Sounds of the Underground
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Published by University of Michigan Press

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Global and Local Underground/Fringe Scenes

The underground scene operates globally across the Web and other media. But it’s also anchored in local urban centers, mainly due to these centers’ unmatchable affordance of resources such as venues, audiences, and money. However, music being produced within such local underground scenes doesn’t generally explore a sense of place or employ local musical or cultural accents as markers of style. Instead, global flows of musical and cultural commerce guide musical style, echoing Will Straw’s idea (see chap. 1) about international circuits of exchange versus a “locally stable heritage.” A noise group from Japan, such as Hijokaidan, is likely to sound broadly similar in some respects to a noise group from Italy, such as Le Syndicat, or a noise group from the United States, such as the Haters. Differences in style across these groups have less to do with national identity than with (sub)generic convention.

At the same time, however, the texture of local political and cultural circumstances, such as an affluent capitalist economy where audiences have plenty of disposable income to spend on music or generous cultural policy, has a huge impact on the nature of local scenes. Equally, these local scenes are obviously shaped by general trends and styles in the global scene while, in turn, feeding back into global dynamics through the Web and through hosting and supporting things like touring underground musicians and visiting audiences. The relationship between the different levels of the underground scene, the local and the global, is one of multiform overlapping. Local influences local, global influences local, global influences global, and local influences global.
So while the digital age has seen underground music culture being significantly liberated from physical limitations such as record shops and snail mail, it’s still the case that the global scene orbits around local physical scenic nuclei. Japanese “no-input mixing board” improviser Toshimaru Nakamura, for instance, described to me how, when he visited Berlin in the 1990s, “it would not be so difficult to get to know musicians there,” since “there were a couple of places that have concerts” (such as the Tacheles arts center in Berlin Mitte and the Anorak club): “You would hop in one of those places and could meet someone.” This persistence in physical scenes continues to this day, as we’ll see. But it comes in spite of clear cultural and subcultural changes. We clearly conduct much of our lives in the “space of flows” of the Web. Many of my interviewees pointed to the utterly crucial role the Web plays in their practice, while underlining the decay of physical scenes. Discrepant label head Gonçalo F Cardoso, for example, praised the power of the Web while also lamenting the fact that he feels disconnected from any physical scene, even suggesting that the decline of record shops and so on means that scenes simply do not exist in the way they used to.

So while it’s important to heed Nakamura’s reminder that things may not “have changed so much in terms of communication within the music scene” and that “there are still a lot of people fond of physical flyers” as promotional devices for “sharing the music together . . . physically in the same room of the same place,” Cardoso’s point is hard to argue with. Dematerialization has clearly led to different norms of musical consumption and therefore of musical value. Live shows, festivals, and venues of the kind Nakamura references have proved an important bonding agent for the kinds of audience, artist, and promoter interconnections that might traditionally have been forged in person but are now commonly facilitated by the Web before they reach the face-to-face stage. Record shops may not be as prominent as they used to be, but they still exist in this context, as seen in the Hanson Records shop in Ohio, RRRecords in Massachusetts, and others besides. The kinds of interconnections built online may never reach this “bricks-and-mortar” phase of actual meetings—as we will see, underground artists such as Vicki Bennett and Scanner have engaged in international collaborations via file transfer platforms and email without ever meeting their partner in person—but in many cases digital connections lead to the booking or attending of concerts or to a trip to a record shop or festival.

City scenes still exist, chiefly through venues and festivals and surviving shops, as well as through the large collections of people high-density urban areas obviously throw together. These scenes provide local audiences with a physical scenic “front line,” where a notable record shop or venue like Grrrnd Zero in
Lyon allows audiences to attend concerts, browse and buy recordings, and make connections with fellow scenic participants. And yet the death knell of dematerialization braids more and more of this physical activity through the liquid Web; even the longstanding Volcanic Tongue in Glasgow shut down in 2014, hot on the heels of many other important shops. It exists now only as an online shop. The Web is therefore unquestionably central to the current existence of the underground. Meanwhile, local city scenes still provide crucial—if evolving and increasingly Web-mediated—nuclei for that global underground.

3.1. Scene Conditions: Large Cities and Large Capitalism

What material, social, cultural, and environmental factors produce the conditions for city scenes’ existence and their means of survival? Local iterations of the global underground scene demonstrate the importance for underground music of a few key but alienable conditions: concentrations of resources such as people, venues, and record shops; a degree of social prosperity; some kind of direct or tangential institutional/cultural backing; and a thriving, eclectic mainstream culture. These are all important in various ways to underground scenes. Indeed, probably the largest local scenes in the world—London, Berlin, New York, Los Angeles—enjoy all of these factors. But they aren’t all absolutely necessary. The inalienable basis of all underground scenes, without which they couldn’t exist but with which they have some chance of survival, is the presence of social permissiveness and some enthusiastic individuals. Without the former, as, for example, Malians under the current Islamist regime are finding out, it is hard to impossible to get any music scene off the ground. Without the latter, it’s impossible.

Various scenes have surmounted local financial and cultural limitations in developing local activity. The underground is naturally fragile and marginal, and it doesn’t take much to keep it going; even larger local scenes are built in part on the basic foundation of the efforts of a small number of musicians, promoters, venue owners, and audiences. However, those larger local scenes do draw in various ways on the conditions I laid out above for the existence and survival of underground scenes. In many ways it is actually capitalism that supports and helps sustain the underground. As David Keenan suggests, for example,

The US has the healthiest DIY underground rock scene in the world; as a capitalist country it has the potential to support small economies and provide the conditions that allow them to survive while remaining relatively autonomous.¹
Furthermore, cities with a rich cultural history, firmly established public arts institutions that might host large festivals with room for some kind of underground work, a healthy network of smaller venues that might house underground performances from time to time, and the sorts of federal or state arts subsidies that might in some way support smaller underground or liminally underground projects, unsurprisingly host the busiest underground scenes. This is an obvious consequence of musicians and promoters having access to a higher concentration of people, wealth, venues, and other resources than would otherwise be the case. This is perhaps an example of where the “trickle-down” philosophy of the political right is at least partially effective.

Perhaps somewhat ironically, then, capitalism has in this way been a reliable engine for the formation of critical and often far-left-leaning underground scenes. The concentration of people in urban centers that was accelerated by Fordist capitalism has produced a concomitant concentration of musicians, promoters, audiences, and other resources. Various underground scenes have exploited this concentration. Capitalism has also driven the growth of these scenes through the wide distribution of wealth via state apparatuses that has taken place in social democratic capitalist economies, as seen, for example, in public funding for the arts and artists and in social welfare programs. Other forms of cultural funding, as, for example, with artist or project bursaries from privately run foundations, similarly derive from capitalist structures, in this case in whole or in part from the personal wealth of private capitalist benefactors. In addition to all of this capitalist largesse(!), liberal democratic capitalism’s (however illusory) granting of cultural and creative freedom to (some of) its citizens has been accompanied by the development not only of thriving mainstream cultures but also of smaller, more esoteric cultures, such as that of the underground and its fringes.

Capitalism has therefore provided the means and the freedom for local underground scenes to develop. This is not to say that there might not be an alternative economic and political system that would have provided for the underground in a much more consistent and generous way or that might have fostered a healthier cultural environment in a more general sense. It is merely to point to some of the ways that the underground has relied upon and benefited from capitalism and (neo)liberal democracy.

I interviewed the label head and radio presenter Jonny Mugwump about his experiences in the British underground. Mugwump is the presenter of the Exotic Pylon program on the leading independent station Resonance FM in the UK. He is also head of the homonymous record label, which releases music by underground and/or fringe acts such as Frisk Frugt, Hacker Farm, Infinite
Livez, Dolly Dolly, and Kemper Norton. Mugwump provides an interesting illustration of some of the ideas I have been discussing here, since his practice connects heavily to aspects of both the physical and the digital, while also showing how important local scenic contexts are to individuals seeking to make their way in the underground.

Mugwump has recently prospered on the underground scene, but his success followed years of dissatisfaction in the North of England. Mugwump described to me his frustrations in trying to get his projects off the ground in Manchester in the 1990s:

I lived in various cities before arriving in London in 2007 when I was 35, but I was in Manchester on and off for the longest time—10 to 15 years. I got obsessed with the idea of a post-everything broadcast and I conceived of a radio show that didn’t exist and called it Exotic Pylon. There were seemingly lots of opportunities for radio in Manchester but I felt closed off at every avenue—everything felt totally locked and elitist to a Manchester mafia. I can’t tell you that that was the reality but it certainly felt like it. I’m a northerner anyway—this was my turf but there was seemingly no way in so I worked at home on my own and broadcast to nobody.

So despite Manchester’s comparatively healthy music scene, Mugwump’s efforts, both in broadcasting and in other musical respects, came to nothing. Once Mugwump arrived in London, however, things changed dramatically. Mugwump quickly gained his own show on Resonance, which he parlayed into other ventures:

Arriving in London plunged me into a creative environment. I started volunteering at Resonance FM, which took about 20 minutes to sort out as opposed to years’ worth of dead ends everywhere else. And that was it really—after 6 months I was given the opportunity to host my own show and I continued to volunteer as an engineer as well. The freedom of the station and the ease of access to London meant that the show could host a chaotic revolving door of musicians and artists and the nature of Resonance meant this was of an incredible diversity.

The local physical scenic contact with a host of musicians and others that Resonance gave to Mugwump therefore proved crucial. Mugwump soon found himself enmeshed in a network of figures in which he found the kind of sympathetic support for his ideas that had been sorely lacking in what he perceived as the
more hermetic Manchester scene. These new London contacts and networks proved crucial in Mugwump’s next move of setting up the record label:

It was that level of constant contact that led to the label being formed. Deep in my heart I had probably always wanted to do this but it seemed like a ludicrous fantasy. Once settled in London it seemed, well, still daunting, but anything was possible at least.

Bearing these quotes in mind, it is obvious that the actual physical existence of the London scene clearly enabled Mugwump’s blossoming from frustrated audience member to label head and radio broadcaster. And yet it’s nevertheless the case that, as with the underground more generally, the digital proved a vital carrier and enabler of the physical in this particular example:

The radio show gained in popularity almost entirely down to my subsequently hosting it and promoting it online. Similarly the label could not possibly exist without the web. I view it as an old-fashioned label attitude-wise (Factory etc.), but it’s entirely modern—it wouldn’t have been conceived without the internet being in existence. One of my grander designs is for Exotic Pylon to be nomadic and I am building towards this. EP can only survive releasing sometimes very “niche” sounds with access to a global rather than a local audience. Whilst the physical is vital so is the digital.

This double bind of the physical and the digital is emblematic of an underground hanging onto older artifacts but casting forward to new modes of communication and interrelation. Local scenes are still crucial to the generation of opportunities and connection, but even these opportunities are eventually mediated and driven by the Web.

The example of Mugwump therefore shows in microcosm the ways that cities, via capitalist mechanisms and dynamics, among other things, facilitate marginal culture’s development. Even in a city as large as Manchester, Mugwump felt that whatever underground networks were in place were too limited and closed off to outsiders to provide any possibility of infiltration. London, however, was so huge and many layered that Mugwump didn’t take long to build up a network of contacts through both the Web and in-person meetings that soon spread from a radio station to bands to promoters, encompassing on- and offline correspondences and connections. The digital and the physical cross over continuously in the Mugwump example, with the in-person London scene providing focal points for concerts and radio shows and meetings and the Web
allowing Mugwump to build, nurture, experience, and expand on these relationships. The importance of capitalism’s concentrations of people and amenities in centers of power, its facilitation of the spread of money, and its basic nonrenunciation of various cultural activities to all of this is clear.

The rest of this chapter goes into a little more detail on how the kinds of material, cultural, social, and political factors that are in part the product and guarantors of capitalism shape and even define the underground. I provide a general overview of various cities before moving on to my extended case study of Ireland.

3.2. Local City Scenes: Ireland, London, Berlin, Japan, and China

The underground scene in Ireland is patchy at best. Activity flares up from time to time in the strangest of places—for example, in a literally underground car park in Galway—while larger cities, such as Cork and Dublin, host fragmented and fragile scenes that nevertheless swell and strengthen from time to time on the back of a variety of environmental factors, such as individual efforts, governmental funding policy for the arts, the ebbs and flows of the local economy, and the happenstance of serendipitous comings together of people and circumstance. The scene in Ireland is obviously subject to wider economic and cultural processes, while also being heavily shaped by microsocial issues such as the abilities of small numbers of people to open and maintain a suitable venue or the willingness of friends to attend a show together. Meanwhile, changing technology has both hindered and helped the scene since it’s harder to make money off the work but also easier to publicize and disseminate it from the perspective of both the artists and the audience.

These kinds of intermingling global (digital technology, public policy) and local (the existence and maintenance of things like venues and record shops) dynamics characterize all local underground scenes. The various scenes in Britain, for instance, benefit from high levels of local resources and from a permissive social context, while also not being hindered by the kinds of older cultural limitations of size and wealth that possibly constrict the Irish scene. In London, live activity takes place across a range of versatile small specialist or nonspecialist venues such as the Vortex, Boat’ting, Archway, Corsica Studios, Village Underground, the Shacklewell Arms, the Old Blue Last, and Café Oto. Shops such as Sound 323 and older venues such as the Red Rose formerly provided a physical core, but that function has largely been usurped. The Web presence maintained by London music writers, stations, labels, and promoters, such as the leading
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black metal, death ambient, and noise “organization” Cold Spring or the online station NTS, is obviously also crucial for the scene. All of the scene’s physical nuclei are anchored in various ways on the Web, but they are also aided and abetted by the flows of capital and other resources commonly found in large and modern Western cities like London.

Similarly, a relatively high amount of personal wealth, solid social infrastructures, and strong cultural traditions have seen healthy underground scenes flourish in America and mainland Europe, though, again, specific environmental social and historical factors shape the relative health of the different scenes. Berlin’s cheap rents, extremely low cost of living, and highly centralized artistic culture combine to allow the development of an array of artistic activity.

A thriving underground scene in the city features improvisers such as Andrea Neumann, Annette Krebs, Alex von Schlippenbach, and Axel Dörner, alongside experimental dance producers like Robert Henke and an array of fringe underground pop and industrial artists such as Felix Kubin, Gudrun Gut, and Einstürzende Neubauten. As with other cities, the Berlin scene connects with the global underground through both Web and other platforms such as international magazines like the Wire and the (wide-ranging) festivals Transmediale and MaerzMusik. Like those cities, too, it orbits around core artists and figures (such as those above and others, from Hanno Leichtmann to Jason Kahn, Olaf Rupp, and Stephan Mathieu); labels such as AbsinthRecords and City Centre Offices; and local physical nuclei such as the Hard Wax shop in Kreuzberg and venues like the eclectic experimental space ausland, the improv-hosting KuLe, and the Tacheles arts center (which closed in 2012). A relatively small concentration of specialist venues, labels, and individuals within a thriving cultural scene, a populous and resource-rich but cost-cheap city, and a wealthy German liberal capitalist economy all mean that the underground scene in Berlin is thriving, with plenty of reserves and support to fall back on should it need them.

Japan and China provide instructive examples in terms of global/local influences and environmental factors. Japan’s adoption following World War Two of capitalistic policies and a liberal democrat polity modeled on and open to cultural influences from the West has meant that Japan’s underground scene has thrived, producing a startling number of prominent underground musicians. That list would go from Merzbow to Junko to Pain Jerk to Otomo Yoshihide to Keiji Haino to Sachiko M to Taku Sugimoto to KK Null to Toshimaru Nakamura; to bands like Ghost, Incapacitants, Hijokaidan, Masonna, Ruins, Boredoms, Mainliner, Melt-Banana, and Ground Zero; to a number of fringe undergrounders, such as sound artists Taku Unami, Akio Suzuki, and Ryoji Ikeda. Japan has also produced at least a handful of its own Western-influenced
underground genres—such as the wall noise Japnoise of acts like Pain Jerk and the “lower-case,” silence-filled Onkyo improv of Sugimoto and others—that echo in their syncretism the recent traditions of Japanese cinema, popular music, and literature.

As with countries in the West, owing to population spread and distribution of resources the Japanese scene is concentrated in a couple of large urban centers, with Osaka and, particularly, Tokyo being at the forefront in this respect. Tokyo’s postwar prosperity and rich artistic culture have facilitated the emergence of a flourishing musical underground. As so often happens (cf. Berlin’s ausland and London’s Café Oto), the Tokyo scene largely grew out of the efforts of a small number of people based around an important single venue—Bar Aoyama in Shibuya—where a confluence of musicians collaborated in performances, building on the experimental noise and rock scenes of the city and earlier “free” music practices at venues such as Minor to develop a thriving improv scene.

From 1998 onward a regular concert series, first entitled “The Improvisation Meeting at Bar Aoyama” and later “The Experimental Meeting at Bar Aoyama,” was established by Tetuzi Akiyama, Taku Sugimoto, and Toshimaru Nakamura. Nakamura described the impetus and circumstances of the series in our interview. Following early experiences in the late 1980s and 1990s in an improv-influenced rock band playing in Tokyo venues such as 20000 volts, NY Antiknock, and Club Quattro, Nakamura abandoned the guitar in favor of the no-input mixing board in 1995. He met his fellow Aoyama collaborators around this time:

We three met each other in 1996. We didn’t start to work together immediately, but the next year, Jason [Kahn, the Zurich-based electronic musician] had a plan of his second Tokyo visit, so I was looking for a place to play together. I asked Tetuzi if he had an idea, and he told me that he knew this place called Bar Aoyama in central Tokyo and was already asked to have some sort of concert series there by the bar master. Then we three played together at Aoyama with Jason.

Nakamura went on to describe how, despite not originally planning it as such, desire for a regular place to play where they could also invite collaborators to join them led to this one show mutating into a concert series that became a focal point for the Tokyo scene: “We hadn’t originally planned to make it a concert series. But we wanted a regular place to play, so we made it anyway into a monthly series.” Nakamura described the way that shows in the series would go:
We three hosted a guest or two, sometimes someone from outside Japan, sometimes someone local. Starting time was set at 9 pm, which was quite late for Tokyo, because we didn’t want our audience to rush into our show from their work places with empty stomachs. “Get out of your office, wine and dine as you like, then come to our show!!” Something like this. Instead, people had to rush into subway stations right after the second set was finished as everything ran late. Nothing was perfect. But I think it was good we tried that way.

The Aoyama series was transferred in 2000 to Off Site, a new venue housed in a tiny residential property in Shinjuku, a ward of Tokyo. Off Site was run by the same three musicians, although Sugimoto retired as organizer in 2001. Like the Aoyama series (which also hosted all the following regularly), Off Site played host to performances from a range of important Japanese improvising, electronic, and noise musicians, including Sugimoto, Nakamura, Akiyama, Sachiko M, Aki Onda, and Otomo Yoshihide, as well as visiting artists such as Britons Kaffe Matthews and Seymour Wright and the Dutch synth musician Thomas Ankersmit.

Clive Bell described the Off Site venue and introduced a number of “Onkyo” improvisers—the lower-case subgenre of improv mentioned above that arose out of the new “Meeting at Off Site” concert series—in a piece from 2003:

Off Site is one of a row of old, highly ordinary houses somehow clinging on in the shadow of Shinjuku’s skyscrapers. These are flimsy constructions of wood and plaster. Inside, Atsuhiro Ito and his wife have converted their house into a Spartan gallery and performing space on the ground floor, seating about fifty maximum, and a welcoming café-cum-book-and-record shop upstairs. This is home for a gang of musicians playing a new kind of improvised music—usually quiet, sometimes bewilderingly minimalist, but astonishingly fertile.6

The “Onkyo” form of improvisation that Bell describes here has since been given international exposure through the aforementioned “Improvised Music from Japan” website and label, which releases the series “Meeting at Off Site” in addition to a range of other recordings. (This international exposure is comparable to that achieved by Japanoise musicians such as Hijokaidan, which in their case happened through Osaka-based self-run label Alchemy Records and through the wider noise network of global venues and ‘zines and so on.) Through these recordings and the publicity that arose around the Tokyo scene, the aforementioned musicians began to develop a major presence in the international under-
ground scene, appearing regularly in venues and at festivals across Europe and America and being written about in the usual underground contexts, a trend that has continued to the time of writing.

The Tokyo scene therefore provides us with an example where busy local activity enables practitioners to connect through global promotional machineries and personal links anchored in the Web to wider scene dynamics. Even though that local activity proved highly effective in giving local musicians a further channel outward to the international scene, it was concentrated around only a few individuals and venues. This shows very well how, even though local permissiveness and resources are often so important to the development and survival of scenes, it is often the initiative of a few artists and promoters that drives artistic production in the underground. Nakamura himself told me about how he feels the Aoyama and Off Site concerts might have provided something unique to audiences at the time and therefore played some part in catalyzing the scene, although he was reluctant to make any firm judgement either way on this: “Some of the audience told us after the show that what we were doing was innovative, and that they had never heard something like that. But it could be only those particular audience members’ points of view.”

Commerce and connection between the local and the global in the underground scene are invariably mediated through such portals as are visible here in the Tokyo example: concerts, collaborations and friendships, articles, websites, and record labels. The promotional possibilities of the Web as a resource for information (the Improvised Music from Japan site includes details of the biographies and current schedules of many key artists, for instance, as well as archival details on past shows and series) and for distribution of physical or digital music means that former physical limitations are less important now than they were in the past. This is the case even if physical concerts and meeting places and urban concentrations of resources have proved utterly crucial to the global underground.

Japan’s Western-influenced postwar culture therefore created the conditions necessary for the growth of an underground music scene. On the other hand, communist or quasi-communist China’s relative cultural and socioeconomic distance from the liberal or social democratic West, particularly in the pre-1980s era, has meant that underground culture, which as I have said usually relies on a thriving mainstream culture for its resources, its materials, and the social permissions necessary for it to flourish, has been more halting in its progress. Both historical and current conditions mean that underground music has a long way to go to gain much of any foothold in Chinese culture. But in recent years a
burgeoning scene has in fact developed in Beijing around a few key individuals and locations.

The improviser and promoter Yan Jun and artists such as FM3, Wu Quan, Wang Chan, and White have been key to the Beijing scene. Yan, for example, ran an annual underground music festival called “Mini Midi” between 2006 and 2010, and for many years he also led a famous series of improvised and experimental music weeklies, “Waterland Kwanyin.” This series gave rise to the related label Kwanyin Records, which is an imprint of Yan’s Sub Jam label. Yan’s new event, Miji, along with the Noise and Experimental night Zajia Lab and the regular experimental event Zoomin’ Night, which formerly ran at D-22 and is now based at the specialist venue XP, again show the importance of physical nuclei for underground scenes. Yan’s prominence also demonstrates how much influence one person can have on such a small scene. FM3, meanwhile, have appeared in Europe in concert and also received much publicity for their so-called “Buddha Box,” a small speaker that emits a variety of preprogrammed drones that can be pitch-shifted and altered in volume.

The success of these kinds of local projects is of course to be welcomed, but it remains to be seen whether China’s much vaunted economic prospects will lead to the further proliferation of underground music there in spite of the country’s historical and cultural constraints on such activity. In any case, Beijing, like Berlin, London, and Tokyo, demonstrates very well the kinds of shifting historically and locally specific factors that shape underground scenes, in its case showing how a somewhat constraining political and cultural atmosphere has possibly hindered the development of Western-influenced underground music. Beijing, Tokyo, and other cities mentioned in passing, such as Osaka, also show how important both a municipal city environment and a few key individuals are for the fostering and development of underground scenes. We see this importance of individuals and small bodies in many cases worldwide, from Lawrence English and his Room 40 label in Australia to Christof Kurzmann’s Charhi-zma of Vienna (a city that is also home to the important electronic noise label Mego). This much more localized, individual, bottom-up underground framework contrasts well with the industrial structures needed for the development and sustenance of large popular music cultures or the institutional framework that so often comes hand-in-hand with “high” cultural activity. The kinds of complex overlapping of individual effort and contextual and environmental support just discussed is borne out in the Irish scene, where cultural limitations are not enough to stop the many active participants in the country’s underground scene from doing what they do.
3.3. The Underground Scene in Ireland

I remark above that the underground scene in Ireland is “patchy.” This has been true through the years of the country’s economic boom, from the late 1990s to 2008 or so, and on into its recession, even if that economic boom did at least see some growth of the underground in cities such as Cork. I’ll track some of these changes below, while critically analyzing the meshing cultural, social, and political factors that have shaped the scene.

I interviewed three leading figures from the Irish scene. I spoke to Paul Hegarty and Gavin Prior originally in July 2010, when the impact of the worldwide downturn had yet to be felt on the scene in any clear or sustained way, updating my interviews with both in June 2013 and with Prior again in December 2014. I also spoke in 2013 to Brigid Power Ryce, a musician who is active in the West of Ireland scene, enjoying something of a bump in 2013, 2014, and 2015 due to the activities of labels such as Abandoned Reason. I place Hegarty’s, Ryce’s, and Prior’s answers into something like a dialogue with my own observations, which are drawn in the main from extensive secondary research and also from participation on the scene as a critic and audience member. Hegarty gives a general sense of the Irish scene, particularly as regards its personnel and its venues, both pre- and post-crash. Ryce does something similar, as well as sharing with Prior a concern for the cultural context that both feel has hampered the development of the Irish scene.

Paul Hegarty is an author, lecturer at University College Cork, member of noise group Safe, and head of the label Dot Dot Dot Music. Hegarty spoke enthusiastically about a range of underground activities across Ireland, beginning by discussing the sorts of venues and musicians that have been important to the Cork scene since the late 1990s:

I came to Cork from Nottingham in the late ’90s, where I found there was a very healthy experimental music scene, notably in the Triskel Arts Centre, the Lobby, and Fred Zeppelins. There were also links between musicians that would feature in the Jimmy Cake [a notable Dublin band] and musicians down here, notably the band Philip K Dick (who became PKD), as well as with improvisers like Fergus Kelly, David Lacey, Paul Smyth.

These venues, which Hegarty acknowledges serve other musical agendas much of the time—the Lobby, for example, is more known as a folk venue than for anything more obscure—hosted a wide range of underground activities with decent audiences in attendance in the ten or so years from the late 1990s to the
crash. Ireland’s capital city, on the other hand, lagged somewhat behind in the same decade, according to Hegarty:

From then until now [2010], shows in Cork ranged from noise, to industrial, to free jazz, to weird folk, to DIY, to avant rock, avant metal etc. It took Dublin quite a while to reach the audience levels the music has down here, including in West Cork, with gigs at Connolly’s and the Leap.

Hegarty expanded on the stylistic breadth of the activity just described:

It goes from the rock end of Rest and tenpastseven, through the noise of Safe and laptop types, through free improvisation, through to hardcore industrial messiness, to sound art, as exemplified in the Quiet Club of Mick O’Shea and Danny McCarthy.

Hegarty was in fact keen in 2010 to stress what he thought of as the comparative health and prosperity of the Irish underground scene, which he saw as being full of fruitful collaboration across genres and forms and well integrated into the global underground scene:

All this to show how much the Irish scene is internationally integrated and punches above its weight—which I’m not sure applies in classical/programme music. Brian [O’Shaughnessy, from PKD, and Hegarty’s co-label head] curated a CD, “Grain”, which was 99 tracks, and it features some very established artists, archive recordings, and artists from all around Ireland. I think that was 2002. In 2001, Brian and myself started our extreme noise band Safe, which is about to release its fifth album, having collaborated with world-renowned experimental writer Dennis Cooper for the fourth. Crowds are strong, and Safe (albeit just me) has played in several locations in Canada, and the UK, and once in Kazakhstan. Self-promotion halfway through, this is the point to say that this putting on of gigs has played some part in what is now a very varied, odd, and successful music scene in Cork.

Hegarty also addressed what he perceived in 2010 as the rich underground scenes of Irish cities other than Cork, stating, “Limerick has had a pretty vibrant experimental music scene for some time. Galway has hosted avant stuff, but I’m not sure how much of it is still going on, though Steven Stapleton of Nurse With Wound lives in Clare and DJs in Galway, along with characters like Peat Bog.”
So, for Hegarty, putting on gigs, which facilitated meeting fellow practitioners, developing a physical network of contacts and venues, the cultivation of independent record labels, and a generally self-determining and enthusiastic practice, was the chief source of the success of the underground scene. Hegarty also underlined, though, that that success must be understood always to be constrained by natural limitations. He pointed out that within this context of esoteric and marginal music there is “an almost natural limit on audience size” and indeed that there is a natural limit on “how much can be going on at any one time.” This limit notwithstanding, though, Hegarty believed in 2010 that “Ireland compares pretty favourably with European countries on that side, and we would definitely have better audience levels, even in raw numbers, than equivalent stuff in the UK.”

Unsurprisingly, my later interview with Hegarty struck a different tone. Hegarty spoke in that second interview about the transformations as he saw them in the Cork scene, which could be summed up “in one word: dramatic”:

People have left, no one new is arriving to be postgrads or take culture jobs . . . students have no money, people have lost jobs. So, the outcome is: less gigs and much less audience crossover [between the underground and other music scenes]. People are being much more selective, so every gig is lucky to break even.

The impact of the Irish recession on Cork’s underground scene has been striking. There are fewer jobs, which means less disposable income and also fewer people, whether they would have arrived from outside or they simply left the city. Hegarty underlined what he called “that one simple point” about people leaving, noting how social media sometimes gives a false impression of a show or scene’s prominence and how the scene has tailed off in general:

People have left. Members of bands are gone, potential musicians and gig attenders. Facebook gives everyone the warm glow of a million people attending. It feels quite a lot like about 10 years ago, when after decent hits with experimental dj-ing, free jazz, or noise gigs at loads of different venues, the crowd just dissipated.

Hegarty went on to say that “no one is bothering putting on really odd music any more. If I put on anything it is harsh noise, so I can’t complain if we get the 25 people in.”

Hegarty’s earlier enthusiasm had evidently been tempered by 2013. How-
ever, Hegarty did also point out that “there is probably too much momentum for the scene to fade off like in about 2004–6.” In a similar vein, he went on to compare the Irish scene favorably to Europe, noting how the Triskel Arts Centre’s uniting of various artistic and social venues and facilities under one roof—the complex includes Plugd Records and its café and the Black Mariah, which puts on a variety of concerts and art shows—has helped to give the scene something of a nucleus:

I’m playing more gigs elsewhere, and Ireland, especially Cork, still has a more encouraging atmosphere than most places without it being “just mates” that come to gigs. We still get loads more gigs in, have more of a performing public than towns this size have a right to expect, and can match major cities in that regard. I think Plugd is doing pretty well, and the cafe has helped there a lot, uniting the Triskel complex as a music-based location.

Hegarty therefore points to many positives in what he felt in 2013 was still a healthy underground Irish scene, even if it had inevitably dropped off a little since 2010. The relative health of the scene should be put down to the efforts of a small number of individuals, including Hegarty himself and others, from Andrew Fogarty to Vicky Langan to bands such as Woven Skull and Wreck of the Hesperus. In Dublin, groups such as the Redneck Manifesto, Children Under Hoof, Patrick Kelleher and His Cold Dead Hands, and others gig in venues such as Upstairs in Anseo and Upstairs at Whelan’s, and, formerly, the contemporary art space the Joinery (which closed at the start of 2015), and the “box socials” on South Circular Road in Dublin, a “BYOB” venue with minimal cover charge, which hosted a series of concerts from 2009 to 2010 in the “shed behind No. 236.”

Notwithstanding these positives, Ireland’s comparative lack of international visibility in the global scene is noticeable. Despite the underground’s alienation from the mainstream, the healthy existence of such a mainstream is, as I have said, crucial to the success of any underground scene. Ireland, historically, has endured relative poverty, with concomitant cultural poverty in terms of the range of established institutions, mainstream cultural vibrancy, and substantial public funding programs, considering its famous writers and pop musicians or not. For this reason, perhaps, Ireland has simply not produced all that many significant artists working in classical or contemporary or underground music, areas of culture depending crucially on such public funding programs. Of course, there are many cultural reasons playing into this situation of comparative reclusion, only some of which concern money and capital. But in the main I would argue
that these two factors—the lack of a core music-cultural mainstream on which to draw and the relative lack of public or private funding—have proved pivotal in undermining or simply forestalling attempts to launch an underground scene in any internationally visible sense.

Both the historical lack of public funding for underground and fringe culture—something that might be in the process of changing, as we’ll see in chapter 5—and the importance of making personal connections with active participants on the scene were stressed by Brigid Power Ryce in our interview. Ryce is a native of Galway. She moved to London in the hopes of developing her music at the age of seventeen, before returning to settle in Galway after failing over a few years to build a satisfactory network of contacts and venues (showing that sometimes all the resources in the world don’t automatically equate to personal fulfillment). A guitarist, button accordion player, and singer of weird folk-infused laments and dirges, Ryce is highly active on the Galway underground scene, where she performs solo and with Dave Colohan and Declan Q. Kelly in the band Gorges. Ryce also collaborates regularly with a collective of musicians under the Abandon Reason banner, which began as a radio broadcast highlighting the collective’s performances at venues like the underground car park mentioned above and then transformed into a record label whose first release was a compilation drawn from those performances.

Unsurprisingly, Ryce stressed the importance of these Abandon Reason contacts and others, placing her relationship with these individuals above any abstract notion of what scene they might individually or jointly represent:

When I came back to Galway I fell back into contact with Vicky Langan (we went to school together) and she pointed me in the right direction of other musicians who led me to others and others and others etc. It started off with meeting Keith from Rusted Rail, who then introduced me to Aaron Coyne (Yawning Chasm), to Dave Colohan (Agitated Radio Pilot, Raising Holy Sparks), to Eddie Keenan (The Driftwood Manor), and to Gavin Prior and Peter Delaney. Then I met Declan Q. Kelly a bit later on and that really opened up a whole new thing for me musically because I started collaborating with him and also Dave Colohan down in an underground car park . . . I find it hard to talk about scenes or even relate with the idea of them and I guess the reason is that I like and feel akin to the individuals more than any scene.

As well as underlining the importance of personal contacts, Ryce described the range of venues at which she and other Abandon Reason musicians have performed, naming in addition to the car park “faireforts, houses, bookshops,
record stores and venues” and listing among the latter “Plugd down in Cork, the Bell, Book and Candle in Galway and Sean’s Bookstore in Limerick.” The variances in type of these venues, which run from houses to car parks, demonstrate both the small size and the fragility of local underground scenes and also the sheer invention that is often involved in putting gigs on and making music happen.

As did Gavin Prior (see below), Ryce had a number of complaints about the public funding situation in Ireland. As we’ll see in later chapters, the underground and its fringes are rarely in receipt of any substantial public or private funds. This is due both to the music’s “natural” marginality and to the skewed nature of existing arts policies toward traditionally “high” culture (as evidenced by the late-2013 Irish miniscandal around the awarding of Music Network recording grants to mainly high-cultural groups by a potentially biased panel), even if this is showing some signs of change, as with the 2014 award of ten thousand euros to Vicky Langan and other developments outside Ireland. This rarity does not mean, however, that musicians don’t find the situation frustrating. Ryce pointed to the “mediocre” projects that do get funding, while lamenting the governmental failure to get behind anything marginal or underground related:

I haven’t found the Arts Council or funding bodies of any help to the underground scene. I feel a lot of the time that they waste a lot of money on a lot of mediocre things. . . . You can just see with for example the Galway Arts Festival that it’s not supporting local let alone underground musicians at all.

In the end, Ryce returned to her theme of personal connections as being the core binding factor in the underground scene, noting that “what’s been important has really been the branching out and finding people on a similar wavelength, and it all kind of falling into place because you’re doing it for the love of it and encouraging each other and sharing with each other.” As we will see again and again, while contextual factors such as a supportive government and a concentration of resources like concert venues are vitally important, many underground scenes, being so marginal and small, survive due to the efforts and enthusiasm of a small group of people.

The failure of Irish cultural powers to fund or provide coverage of the country’s underground scene was also heavily stressed by Gavin Prior, an improvising noise musician; head of the prominent Deserted Village label; and member of such bands as Toymonger, the Primal Barber Trio, Wyntr Ravn, and, formerly, United Bible Studies. Prior sees the problem of Ireland’s comparative lack of visibility on the international scene in institutional and geographic terms,
whether identified in the failure of any Irish underground musician to attain prominence beyond the country’s borders or in the lack of a significant bespoke underground venue or festival (although Hunter’s Moon, running in Leitrim since 2011, came close in the latter case until folding in 2014). The media in Ireland, according to Prior in 2010, have been pretty much useless for underground music. United Bible Studies is a relatively accessible group compared to other projects I’ve been involved in, yet Cian O’Ciobháin is the only Irish DJ to play our music and the Journal of Music is the only Irish publication to have reviewed our last widely available release. I may sound bitter, but it’s not as if our music gets no recognition elsewhere; we can tour the USA and get flown over to record radio sessions with VPRO in the Netherlands and sell records all over the world on labels from various countries. We make the effort to contact the Irish media and are ignored. On the other hand reviewers and DJs from the USA, Britain, Europe, and Australia write to us out of the blue looking for promo copies. Some reviewers even buy our records with their own money.18

Echoing the point, Prior also pointed out, “We released The Soup & the Shilling by The Magickal Folk of the Faraway Tree. It’s a collection of folk songs from the British Isles, including many songs in Irish. We couldn’t meet the demand for promos from around the world but never got a review in Ireland.” Prior went on to suggest that the Irish media “don’t bother seriously covering music unless there’s a label or a PA firm behind it.” Moreover, as he pointed out, underground musicians in the main lack the institutional backing that “classical experimenters” rely upon. The Arts Council, Lyric FM, and other media outlets concentrate on what Prior described as the “holy trinity” of jazz, trad, and academic composition, thereby potentially denying Irish underground music some of the attention it might deserve and surely needs. As Prior said:

Classical experimenters have had the advantage of Arts Council funding and a very receptive Lyric FM so they can perform live without losing money. For example, the long running series of free concerts in the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin has made modern music accessible to all sorts of people, but focuses exclusively on academic music.

Compounding matters are the relatively small size and the unusual population spread of Ireland. With over a quarter of the people concentrated in Dublin, and the population density unevenly spread throughout the rest of the
country (62 percent of the population live on 2.4 percent of the land), tours of local or international underground acts can fall apart before they have begun. Promoters just can’t book concerts outside the capital, meaning that visits from international acts are often not viable, as Prior pointed out. The geographical influence on underground activity shows that it’s hard (though far from impossible), beyond economically established and institutionally rich locations, for underground scenes to reach maturity outside cities or in smaller cities. Prior laments the difficult geocultural Irish situation:

So on one hand Ireland is a small country where the media are of no use to underground musicians, yet on the other it’s where I live and enjoy playing live, so it’s frustrating when we try to break even playing live especially when trying to bring musicians from overseas.

Prior went on to contrast the Irish situation with that of the United States, echoing Keenan’s earlier discussion of the importance of the latter country’s wealth in the development and undergirding of underground culture:

The USA has the population to support a magazine like *Arthur* dedicated to the underground [though the mag is now defunct in print and online]. In the USA people can tour for a couple of months even if you only play to 40–50 people a night. When UBS [United Bible Studies] were there we got more money playing house shows than in the Knitting Factory [a prominent venue in New York].

This quote shows the importance (though not necessity) of wider prosperity and the sheer existence of human beings to play and listen to the music in the cultivation of underground scenes. Prior also elaborated in this respect on how his group United Bible Studies attempted to transcend local scenic constraints by using the new Web platforms afforded by digital technologies, something that, as he underlined at the end of 2014, is more significant than ever:

Through trading CD-Rs, we’ve gotten our music released on underground labels in other countries. It was a case of “To Hell or to the Internet”? We could sell and swap our releases with people in other countries while mostly being met with indifference in Ireland. It’s nothing to do with trying to be famous, but I’d like to see more Irish underground releases on labels in other countries and bands looking to sell their music abroad online. Many people are proud to not make a profit from their music, but that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t try to get people to hear it.
So Hegarty’s positive appraisal of putting on gigs and performing, of starting labels, of forming personal contacts, and of generating activity out of those means contrasts with Prior’s stark observations about the institutional and geographic stranglehold in which the Irish underground scene finds itself, something that echoes Ryce. For Prior, the scene has been weighed down by Irish culture’s retrograde emphasis on folk and classical forms, with the Irish Arts Council, as Prior observed in 2010, doing very little to support the recording or promotion of music falling outside these parameters. (As I’ve said, this is changing a little, though the situation is still drastically weighted in favor of established institutional forms.)

Prior pointed out in a similar vein in the 2013 interview that the “i and e” festival had had its funding cut, that DEAF (the Dublin Electronic Arts Festival) had folded due to lack of commercial support, and that the Dublin venue the Joinery had only survived after having its funding cut by carrying out a successful Fundit campaign (the Irish equivalent of Kickstarter). In December 2014, in our final interview, Prior pointed out that the Joinery was closing due to lack of funding and that, after three editions (and as I note above), the Hunter’s Moon festival of experimental, fringe, and experimental music was no more. This combination of cultural isolation and possible audience indifference (arising for whatever reason) encouraged Prior to turn to the Internet to promote his own work and form the type of network of contacts that Hegarty had found through gigs and Ryce had found through personal relationships.

Prior finished our 2010 interview by pointing out some of the significant positive aspects of the Irish scene. He suggested that the country’s then-new social deprivation might actually lead to positive cultural transformation:

To me the Irish underground(s) seem healthier than ever. In Dublin a lot of places like The Joinery have been springing up where people can bring their own beer and all the door money goes to the musicians and the space. Our towns are already full of un-leasable retail spaces and many more are locked into completion. We might finally see the dawn of a squatting culture in Ireland. The combination of Arts Council cuts and a deep recession will make it easier to justify.

This quote interestingly contrasts with my earlier points regarding the importance of healthy capitalist economies in the formation of underground scenes and in this way supports Ryce’s emphasis on the efforts of individual collaborators. Its positive sentiments were in fact largely echoed in our 2013 interview, albeit for different reasons, although later, in 2014, the “squatting culture” Prior
anticipated had yet to materialize, apart from a couple of examples. Where earlier Prior felt that a background of deflating wealth might prove to be the catalyst that the Irish scene needed, the 2013 interview pointed more to the abilities of a certain number of figures to maintain the backbone of the Irish scene, which Prior suggested compares very favorably to what one might find in a city as large as Seoul, where he had lived for a year in the intervening period (though Seoul’s shared lack is probably down to historical cultural factors of the kind evident in the Chinese example more than anything else).

Against a background of “dying-off” independent record shops such as Road Records in Dublin, Prior heaped praise in 2013 and 2014 on the surviving specialist shops Plugd Records in Cork and Wingnut Records, the latter of which has locations in Waterford, Athlone, Galway, and Limerick and specializes in “independent and self-released records by Irish DIY bands and labels.” Prior commended these shops, pointing out in the case of the latter, for example, that “there’s no way such music would be on sale in those towns without Wingnuts.” He also drew attention to what he saw as the productive activities of individuals such as Ian Maleney, who runs the Fallow Field label and publishes the ’zine Hatred of Music. Practitioners such as Maleney and events such as Hunter’s Moon serve or served as vital cogs in the patchy and fragile but still lively Irish scene. Finally, in 2014 Prior emphasized the ever-increasing importance of the Web to practitioners such as himself, since there are “few places to sell physical media,” whether as a resource for people to order physical media or to stream or download music.

In the end, then, while still regretting the failures of mainstream Irish society to support and nurture underground music and underlining the importance of material factors such as geography and population spread, Prior, like Ryce, emphasized how pivotal small networks and individual enthusiasm can be within underground scenes and how important the Web is to contemporary underground and fringe practices. The individual enthusiasm Prior stresses, as I claim above, is one of the key factors supporting underground scenes, alongside a socially permissive culture and general prosperity. Ireland shows how these factors can indeed drive the development of scenes, though in all the examples, Irish and otherwise, it’s clear that additional local factors, such as amenable venues and networks of people and promoters, other extant music scenes, and the existence of social and/or artistic government provisions, have been key. This is evident, for instance, in the demise of Hunter’s Moon on the one hand and the relative health of venues in places like subsidy-rich France, as we’ll see in a
case study in chapter 5. These additional factors obviously rely on more general cultural and political structures, coalitions, vested interests, and processes than individual enthusiasm might. Part II attempts to get a handle on how such complicated processes shape underground music culture, first in a general sense and then in the context of a range of case studies, without leaving that key factor of individual enthusiasm out of accounting.