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Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music

Wendy Fonarow

Wesleyan University Press

Reviewed by Elsa Grassy

Wendy Fonarow's *Empire of Dirt* is one of the most exciting works to have been published in the field of popular music studies in recent years. A meticulous ethnography of the British music scene, it is based on audience members' behavior at 'gigs,' that is to say "performances that occur in non-seated, indoor venues" [14], indie's preeminent participatory event. Music performance is here considered as a ritual with deeply ingrained codes and constitutes the basis for the analysis of performers, crew and fans' behavior and of collective meaning-making in this particular musical community. Most important of all, *Empire of Dirt* is the work of someone who is deeply involved in the community she studies and knows how to masterly articulate insider knowledge and scholarly distance.

Geographically defined music scenes have been a focus of research in Popular Music since James Curtis and Richard Rose's groundbreaking article on "The Miami Sound" published in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* in 1983. In this book, Wendy Fonarow focuses on Britain that she characterizes as "the cradle of indie music" [13]. Yet it must be noted that although such scenes can be defined and analyzed locally, the place of music is always magnetic and reaches out beyond national borders—there is an international indie community [2] identifying with Britain and calling it, more or less consciously, its cultural home or hearth (be it sufficient to say that festivals such as Glastonbury are advertised and awaited throughout the world).

Indie, a diminutive for "independent" music (pop and rock mostly), is not an easy word to define. In the first chapter, "What is Indie?," the author explores the multiple definitions of the term. At a basic level, it can be understood to refer to a musical genre or to a music distributed through independent networks. Yet these definitions do not do justice to the complex reality behind indie.

One of the most crucial ideas that Fonarow bases her analysis on is Christopher Small's concept of music as an activity. In *Musicking*, Small explains that it is misleading to think of music as a noun: music is not an isolated object separate from listeners and performers or even from the context of performance. Small prefers to speak of the activity of musicking, which comprises everything from production to consumption, and sees the meaning of the music in the set of relationships that it establishes [9]. The sound cannot be divorced from the assumptions of the community around it, and from the codes related to the place of performance and/or hearing. In other words, music is not a sound created by a composer or interpreted by performers—it is a collective activity where everyone takes part in the process of making music and meaning.

Based on this analysis, Fonarow defines indie as a set of behaviors and values shared by a self-described community who sees itself as distinct from a mainstream, mass audience, perceived as

undesirably centralized and hierarchical. She chooses to focus on performance since “the actions of audience members at shows are a part of how meaning is constructed and social relationships are articulated.” Behind the sound lie sophisticated codes contributing to a complex aesthetic whose study requires a variety of theoretical tools. Fonarow’s approach combines performance theory (Victor Turner), practice theory (Pierre Bourdieu), and the concept of participant framework, first introduced by Erving Goffman and later refined by Susan Philips.

To Fonarow, who teaches at UCLA’s Anthropology department, a society’s art forms and values reflect the way its members conceive of divine creativity, and the power of artistic statements depend on how well they play with ideas and concepts that are of particular import to their audience: “In the economy and institutional sector of indie, we find the recapitulation of religious ideologies regarding the means of accessing genuine and meaningful experience” [77].

The study of the religious or mythical dimension of societies has long been the domain of anthropology, while sociology was only concerned with “modern” societies. It has only been a few decades since anthropologists started studying our times with a focus on group behavior and the collective subconscious—a fact noted by Monique Segré in *Mythes, rites, symboles dans la société contemporaine*. As other Popular Music scholars have done before her (Sara Cohen, Finnegan and Simon Frith, to name a few), Fonarow applies the concept of ritual to a contemporary subculture: “While the connection between religion and creativity has been well examined in other societies, scholarship devoted to Western music and art seems mostly blind to how Western artistic productions express our own metaphysical themes” [3]. Yet, while most authors choose to speak of a “spiritual,” “pagan” or “mythical” dimension behind collective patterns of behavior in our contemporary societies, artistic performances are here interpreted along strictly religious lines. The author compares the criticisms indie fans address to mainstream music to the Protestants’ rejection of Catholicism during the Reformation—her demonstration hinges on the word “purist,” commonly applied to indie orthodox fans. The indie community replicates the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism in multiple ways and “articulates the complementary and opposing principles of Puritanism, Romanticism and pathos” [19].

Fonarow gives a fascinating description and analysis of the geography of performance venues. During gigs, seen as ritual structures, members of the audience position themselves in one of three zones of participation corresponding to different modes of fanship and ways of behaving at performances: they reflect “varying degrees of affiliation to the music community and to particular bands, contrasting modes of participation, and diverse statuses of audience members” [79].

The three zones are the area near the stage (including the pit), where activity is at its peak, a more contemplative zone behind it, and finally the area at the back of the venue (near the bar) where what’s going on on the stage matters least of all. Fonarow shows that zone one and zone two are clearly related (zone two being the place to which indie fans retreat when they grow older and become less physically engaged in the performance), while zone three is specifically devoted to displaying non-fanship. The third chapter zeroes in on the behaviors of those in this latter zone—mostly industry members vying for credibility and high status in the industry community. In the course of this chapter, the author develops an incredibly fascinating semiotics of the where industry members put their backstage pass and how they get past the guestlist doorman.

In Chapter 4, “The Participant Structure and the Metaphysics of Spectatorship,” the author engages in an analysis of how the different participatory modes become meaningful in relationship to each other. The participants’ repartition at gigs seems to reflect a conflict between West African and Western artistic and religious traditions. As indie members age, they turn to a more Western mode of experience and move to zone two, a place more adapted to a contemplative behavior. Age plays a primordial role in how indie members position themselves during gigs and in how they are perceived by the community: “Indie gigs are events that articulate youth as a time of physical engagement and

adulthood as a time of composed demeanor and mental contemplation” [154]. There is a point in an indie fan’s life when one has to either opt out of the community or find a strategy to keep participating and going to shows, hence resisting the pull of Protestant values against West African modes of experience. Those strategies are examined later in the book, in Chapter 6, along with the behavior of individuals who seek a more intimate relation with musicians, especially groupies. Fonarow gives a brilliant analysis of gender reversal in indie, another characteristic that differentiates this community from the mainstream.

In the various genres of rock and pop music, gender and social codes are at play and comprise a spectacle of erotica. [...] For British indie, there are few examples of hypermasculine or hyperfeminine artists. Indie’s musical terrain is composed primarily of the androgynous blending of male and female attributes. [212]

The blending goes beyond gender issues. While there seems to be a major divide between young and older indie fans, indie bases its authenticity on the illusion of closeness and connectedness with other members of the community. The idea of closeness was introduced earlier in the book as part of the definition of indie. As is the case in punk, lack of mediation is a key component of the relationship between artists and audience in indie. The fifth chapter is devoted to how indie creates and maintains authenticity, most often termed credibility or realness in musical communities. This closeness is probably the most important reason why indie means so much to its fans. Drawing on her passage on age, Fonarow conceptualizes indie as a substitute family for youth, midway between childhood and adulthood, “between two families” [245]. To an outsider, indie looks futile and threateningly destabilizing—to an insider, it is a meaningful structure:

Dirt threatens our ordered world of masculine and feminine, children and adults, black and white, mind and body, emotion and reason, man and divinity, animal and human, you and me. Dirt is the union of culturally produced opposites. Dirt is miscegenation, the taboo. [...] To the outsider, indie music is dirt. [247]

In addition to being a brilliant read, *Empire of Dirt* is an exciting experiment in embedding strategies of authentication. Most scholars authoring works on Popular Music make an attempt at establishing credibility not unlike that of musical communities’ members. Researchers in the field of popular music come from a variety of backgrounds, academic and otherwise, yet they all share an almost obsessive concern for rigorous methodology, all the more as Popular Music Studies have long strived to establish a theoretical credibility.

Being both observer and participant in the indie scene, Fonarow is also extremely careful to establish her subjectivity from the start, which she very indirectly theorizes when she mentions the recent shift from a subject/object dialectic to a subject/subject dialectic in the field of ethnography [3]. In Fonarow’s case, authenticity is established at the academic level as well as on the indie level. She has impeccable academic, fan and industry credits. Her theoretical framework and her teaching at one of the most advanced universities in the field of popular music combined to her position as indie fan and music industry insider grant her absolute authority. The author bases her analyses on personal experiences—for example her subconscious understanding of the space of the stage as a member of the audience—which she is able to distance herself from thanks to her theoretical tools. She also has first-hand experience in the music industry and was able to observe the indie community over a period of several years as she was working for several independent labels such as Domino, MCA and Reprise

At the same time, this position helps her win the indie-insider reader’s trust. From back to cover, Fonarow can be read not only a scholar researching her field methodologically but also earnestly involved with her topic: the list of bands and musicians quoted in the thank-you’s section in the opening pages, the comment from New Order’s bass player, ex-Joy Division’s Peter Hook, on the backcover bears, even the song lines at the beginning of each chapter signal that the author is an

insider. Fonarow's mastery of indie codes is not the result of a cold-hearted effort for winning trust but could only be achieved by a long personal commitment to the music.

I am aware that in focusing so much of my attention on the author's knowledge and love of indie music, I am giving away the defiant indie music fan inside of me, wary to establish if the person speaking about MY music is either insider friend or outsider enemy. Not only is the researcher's subjectivity a factor in the subjectivity of the object—the reader's subjectivity also comes into play: "This art form is a passionate concern to members of the community, who look to music not just as entertainment but as an expression of significant cultural sentiments and as a nexus of moral ideas of profound consequence" [2]. No other book than *Empire of Dirt* could have exemplified this better.

References

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