Music, Value, and Social Networks in the Digital World

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Valuing Electronic Music

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1 Networks in music

In music as in life, nothing is more important than people. Professional music-makers need audiences, and to reach those audiences, they need the support of many other people, from promoters and agents to fans who will rave about them to their friends. And artists of all kinds need contact with fellow artists: to inspire them, to collaborate with them, to compete with them, and simply to acknowledge them as peers. In isolation from people who value the music you value, it's hard to know how good you are, or how to take your work to the next level.

As a recent report on the music industry put it, 'talent… cannot exist unless it is recognised by others in a network.'[1] The Valuing Electronic Music project is an attempt to find out how this process of recognition happens in the digital age. We collected data on millions of user accounts on the SoundCloud website, focusing in particular on a random sample of 150 000. We also spoke to a range of people involved in London-based electronic music scenes (electronic music, followed by hip hop, being the kinds of music that are most represented on SoundCloud). Then we organised a public discussion between three electronic music-makers and an expert on electronic dance music, and interviewed writers, musicians, and promoters at the Convergence festival in London.

These discussions enabled us to focus on the value of different kinds of relationships between music-makers and promoters, DJs, and other people involved in electronic music: for example, we found that music-makers may treat responses from live audiences and from well-informed listeners (including other music-makers) as more valuable than anonymous 'clicks' on a website. As we will discuss below, they may have good reasons for this preference, because people who are involved in a scene may be able to add more value to their music than people who are not, and websites such as SoundCloud may be more effective for cementing relationships with local audiences than for growing an international fanbase. You can listen in on some of the conversations we had via our website (http://www.valuingelectronicmusic.org/media).

2 New Media, New Challenges, New Opportunities

Digital technology and the internet have brought about huge changes to the music industry. Because so many people now listen to music without paying for it, or download individual tracks where once they would have purchased whole albums on vinyl or CD, the amount of money available to be made from recorded music has fallen, resulting in greater reliance on alternative revenue streams to which many music-makers lack access.[2] For example, we found that, for the dance music producers we interviewed, the main music-related revenue stream was from live DJing, which meant that, while a hit record was not necessarily a source of income in its own right, it could act as a source of fame or notoriety leading to better DJ gigs (although this assumes the availability of venues in which to play, at a time when music venues are closing faster than they open in the UK).[3] At the same time, the internet now provides unsigned music-makers with a host of new ways to get their music heard and build a following, so that it has become easier to have an underground hit without a record deal. This represents an opportunity, but not an easy one to take advantage of: it means that music-makers outside the big league are often their own promoters, sales force, and marketing department, winning over audiences one member at a time.[4]

Such entrepreneurship requires skills that many music-makers neither possess nor wish to develop (after all, they may have gone into music precisely in order to avoid working in business-orientated areas such as sales), and our research has shed light on just how difficult it can be for them to make headway. With SoundCloud – as with other websites such as YouTube, Bandcamp, and Beatport – anyone can make his or her music available to a worldwide audience. But that doesn't mean that anybody's going to listen to it. Only one in a hundred SoundCloud accounts in our sample had a hundred or more followers, and only one in a thousand had a thousand or more. Even when we only looked at accounts with public tracks (which tended to be more popular), we found the typical SoundCloud account to have just seven followers.[5]

However, careful analysis of our interviews and SoundCloud data provides some important clues about who tends to be most successful at building up an online following, and why.

3 Genres, Cities, and Scenes

A scene is what happens when people come together in a particular place, united in valuing a particular kind of music.[6] Scenes connect music-makers and fans to each other, and as such we argue that they can be understood as social networks.[7] A clear upshot of the research we undertook was the importance of being part of such a scene. For example, we found that, in dance music, becoming part of a scene means being played by DJs who are already part of the scene – or otherwise, starting a scene yourself, with a few like-minded and hardworking individuals who don't mind playing to a half-empty room while waiting for the world to catch up with the new sound.[8] Other sociological studies have confirmed the importance of scenes in the founding of genres, from bebop to punk,[9] although the scenes associated with some genres seem to be more tightly networked than others.[10] Sometimes these scenes get pushed aside or forgotten when commercialised versions of the genres they created achieve mass popularity – for example, one researcher has observed that the memory of the 'queer and colourful scenes' in which dance music began is being erased by excessive focus on the 'primarily straight, white, middle class environments' in which mainstream dance music is now consumed.[11] But scenes are clearly necessary for the continued vitality of popular music.

Our research suggests that scenes continue to be significant even at a moment when technology seems to be making place less important. We found that people who release tracks on SoundCloud are more likely to follow other people who release tracks in the same genre, and that SoundCloud users who identify themselves as based in a particular part of the world are more likely to follow other SoundCloud users based in the same part of the world. This seems to be more of a factor for some kinds of music than others. For one thing, SoundCloud users who release tracks in subgenres of dance music and hip hop appear to have more followers

than those who release tracks in other genres. For another, SoundCloud users based in cities strongly associated with dance music and (to a slightly lesser extent) hip hop appear to have a higher proportion of *local* followers. For example, our sample contained more than eight times as many cases of SoundCloud users in Chicago following other SoundCloud users based in Chicago (the birthplace of house music), and nearly twice as many cases of SoundCloud users in Atlanta following other SoundCloud users based in Atlanta (internationally famous as the centre of southern hip hop) than it did of SoundCloud users based in Nashville following other SoundCloud users based in Nashville (the world capital of country music), even though SoundCloud users based in Nashville had considerably more followers overall.[12] You can see what this means for one of our interviewees in figure 1.

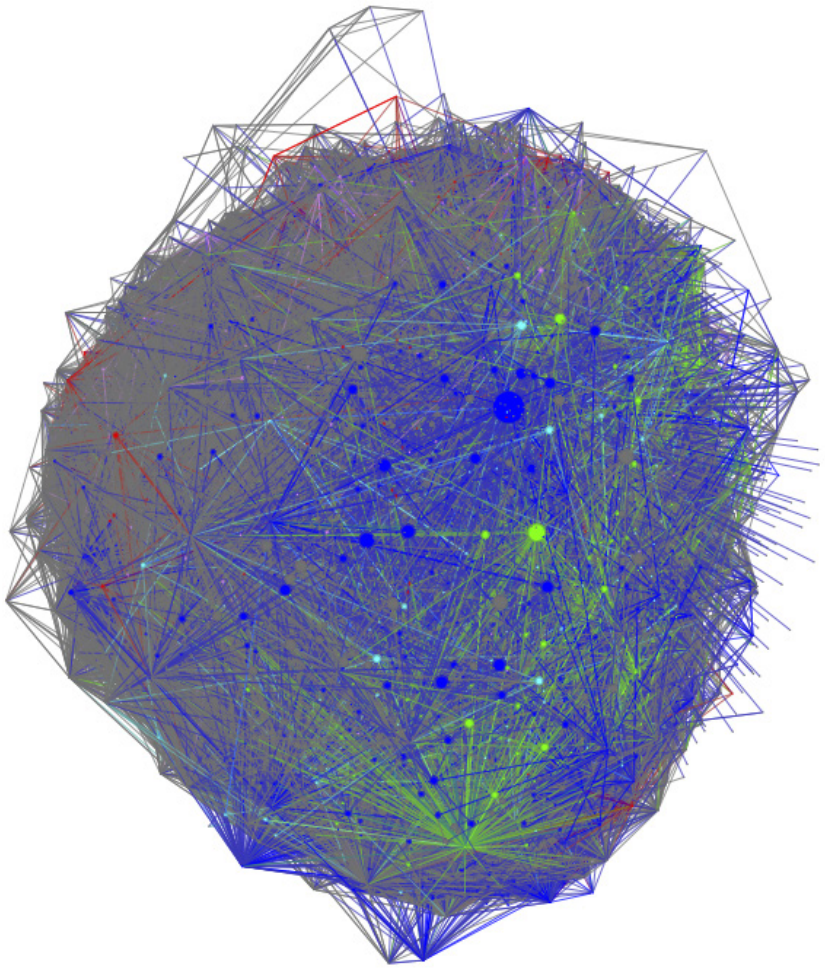


Figure 1. This graph shows all the SoundCloud followers of one of our interviewees. Each circle represents a SoundCloud user, with its size reflecting the number of other users in the graph that follow that user, and its colour reflecting its location: each of the top five cities among our interviewee's followers is represented by a different colour, with the colour grey indicating users who are based elsewhere or who did not reveal their location. Lines between circles indicate following relationships. The largest circle represents our interviewee himself, who is based in London (dark blue). Followers from the same cities often follow each other. The second largest circle represents a user based in Bristol (light green) who shared roughly half of our interviewee's followers and had more followers overall despite less of a presence in the mainstream media.

4 To Share or Not to Share?

Our interview-based research suggests that music-makers can benefit from sharing their music with select individuals and organisations, but that indiscriminate sharing may not necessarily bring the same advantages. If one artist remixes another artist's work and the result is a hit, both can do well out of the arrangement – something we observed in the instrumental grime scene. But invitations or offers to remix tracks should be considered carefully, because they are not always worth the recipient's while.[13] Moreover, DJs, blogs, magazines, and promoters are unlikely to notice your work unless you send it to them (or somebody else does so on your behalf). But such people and organisations may appreciate having early or exclusive access to something that is not generally available: indeed, cutting-edge DJs make a name for themselves by playing music that other DJs don't know about yet.[14] This can be related to concerns that a track's value to a record company may be diminished if it has already been made available for download: in exchange for the copyright on an artist's recordings, a record company typically offers benefits beyond royalties from sales (ranging from the mere status of being 'signed' to investment in marketing and promotion, at least at the higher end of the market), but it may be difficult for an artist to enter into such an arrangement after giving up some or all of the moral rights to his or her best work.[15]

All these factors may explain why so many 'public' tracks on SoundCloud can be streamed but not downloaded, and why so few music-makers release their work on Creative Commons licences: just because consumers have come to expect everything to be available for free on the internet doesn't mean that artists are ready to surrender all control over the distribution of their work, nor that it would be in their interests to do so. In sum, it is very important that music-makers understand the risks as well as the benefits of do-it-yourself online distribution.[16]

5 London, New York, Los Angeles… and Shoreditch

Perhaps the clearest finding of our research was that there appear to be huge advantages to being based in London. While the *typical* London-based SoundCloud account did not appear to have an especially high number of followers, accounts based in London were ten times more likely than others to have a thousand or more followers.[17] London-based SoundCloud accounts also had more followers from other cities where users had large followings worldwide, such as New York and Los Angeles – the cities whose SoundCloud accounts were next most popular with members of our sample.[18]

People we interviewed testified to London's advantages as a location, whether in terms of audiences, of the reputational benefits of association with a world-famous city, or of opportunities to build relationships with other music-makers. But not all parts of London were considered equal. Venues in the 'hipster' districts of East London, especially Shoreditch, were regarded as better locations for off-mainstream, uncommercial genres of music.[19] However, the attraction of these areas derives from the fact that they are in a transitional state which is by definition unsustainable. They became fashionable because of cultural businesses that set up there, taking advantage of cheap rents, but their fashionableness is now contributing to swiftly rising rents and a process of 'gentrification'. It is a familiar story: once a run-down area becomes attractive for outside investment, the cultural businesses that made it attractive are driven out, along with the local community.[20] Whilst a base in London – and especially, in or near Shoreditch – should currently be recognised as an advantage, it cannot be seen as a long-term guarantee for success.

6 So, what can you do?

It's all very well for music-makers to have a presence on social networking sites, but in the current climate, if they want to be heard (and especially if they want to be signed), they're going to need more than that: the days when a global career could be launched from a MySpace page are gone. DJs, magazines, and blogs can all help music-makers to reach an audience, and their reputation may depend upon recognition by other music-makers. But there's a lot of music out there, and influential people probably aren't going to find an unknown track on their own, so unsigned music-makers should consider proactively sharing their music with people who can add value to it (though not necessarily with the whole world).

But what about all the inequalities we found? Clearly, there is not a level playing field. Music-makers based in certain cities and parts of cities appear to have an advantage over music-makers based elsewhere. Certain genres have an advantage in certain live venues, certain parts of the same cities, and certain websites. And we've barely begun to look into the problems music-makers may face because of their gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic group, or skin colour. Genres of music that reach a predominantly black audience often attract an undue level of police hostility, for example, and one of our interviewees suggested that this made venues more reluctant to host the people who perform them.[21]

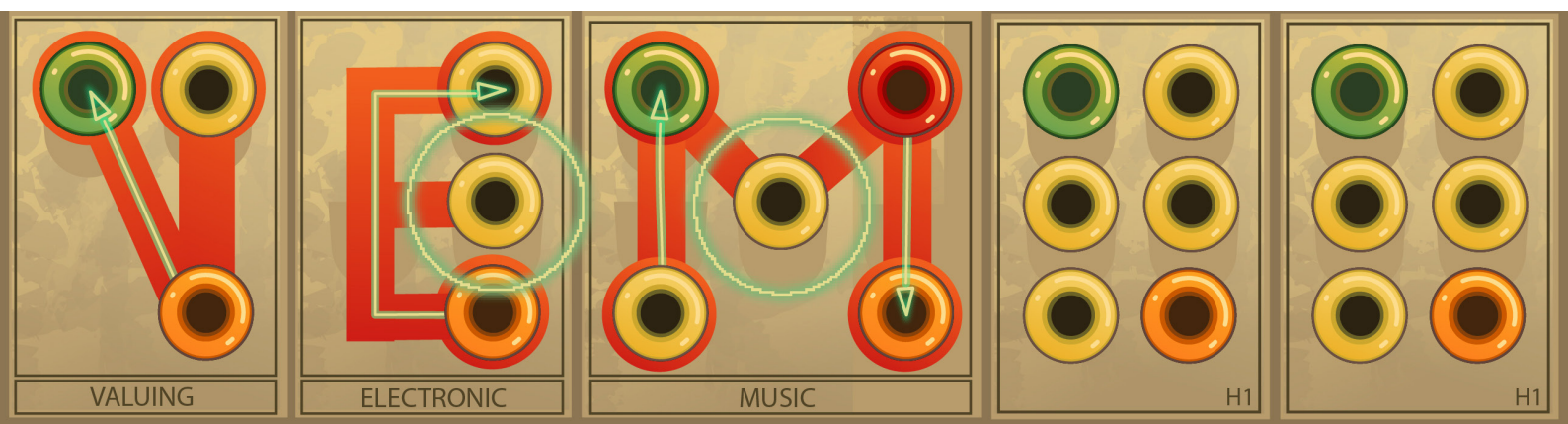
So if you are a musician, a DJ, a promoter, or anyone else with a stake in new music, what can you do to help your career in an unfair world? On an individual level, the answer might seem obvious: if you're not already living in London, New York, or Los Angeles... move. But not everyone can do that, and even the biggest city may have a limited number of venues that are open to your kind of music. And there would be negative consequences for the place you're in right now if all the ambitious music-makers left.

However, while the picture we uncovered suggested that music-makers based in these locations might have an advantage over those based elsewhere in the world, that definitely doesn't mean that everybody else should give up. A large number of followers who never invest money and time, e.g. in coming to see you play live, may be worth less to you than a small but dedicated following in your local area – so remember that, while they couldn't match the global popularity of users based in the big three cities, SoundCloud users based in some locations, such as Chicago, Berlin, and Paris, appeared to have particularly high numbers of followers from their own cities. We also found evidence of tightly integrated scenes in some much smaller cities such as Bristol, with clusters of music-makers appreciating one another's work and a few of them achieving wider fame. So before you pack your bags for the metropolis, ask yourself whether the scene you need to be part of might be closer to home. And if it doesn't yet exist, you be might just the person to do something about that.

December, 2015

Notes

1. J. Schifferes, J. Cunningham and S. McAndrew, *Channelling Talent: The Role of Social Networks in Recognising and Rewarding Talent in the Music Industry* (London: RSA Action and Research Centre, 2014), p. 15 <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/channelling-talent/>.
2. Future of Music Coalition, 'The Data Journalism That Wasn't', *Future of Music*, 2015 <http://www.futureofmusic.org/blog/2015/08/21/data-journalism-wasnt> [accessed 24 August 2015].
3. According to the Association of Licensed Multiple Retailers, half of the UK's nightclubs have closed in the last decade. See Jim Connolly, 'UK Nightclubs Closing at "Alarming Rate", Industry Figures Suggest', *BBC Newsbeat*, 10 August 2015 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/33713015/uk-nightclubs-closing-at-alarming-rate-industry-figures-suggest>
4. Musicians' Union, *The Fair Play Guide* (London: Musicians' Union, 2012); Mark Banks, Jill Ebrey and Jason Toynbee, *Working Lives in Black British Jazz* (London: Jazz Services, 2014), p. 29.
5. Daniel Allington, Byron Dueck and Anna Jordanous, 'Networks of Value in Electronic Music: SoundCloud, London, and the Importance of Place', *Cultural Trends*, 24 (2015), p. 216.
6. For more on scenes, see Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson, 'Introducing Music Scenes', in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), pp. 1–15.
7. For an introduction to social networks, see John Scott, *Social Network Analysis: A Handbook*, 2nd edn (London / Thousand Oaks / New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2000).
8. Tim Ingham, Paul Lynch, Chad McKinney, and Luis-Manuel Garcia 'Slackk, Winterlight, Glitch Lich: Electronic Music Producers Panel', 2014 <http://valuingelectronicmusic.org/2014/11/25/slackk-winterlight-glitch-lich-electronic-music-producers-panel/>
9. Jennifer C. Lena and Richard A. Peterson, 'Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres', *American Sociological Review*, 73 (2008), 697–718; Nick Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style, and Subversion: The Punk and Post-Punk Worlds of Liverpool, London, Manchester, and Sheffield, 1975-1980* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).
10. Mark Taylor 2015, 'Everyday Participation and Cultural Value in DIY music.' Paper presented at the *Joining the Dots: Music and Social Networks* symposium on 16 June 2015 at the University of Manchester.
11. Luis-Manuel Garcia, 'An Alternate History of Sexuality in Club Culture', *Resident Advisor*, 28 January 2014 <http://www.residentadvisor.net/feature.aspx?1927/>.
12. Allington, Dueck and Jordanous.
13. Ingham, Lynch, McKinney, and Garcia.
14. Ingham, Lynch, McKinney, and Garcia.
15. Even with the fall in sales that has resulted from digital piracy, the value of royalties from a traditional recording contract should not be underestimated – especially given the lack of viable alternatives. While there are websites such as BandCamp that allow users to charge for downloads of their music, it has been observed that even relatively popular music-makers are likely to be earning less than the minimum wage from such sales: see Mat Flynn, 'Be Careful what you Wish for: Meeting the Expectations of Democratised Music Access'. Paper presented at the *Creativities, Musicalities, Entrepreneurships* conference on 5 September 2014 at the Institute of Contemporary Music Performance, London.
16. It is arguable that the risks of free sharing in particular are somewhat better understood than the possible benefits – at least for the creators of the material being shared (as opposed to the owners of the sharing platforms). For detailed discussion, see Robert Levine, *Free Ride: How the Internet is Destroying the Culture Business and How it can Fight Back* (London: Vintage, 2012); for an amusing critique of a recent initiative, see Alan Graham, 'Creative Commons: Please Share your Money to Figure out how Sharing Makes Money', *The Trichordist*, 30 July 2015 <http://thetrichordist.com/2015/07/30/creative-commons-please-share-your-money-to-figure-out-how-sharing-makes-money/>.
17. Allington, Dueck and Jordanous, p. 216.
18. Allington, Dueck and Jordanous, p. 218.
19. Allington, Dueck and Jordanous, pp. 214–215. For more on the connections between city location, venue, genre, and ethnicity, see Athena Elafros, 'Locating the DJ: Black Popular Music, Location, and Fields of Cultural Production', *Cultural Sociology*, 7 (2013), 463–78.
20. The organiser of a renowned grime night that came to an end when its venue was closed put it like this on his blog: 'We are encouraged to create jobs for ourselves, then they strip away our meeting points and cultural hubs and replace them with Costas, Subways, and more retail units and housing nobody that works in those shops can afford.' (Elijah, 'The End', *Elijah365*, 2 May 2013 <http://elijah365.com/post/49393164897/theend>) Many cases can be cited in London alone. To take a particularly notable example from 1998, the famous Four Aces club in Dalston was closed by compulsory purchase order and replaced by luxury flats after more than three decades of service to black music (Will Coldwell, 'What happened to the great London nightclubs?' *Guardian*, 13 August 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/aug/13/what-happened-to-the-great-london-nightclubs>). Since that time, other major London clubs have been shut down as a result of urban 'regeneration' in areas such as King's Cross, Vauxhall, and London Bridge (Adam Bychawski, 'Britain's railways created the country's biggest clubs and gentrification shut them down', *Thump*, 6 November 2014 <https://thump.vice.com/en_uk/article/how-railways-created-the-uk-biggest-nightclubs-and-gentrification-closed-them-bagleys-studios-kings-cross-cable-crash-vauxhall>). For a review of the academic literature that acknowledges the problematic nature of culture-led regeneration, see David O'Brien and Kate Oakley, *Cultural Value and Inequality: A Critical Literature Review* (Swindon: Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2015), p. 18.
21. Dan Hancox, 'Public Enemy No. 696', *Guardian*, 21 January 2009 <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/jan/21/police-form-696-garage-music>; Noisey, Form 696: The Police vs Grime Music, *Noisey Specials*, 29 May 2014 <http://noisey.vice.com/en_uk/noisey-specials/form-696-the-police-vs-grime-music>.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