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Staying In. The Domestication of the Underground

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I can't put a finger on exactly when it happened, and I'm not sure exactly how it came about (perhaps it's a combination of age, job, location etc) but I've recently caught myself asking questions like 'what do kids do nowadays?' 'what do they like?' and importantly, 'where are they?' Before you start to worry, this isn't accompanied by the donning of elasticated trousers and the purchase of a Rover 75, but is the product of my concern about the audience for alternative/underground music.

We talk a lot about the lack of numbers at events in Bradford - 'There's so much good stuff going off but not enough people at it to make it sustainable' - and there are various approaches to addressing this, HowDo?! being one of them. But no matter how much we 'make a noise' about what's happening, cross market, join-up, target audiences, improve accessibility and so on, I do wonder if there's not a deeper and less easily solved root to the problem of people not going out.

I've written previously about the shift in individuality, subjectivity and world view that technology produces (see 'No Doubt' in issue 3 of HowDo?!). The gadgets and technologies we have created to assist us with our daily lives bite back, changing our habits, social relations and personalities in increasingly less visible but irrevocable ways. Technology, as an extension of the body and mind, naturalises certain ideologies and behaviours so they seem like common sense or unbreakable customs.

In his recent exhibition at South Square Gallery in Thornton, Simon Boase explored the everyday but nevertheless strange phenomenon of the collapsing of time and space that occurs with internet web browsers. In a video projection we were invited to spy on a session of Simon's internet surfing, where he rarely had less than seven tabs open in his browser, each showing a Youtube video, webcam, Skype conversation, Soundcloud file or some other window of entertainment. Through these means we are simultaneously 'at' a rave in Berlin, a house party in Tehran, listening to music produced in Leeds, watching a mainstream MTV video and so on, skipping erratically between one and the other until they become indistinguishable; almost the same thing in the same place.

What intrigued me about this exercise was the fact that it made visible the norm of how people 'live' music is disseminated and experienced today. When I think back to when I started playing in bands when I was 14 or so and ask myself what motivated us, the answer is that it felt as though it was the only way to make music. Likewise, shortly afterwards when I started to play and organise gigs in youth centres, pubs, boat clubs and village halls, it was because that was the only way for us to share what we were doing with others.

Today, making music on a computer is much simpler, faster, cheaper, easier (and 9 times out of 10 has better results) than undergoing the hassle of learning an instrument, finding people to play with, buying and lugging around bulky equipment, rehearsing and recording in pricey studios and so forth. Similarly, the need to share and get feedback on your creative output is immediately satiated with a quick upload to Bandcamp or Soundcloud and a link via social networking sites. It is so much more cost effective, less risky and more comfortable than booking a venue, inviting people and then having to watch their faces as they get bored and wander off!

I'm conscious here of sounding cynical and patronising but my point is not to claim the world was any better off for me and my friends fumbling through Nirvana covers to pissed-up 15 year-olds in a Matlock shed than if we'd been sat at home on a computer. Rather, I'd like to identify and make some sense of the ramifications that this new technology-aided paradigm holds.

As George Galloway is eager to point out, with its high proportion of youth Bradford will be the 'youngest' city in Europe by 2020. Whilst his interest is in how the current government will (fail) to provide employment for this mass of youth, mine is a little closer to home. What relevance will music venues, pubs and social centres have for a wave of young adults whose primary 'venue' for musical entertainment has been the computer screen and mobile smart phone? What kind of underground scene can we envisage when the very idea of 'going out' is becoming outmoded, absurd even?

If the real underground network of creative expression is potentially found in the bedrooms, studies and living rooms of a thousand domestic dwellings should we bemoan the 'lack of engagement' with our gigs, exhibitions, festivals and cultural events? If people are still being creative and communicating then who are we to judge? Things change, get over it Granddad! We could argue that cyber-space is more democratic and inclusive than the real world; there are no borders, no geographical divisions. People are able to present themselves as whoever they want, identities are fluid and changeable rather than fixed and rooted. There are communities of interest and affinity that are not limited by parameters of region and proximity.

The prevailing counter-argument is an economic one. Without the 'market' of youth 'investing' in our pubs and clubs with their disposable income (if such a thing will exist by 2020) there is no chance of economic growth or sustainability at the local level. Now, I'm unconvinced that capitalism is sustainable even with youth spending their wedge in pubs and clubs, so to me it's beside the point. There is, however, a more social dimension to going out that risks being lost forever in the domestication of the underground.

Collective experiences of live music (like sport, theatre, art and so on) are the site for chance encounters. It is in these spaces where people who don't know each other - and normally never would - come together, share an experience, meet, collide, chat at a bar, fall in love, etc. What is learned in such chance encounters is an appreciation of difference and of the value of true hospitality; that is, of being open to someone you don't already call a friend. Now, this does happen in the communities of interest of the internet, but the tolerance for those that are 'different' or initially dislikeable is much lower, and the scope for meeting someone 'other' to yourself is narrower.

So, my argument for the preservation of our pubs, clubs, venues and social centres - and the urgent need to build a culture of going out to enable this - is not about money, but about conserving the potential for encounters that teach us about hospitality. Real hospitality (which might lead to genuine friendship and love) is an extension to the unfamiliar - to a stranger - and is a first step in thinking and creating a fairer, better world. The home, however, is not conventionally a place for strangers and this is why collectively owned and experienced spaces are so important. They are a common resource, and deserve supporting, conserving and fighting for as we do our green spaces, communal parks and forests. Time to get out and explore the great outdoors!