners' hands, but are increasingly coming under commercial and legal pressure as they expand.

Yet all of these platforms, though digital and functionally 'non-physical,' are still based on the assumption that music is a sonically fixed and passive experience. It bears emphasising that these services cannot provide you with a live event or a

musical instrument, much less an interactive musical experience. The visual side of musical culture is of the utmost importance, and cannot be reduced to a thumbnail or a YouTube video. As ever, visual artists (such as Kim Laughton, who makes flyers, artwork and videos throughout the underground), film-makers (such as Chris Cantino, part of the band Magic Fades) and clothes designers (such as Hood By Air, closely connected with the seminal GHE20G0TH1K night in NYC) are closely connected within musical culture. Music is so much more than a sound, but how can its multimedia existence relate satisfactorily to remuneration, and how does this complicate the role and significance of music as an artform?

*"When does  
a distinctive  
sonic and  
visual  
aesthetic  
become a  
brand?"*

Furthermore, music is surrounded by a rapidly moving system of websites and social media commentary. Music fans can play a part in the culture of celebrity 24-7, interact with it, and even become celebrities themselves simply by tweeting, posting and sharing. Networks of friends

spring up rapidly throughout Facebook and Twitter without anyone having met each other - can they be called colleagues? This new milieu brings counterculture's old anxieties about hype and branding into the spotlight. When does genuine enthusiasm turn into excessive hype, and when does a distinctive sonic and visual aesthetic become a brand? Is it a matter of speed? And what does digital popularity mean?

One key way in which artists have been exploring all of these questions by taking on the mantle of 'pop,' as if rejecting the idea of a non-mediated authentic music (such as folk or indie rock) as an illusion that is just as tainted by capital as anything else - perhaps more so, since it is being deceptive. Adopting some of the sounds and sights of commercial music - even muzak - artists like ADR, or collectives like Jack and PC Music, or movements like vaporwave, are performing capital on their own terms, and discovering their own truths and pleasures as a result. This is a music that appears to understand, either positively or negatively, its own role in a fast and often ephemeral milieu mediated by commerce and digital systems, and perhaps it has something to teach us in that respect.

Music, then, might be engaging with its own problems of labor. But not only is irony and self-consciousness about them at risk of collapsing into capitulation, but it is far from solving these problems for all that (intentionally or otherwise) they represent them aesthetically. And actually, the impulse to value music as detachable from the world of today, and an escape from it, is a potentially noble and Utopian one. Doing so might incur a debt, but it

might also lay the foundation for the next world.

Adam Harper writes music criticism for The Fader, The Wire Magazine & more, @rougesfoam  
3hd002