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Amateur experts: International fan labor in Swedish independent music

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With the rise of Web 2.0 have come increased opportunities for fans to serve as filters, influencing the global flow of cultural materials. On the one hand, this represents a giant leap forward for fans, who can now serve new roles without industry support. On the other, it represents a potentially exploitative transformation of media industries in which unpaid volunteers do the labor that professionals are paid to do. This paper examines this tension with a close analysis of the global internet scene around Swedish independent music. Interviews with music industry actors and particularly active fans are used to establish the value of fan practices to the industry and to examine how the fans understand the tensions between their own costs and rewards, exploitation and empowerment.

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Abstract

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Amateur experts: International fan labor in Swedish independent music

From an indie rock point of view, at least, Sweden is basically another hip American college town.

-- Ross Langager of *Pop Matters*

reviewing Swedish band The Caesars

Swedish popular music has attained an international profile as an unusually vibrant and high caliber (if derivative) music scene. Although Sweden is a small country located in the far north of Europe, its artists and labels find audiences ready to adopt its music as its own throughout the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom, much of Asia, and parts of South America (Burnett, 1997). The Swedish independent music scene has been written up in such mainstream media venues as *The New York Times* and *Spin*. Among the bands cited in the *Times* piece were the Shout Out Louds, Peter Bjorn and John, Jens Lekman, José González, the Knife, the Concretes, Lykke Li, and the Hives. One reason for the international and domestic success of Swedish music is the work that its fans do online and off. Fans, most of whom live outside Sweden, are publicists, promoters, archivists, and curators, spreading this music far beyond the Swedish borders. They work for free, promoting bands and labels by highlighting their music on news sites, archives, blogs and offline by booking them (via the internet) to play in local venues. These efforts to improve the visibility, accessibility, and comprehensibility of Swedish indie are buttressed by many others fans' minimalist practices.

Together, these fans serve as expert filters as they sift, sort, label, translate, rate and annotate a large, disorganized, and geographically remote set of cultural materials for international consumption. Although we focus on this phenomenon in the context of Swedish independent music, this kind of voluntary fan effort can be seen throughout the music industry, and speaks to the fundamental changes that global industry is experiencing as the music business increasingly shifts to digital formats. The music industry is itself just one sector with a business model radically disrupted by the ever-increasing interconnectivity and voice of those who were once easily categorized as audiences, markets or customers. **The changes within this sector thus indicate and presage changes throughout increasingly digital economies.**

In an essay on music fandom, Eric Harvey (2008), a writer for the popular independent music webzine *Pitchfork*, positions fans as potential leaders in creating a new music culture in the current digital environment:

The current rhetorical gray area about online music in general, however, offers an opportunity for fandom to fill a crucial role. Not as critics, but trusted, independent tastemakers and active audience members who rely on their affective responses to music as a means for promotion and conversation. It's a long shot, sure, but at a time when so much of the structure that holds together music culture has disappeared, fans could take the initiative to create a new one.

Baym (2007) offers an ethnographic analysis of the practices of the online fan community around Swedish independent music, unpacking the variety of materials they produce and demonstrating their interconnection across sites.

These fans are one manifestation of the “participatory culture” behind Web 2.0 in which user-generated content stands alongside professionally-produced content in claiming audience attention (e.g. Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). This “gift economy for information exchange” has been situated as the driving force behind the development of the Web (Barbrook, 1998; Burnett & Marshall, 2003). One response to such instances of fan influence is to celebrate this newfound ability to wield power without industry support. As Zimmer (2008) summarizes, “the rhetoric surrounding Web 2.0 infrastructures [...] promises to empower creativity, to democratize media production, and to celebrate the individual while also relishing the power of collaboration and social networks.”

A counter-reaction is to critique such fan practices as an example of the exploitation through free labor that underlies the emerging Web 2.0 economy. Critical scholars noted early on how the glamorization of the user in the digital world was a convenient pretense for the mobilization of ‘immaterial labor’, echoing the familiar logic of capitalist exploitation (Hart & Negri, 2000; Terranova, 2000). Scholz (2008), for instance, argues that “the Web makes people easier to use [and] makes it possible to ‘out-source’ many tasks to the users.” Allen (2008) charges that Web 2.0 “validates a kind of advanced, promotional entrepreneurial capitalism that binds users to profit-making service providers via the exploitation of those users’ immaterial labour.” Scholz (2008) and others note that people generally find this exploitation enjoyable, as productive online practice “can be participatory, exploitative and create pleasure for its users at the same time” (Petersen, 2008). Yet, argues Jarrett (2008), the very fact that people enjoy it demonstrates power “in its seductive form” where it “requires no need to blatantly

legitimate itself, to justify its own ends. Instead, it integrates society through apparent free choice and affective pleasure.”

In the case of fandom, and the productive practices that result, we know little about how fans perceive their own contributions or how they reconcile this tension between empowerment and exploitation in their own lives. This paper draws on our interviews with highly engaged fans, musicians and labels to explain the value of fan practices and to articulate the calculus of rewards and costs fans consider in motivating their participation. Both authors conducted interviews face-to-face, on the telephone, through chat, video Skype, and over email with Swedish music industry actors during 2007 and 2008. We interviewed most of the most prominent internet fans in this scene, as well as executives from major and independent record companies, smaller record labels, distribution firms, retail chains, foreign trade promotion staff, musicians, and radio station staff. This paper focuses on the interviews with the people running independent Swedish labels, Swedish musicians recording with these labels, and the expert fans who build an international scene around them. In the following text those interviewees who consented will be identified, but for reasons of confidentiality others will not.

Fans As Filters

The Problems of Attention and Broad Presence

The contemporary digital musical environment has offered musicians and labels unprecedented opportunities to reach international audiences. At the same time, since so many musicians and labels have access to the internet, it is more challenging than ever to rise above the din to gain attention. Says Mattias Lövkvist of *Hybris* records, ”We have stopped thinking about ourselves as a label, we’re more like a music company [...] We make music. We don’t think about selling music, we just want to have attention.” “All I

want is to get the music through to people,” agrees Magnus Bjerkert of *Adrian Recordings*.

The field in which they must compete for attention is so crowded that to update his English-language Scandinavian music news journal *It's a Trap* throughout each day, its Oregon-based American editor, Avi Roig, uses an automated process to check over 2,000 bookmarks. He also subscribes to MySpace blogs, and receives email updates directly from artist and musicians. Nonetheless, he still misses stories and some bands remain below his radar. Roig is perhaps the extreme example of a fan who is paying attention. If he cannot follow it all, imagine the difficulties fans and potential fans far less engaged than he face. In this barrage of information, getting attention and getting the music heard is of paramount importance to musicians and labels, especially small ones.

Getting attention is further complicated for labels and artists by the distributed nature of their potential audience, both geographically and online. Fans of Swedish independent music are organized on the internet, although in very loose and highly distributed ways. They “move amongst a complex ecosystem of sites, building connections amongst themselves and their sites as they do. They avail themselves of multiple communicative platforms across the Internet: blogs, social networks, comments, discussion forums, private messages, shoutboxes, MP3 files, and videos” (Baym, 2007). To reach all their potential fans, bands should have a presence on sites such as MySpace, Last.fm, Imeem, Facebook, Bebo, YouTube, websites, blogs, Flickr, Twitter, and other sites, including those which have not yet been invented. Musicians and labels can't keep up. As one put it, “Well first we tried a ‘hostile takeover’ of the whole kit and caboodle,

but our army was waaaay to small. So we settled for MySpace and Virb I guess... big ass thing, the internet” (Rickard Lindgren, Hell on Wheels).

Fans offer one solution to both of these problems. They spread and endorse the music in places and ways that the artists and labels cannot. As fans mention, discuss or disseminate music they like across the many platforms on which they maintain their own internet presences and in their local communities, they serve as publicists and filters, steering other audience members towards (or away from) bands and labels. Martin Thörnkvist runs the small label *Songs I Wish I Had Written* and leads a coalition of seven independent Swedish labels (including *Hybris* and *Adrian*) called The Swedish Model. The coalition is committed to a new vision for the music industry that is friendly to both technology and fans. He advocates for working with fans, giving them the tools they need to spread the music:

If the right people get it then he or she will spread it because that's the way we are working. Nowadays you Digg it, you forward it, you share it. We're a small company and everyone who can help us spread it, we're satisfied to help.

That The Swedish Model and the labels for which it speaks place such value on fan-driven message delivery reaffirms integrity and authenticity as anchoring values in the indie tradition (Fonarow, 2006). As musician Gustaf Kjellvander of The Fine Arts Showcase elaborates, “I believe the ‘indie’ (it’s a kind of watered down term) point is that promotion is word of mouth vs. big bucks being thrown at it - one suit backing it with his bread.”

The Value of Fan Labor

To say that fans provide word of mouth is to oversimplify the range of practices through which they accomplish this and the effort it takes to produce it. Spreading the word about new music is enacted along a spectrum that ranges from very low to very intense investment. Together these fans create an international presence far beyond what labels or bands could attain on their own. In this section we survey the range of inputs and influences fans provide, establishing their value to the independent music industry.

Low-Investment Fan Promotion

Fans have many easy ways to promote bands across the online spaces they visit. They list them as favorites on their social network site profiles, add them as friends on MySpace, put them on embeddable playlists, use widgets to stream their music on their websites and profiles, recommend them to others, and more. Jonas Färm of on-again/off-again band Starlet describes the variety of ways he's seen his band promoted by fans online:

In MySpace you as a user can “add” a band's song to your site, so they're playable on your site. I've seen Starlet songs used in that way, and that means others have too, in that way a “fan” has helped spread the music. I've also seen generated playlists from last.fm and iTunes and Winamp and etc online. Starlet has been mentioned in various blogs. I recently put up a Depeche Mode cover on my Myspace site, which generated an interest from the Depeche Mode fan communities, e-mail bulletins and lists, and posting in the world's largest Depeche Mode fan community forum.

For a band like Starlet that has not put out a new record in many years, this fan discourse may be the only thing keeping them active: “If the word about Starlet is active, Starlet exist outside of my head. Starlet hasn’t released any albums since 2001, still there are people talking, listening, e-mailing. It’s in a way motivating, although not essential.” Invoking his indie credibility, Färm adds that while this fan response is “fun and important,” he is “not in this for fame or money.” Indeed, he is among many artists and label workers in this scene with a middle-class day job.

Fans also contribute to spreading the word about bands they like while exerting very little effort through the many Music 2.0 sites (such as iLike, Last.fm and MOG) that log music as fans listen to it. These data are fed into algorithms where they are combined with listening data from millions of other users to make personalized recommendations. This enables fans to passively have input into others’ musical discovery process.

Though in some ways Web 2.0 may detract from online fan community (Baym, 2007), fans continue to create successful groups online on social network sites, Usenet, mailing lists, web boards, and elsewhere (e.g. Baym, 2000; Kruse, 2003; O’Reilly & Doherty, 2006). These groups exchange information about artists; posting to them is one low-effort way to support bands. Johan Angergård, who plays in multiple bands including The Acid House Kings and Club 8 and runs the *Labrador* label, explains how fan interconnection helps them build relationships with fans even when they are not present. The internet, he says, “makes it easier for fans of a certain band to get to know other people who like that particular band, discuss it, and find relevant bands to listen to. So it helps fans build relationships with each other around a certain band/label/etc. Which indirectly means the artist/label is building relationship with its fans.”

Active Fan Production

A small subset of fans supplement these low-level fandom activities with highly active and engaged production of their own content and events, becoming centers of fan activity in their own right. The news magazine and small American record label and webshop *It's a Trap* is an example of this, as are the mp3 blogs that cover Swedish music including *Swedes Please* (USA) and *Absolut Noise* (France), the latter of which is written in both English and French. *Hello! Surprise!* (Sweden), an English-language archive of over 500 bands and dozens of labels with links to short descriptions and free legal mp3s put together by Johannes Schill is another, as are the independent fans booking Swedish club nights in countries around the world (e.g. *Tack! Tack! Tack!* in London, *Fikasound* in Spain, *Sounds of Sweden* in Glasgow, *Hej! Hej!* in Washington DC) (Baym, 2007). These productive fans can reach international audiences which may be quite large. Jenkins (2006: 24) sees this as a paradigm shift in the way media content is produced and circulated: “Audiences, empowered by these new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture.”

Roig runs *It's A Trap*, the only site that focuses on the international promotion of music from all Scandinavian countries, in his spare time throughout each day. Asked to identify sites he uses to learn about new Swedish music, one Swedish musician replies “‘There can be only one’: *It's A Trap*.” The site receives as many as 4,000 daily hits and as many as 30,000 unique visitors a month, many from within Scandinavia. Says Roig:

No one else does what I do or even comes close, so I seem to have positioned myself as a vital part of the Swedish/Scandinavian music industry. As the

leading news provider, I am the go-to site for many, many industry people and am often one of the first places people will send news releases since I have a quick turnaround and a wide reach. Not only do I often beat many other press organizations by days (or even weeks), I also cover a huge range of genres.

Mp3 blogs are also important. *Swedes Please*, written in Chicago, Illinois demonstrated its influence when, along with Roig, its author Craig Bonnell was invited to speak at one of Sweden's top music conference/festivals, all expenses paid. *Songs I Wish's* Thörnkvist, who appeared on the same panel, cites the importance of blogs, remarking "I'm getting much more music attention from blogs than I'm getting from *NME*." The significance of any one blog is open to question. "We pay attention to some blogs," says *Adrian's* Bjerkert, "there's no blog where we'd fail if we're not up there." One of the bloggers we spoke with agrees, exclaiming "C'mon! I don't have any true role. Blogs are less important bloggers think they are." He adds that although *Absolut Noise* is one of the most popular music blogs in France, its audience is nothing compared to the millions who watch the TV channel for which he works as a journalist.

However, individual blogs do not have to be influential to have an impact. mp3 blogs are aggregated at meta-sites such as HypeMachine and Elbows, enabling all the blogs to form one steady stream of buzz and giving them collective if not individual voice. Several of the label people and musicians we spoke with did not frequent individual blogs, but did pay attention to see where their music came up on HypeMachine. Furthermore, as *Hybris's* Lövkvist articulates, as a movement, mp3 blogs influence culture and validate the music:

mp3 bloggers are important in the development of mp3 culture. In the beginning there weren't many mp3 blogs, it had very big impact if we put up our own site because everyone would go to the site. Nowadays mp3 blogs have taken that place. The label isn't enough of a filter anymore. It's great for us. If a big mp3 blog puts up a track by one of our artists it gives it credibility. It makes it easier for people to like it and accept the music.

Fans such as these are notable not just for their ability to publicize, but also for their expertise. In describing the importance of *It's a Trap* and *Swedes Please*, Thörnkvist remarks with a smile that “they have better knowledge of Swedish music than we have, which is kind of cool.”

Well-placed fans can even break bands. Nick Levine, explains how he and his partner in the London's Swedish nightclub *Tack!Tack!Tack!* (which had a strong MySpace presence of its own) influenced the development of a band made up of teenage Swedish girls. The band saw *Tack!Tack!Tack!* at the top of their friends' friend lists on MySpace and contacted them asking if they could play their club:

They were really good but no one knows who they are. You can't have a band play when no one knows who they are. We decided to hype them up through the net. We hosted a lot of propaganda bulletins, put them in our top friends. They got 500 plays within a couple days on MySpace with only 60 friends. [...] Within about a month they'd been approached by about 15 different labels. They signed to V2 in Sweden and Wichita in the UK. They got picked up by the biggest booking agency in Sweden. We were hyping them up ‘this band is next big thing.’ We meant it as a joke but in Sweden they've become

the next big thing. [...] If it's someone in London picking up Swedish bands it looks bigger than it is.

Ironically, the fact that Levine and his partner in London were active on *It's a Trap* and pushed the band there too, made it appear that the group had followings in both the UK and the United States, a point to which Swedish journalists often referred while hyping the band. Labels are well aware of the marketing benefit of a visible international audience. Says *Songs I Wish*'s Thörnkvist, "if an American blog writes about us, we can say to a club in Washington 'hey Americans are actually reading about our bands.' The world is getting smaller in that sense."

Levine celebrates that *Tack! Tack! Tack!*'s ability to do this independently "gives bands another option," yet also reflects on how this level of fan influence can be seen as disruptive to the industry status quo. "No doubt some people who work in the Swedish music industry don't like that because it means they don't have 100% control. Bands don't have to wait for label. We're someone outside of the infrastructure who's trying to take bands international."

Place still matters even as the internet seems to transcend geography; Levine and his partner are two of several fans who are booking artists at explicitly Swedish club nights in metropolitan centers throughout the world. Swedish artists can do more international touring than ever before as a result. *Labrador*'s Angergård notes that "people who contact us and want to arrange gigs are usually fans. Quite often fans doing gigs professionally, but still fans." For Labrador and its artists, the internet "makes it a lot easier to find booking agencies in different countries. I actually can't understand how it worked before Internet." *Songs I Wish*'s Thörnkvist echoes the observation:

The one thing the internet has done to geography is that it is much easier to tour in territories that they don't live in, because it's easier to promote yourself in Austria if you're a Swede. Swedish bands that used to do European tours were the major label hit bands. Now all of my bands do European tours, playing in France, Germany, England. That would never have been possible ten years ago. Promoters are finding out about us online and it's easy for us to find them as well.

Fans who run Swedish music nightclubs help to build local fan bases for the Swedish acts they follow in their towns and elsewhere. *Sounds of Sweden's* Stacey Shackford, for instance, argues that she's "done a lot to promote Swedish music in Scotland, and have converted many people into Swedophiles :) It's also great to be able to help Swedish musicians reach a new audience. Glasgow has now become a standard port of call for Swedish artists touring the UK." Her club "has also inspired other promoters to incorporate Swedish music into their line-up/club nights - and in some cases to start new Scandinavian club nights in their own towns."

Like other fan promoters, Mónica Gutiérrez and Kristina Villaverde who run the Swedish music booking agency *Fikasound* (Spain) combine online, offline and other forms of promotion. "In a small way," they say, "we are helping to spread the Swedish music in Spain and that is our aim, the musical exchange between Spain and Sweden." In addition to booking shows, they push the bands on MySpace and promote their bands on the radio. Offline, "we arrange concerts and tours for the bands, we play Swedish indie music in clubs in Spain, we do reviews for the press, etc. And soon, we will release a CD

compilation with some of the bands who have come to play to Spain with *Fikasound* during these three years.”

These fan practices provide bands and labels with a means of getting attention online and off, but there are limits to the attention labels focus on them. Labels may appreciate being represented in online spaces, but the fans who run them are rarely the focus of publicity campaigns. Like the promoters behind *Fikasound*, labels generally view the internet is just one part of the whole, “a natural part of the other promotion” (Angergård). Even these independent labels still actively pursue the traditional gatekeepers, especially within Sweden. They advertise in print, telephone and send CDs to radio stations and journalists, create posters, and otherwise seek representation in the mainstream mass media. “I can’t say what’s important because I try to do everything,” says *Adrian*’s Bjerkert, “there are so many ways to get people to listen to music. How many people are really exploring the internet in the way I am and my friends are?” When they do directly target online sites for promotion, the labels generally seek the attention of the American indie fanzine *Pitchfork*, which began as an amateur upstart, but quickly became an influential business, rather than the amateur specialty sites that cover Swedish music.

What Makes Free Labor Worthwhile

The discussion thus far has centered on the value that fan activity provides, and has leaned heavily on the perspectives of labels. These small labels are hardly the capitalist corporate behemoths of FoxInteractive (which owns MySpace) or Google. Many of the industry people and musicians we interviewed have other jobs that help pay the bills. But the dynamic in which fans do free work from which those selling the

product (in this case primarily recordings and live performances) benefit does raise the aforementioned specter of exploitation. Many of the activities these fans engage in (reviewing, promoting, booking shows, arranging travel, creating playlists, etc.) would be considered professional labor when done by anyone at a major label, radio station, management company, or press outlet and a fair wage for their efforts would be mandatory.

Banks and Humphries (in press) question whether this kind of fan productivity can really be understood in the context of labor issues, positing a need to “move beyond commentary that frames user-created content that becomes commercially valuable as a marker of exploited labour.” Based on their analysis of the productive activities of fans of a train game, they argue that “these transformations in the relationships among media producers and consumers, professional content creators and amateurs may suggest a shift in which frameworks of analysis and categories that worked well in the context of an industrial media economy are no longer helpful.” Rather than being cultural dupes, fan creators “are quite competent and canny participants in the making of these relationships” (Banks & Humphries, in press). In this section, we draw on interviews with the most enterprising online fans in the Swedish indie scene in order to understand the costs of their efforts, the rewards they receive, and how they balance the tension between empowerment and exploitation.

The concept of exploitation implies that there is a cost to its victims. The fans we spoke with do pay steep prices for ventures from which they have little hope of profiting financially at this time. These include time, website costs, burnout, balancing their music-

oriented fan activities with their other responsibilities, and hosting touring bands. The greatest cost they identify is time:

It costs me time. A lot of time. And a bit of money but that's ok. (*Absolut Noise*)

In terms of cost, I'd say the greatest cost is time, it's the one thing we don't have enough of. Doing all these things is very time consuming. (Levine)

Time: at least 2-3 hrs a day, sometimes more. I definitely work at least 6 days/week. I spend a lot of time reading/answering email, editing reviews and doing all sorts of other tedious administrative tasks that eat up a huge amount of time and seem very unrewarding.” (Roig)

I devote a lot of time to organising SOS, and in some cases entire tours, for these bands. (Shackford)

Sometimes these fans break even or make modest profits, but they rarely generate financial revenue commensurate with their efforts. Roig pays US\$99/month for his server and lays out considerable cash to import CDs and records, but eventually he recoups most of these expenses through reselling those imports and through advertising on his site. The fan promoters connecting with Swedish bands online and bringing them to their towns to play make little, if any, money. “With *Tack!Tack!Tack!*” says Levine, “the aim is to break even. 90% of the time we break even and make a little profit.” Says Stacey Shackford:

After reviewing the accounts of *Sounds Of Sweden* over the first year, I realised the costs associated with it are literally quite high. The club night rarely breaks even, and has made a marginal profit only twice. It can get quite

expensive flying bands over to play, and paying for the venue, sound engineer and promotion. Plus, we house the bands at my apartment, and feed them while they are here.

In addition to time and money, these fans pay other costs including burnout and balancing this voluntary work with jobs and other commitments. Says one, “I don’t want to think of how many hours I’ve spent on the site but my personal life has definitely changed a bit; I don’t see my friends as often these days.”

However, all the active fans we interviewed spoke of valued rewards they accrue through their efforts. These included free music, access to live performances, and in a few select cases, expense-paid invitations to Sweden. Music discovery is also frequently mentioned as a reward. “I’m getting a wide knowledge about music,” says

Hello! Surprise!’s Schill, “I’m listening to a lot more music today than five years ago.”

There are also social rewards in meeting other fans. One blogger notes that his blog offers “a good way to flirt with Swedish girls” (*Absolut Noise*). Promoters appreciate that “people came after a show and told you ‘thank you’ for organising a concert” (*Fikasound*).

By far the most rewarding outcomes for all the fans we spoke with are their interrelated abilities to *form relationships* with artists, to help *build audiences* for those artists, and to *make meaningful contributions* to a cultural domain that brings them such pleasure:

I like to have a relationship with artists I like. Blogs allow that somehow.

Even if it is not a proper relationship but mostly emails, and mails and few times you meet them. (*Absolut Noise*)

I get exposed to fabulous music and meet some fantastic musicians. The musicians I've met are extremely talented, and also great people who are a joy to work with; many have become friends, and I believe most truly deserve success [...] It's also rewarding to provide bands with the opportunity to play in Glasgow - which to many of them is a dream come true - and to see the audience reaction. The most rewarding thing, however, is seeing that unknown act you booked last year get the critical and commercial success they deserve. I've always had a great passion for music... but I can't play an instrument or sing, so this is what I do - I help make sure those with talent are heard. (Shackford)

I will write for bands I want to help out for one reason or another [...] It's a symbiotic relationship, you're getting as much out of it as they are. With *It's A Trap*, I have an outlet, if I want to help a band I can do it and get to a wider audience. (Levine)

The most rewarding aspect has to be the platform I've created myself to spout off whatever nonsense I want and get people to pay attention. Sometimes the bands I hype even get signed and that feels great. (Roig)

One might stop here and conclude that fans collect many important rewards that should be taken at face value as justifying their labor. We do believe that these rewards are undervalued in the rhetoric of exploitation and labor. However, the fans themselves do not stop there in making sense of their efforts. The fans we spoke with articulate three different stances toward the musicians, labels, and industry that further their perception that the practices they engage are fair.

One stance was to lessen the value of their own work by positioning themselves as enthusiasts too far outside the scene to merit economic reward. These fans sometimes took umbrage to implications that they are involved in the scene, doing work, or should be paid:

I don't want to say I'm "involved in this scene" cause I have too much respect for the artists who play music. I don't create anything. I just write (and I don't write with a good style. I mean I'm not an author, you know) about people who are involved in this scene. (*Absolut Noise*)

I'm just an enthusiast. I wouldn't say I'm involved at all. The ones who are doing the work are the artists, they should have the money.[...] I'm just making information easier to reach/find for people. It's like a large part of the open source community in the computer world, those guys with super-powers on TV or basically any other person with a hobby. None of them are doing it for the money, neither am I. (Schill)

Despite having arranged the first pop concert at the Swedish embassy in Spain, the women behind *Fikasound* claim they "don't really think we have a role in the indie scene, we promote Swedish bands and try to make a little space for them in the Spanish market. We want to spread the music we like, that's all." Being an insider is not a motivation: "we don't do this to be in the scene, we do this because we love music and normally one wants to share the things one loves."

Other fans position themselves as the musicians' peers more than as respectful enthusiasts. Fans remark that "there is usually less 'rock star' attitude" from these bands:

Perhaps this is because many of the musicians are just regular people with

day jobs who create music in their free time - many of them probably wouldn't get the recognition they enjoy if it weren't for the Web, and sites like MySpace. Anyone with a microphone and computer can now be heard by music fans around the world - you no longer need a record contract or distributor. Many of the Swedish artists I've communicated with recognise this - they are quite humble and wowed by the attention they get, and therefore very responsive to their online fans. I think this personal touch further endears the bands to their fans. (Shackford)

From this vantage points, the fans see themselves as doing favors for people who either are or could easily become friends.

A third strategy that fans sometimes use, including some of those who position themselves as peers to the bands, is to view their labor as an investment toward a future career which may eventually lead to appropriate financial compensation. This phenomenon was found by Banks and Humphries (in press), as well as by Thornton (1996) who discussed how select ravers in the UK club culture are able to convert their “subcultural capital” into economic capital with paying gigs as DJs. There is reason for such hopes of professional advancement. **One of independent music's most successful label leaders, the head of Canadian label *Network*, Terry McBride (2006), for instance, predicts that “down the road bloggers with a great track record will be able to make a decent living from the fact that they can sell the music that they are promoting by using peer to peer.”** In this scene, some, like Roig, have already parlayed the capital of their expertise and web presence into paid positions such as hosting a satellite radio show about Scandinavian music and providing Gracenote with Swedish artist data and CD

purchasing/scanning. “It’s an exercise in networking really,” says Levine, “ultimately, the more people you know the more opportunities will accrue to you. The networking is quite interesting and important. It’s definitely one of the major benefits. We’re in London and we’re actually doing something, we’re contributing to the London scene.”

In short, these fans articulate a complex system of costs, rewards and relational interpretations that motivate their continued engagement in voluntary practices that provide economic value for others. The potential for friction always remains, however. In reflecting over the success of the band they helped to break, Levine reconsiders: “we haven’t gotten anything out of it ourselves. Maybe we should take a step back, maybe we’re more influential than we thought we were.”

Conclusion

We began by citing the conflict regarding celebratory and critical approaches to the work fans like these do. Are they empowered participants staking out crucial positions in the new digital economy or are they exploited innocents, disempowered by a culture industry that has turned them into de facto employees who work for affective pleasure rather than wages? Not surprisingly, this binary proves too simplistic when looking closely as we have here. The answer is, as Kenneth Burke would have said, both/and. In scenes like this, exploitation and just reward are matters of perception. The challenge that lies before us is to identify the circumstances under which people experience their contributions as exploitation and those under which they don’t, and to understand the strategies through which they manage these tensions.

There is much to celebrate. Fans’ participation is real and has never been more significant or valued. They are gatekeepers, filters, and influencers on a scale they never

were before the internet. They are needed by both industry and other fans. Yet there is ripe potential for exploitation, which the fans themselves may recognize. They are paying to do work that those in official positions within the industry are paid to do. Others are earning at least modest versions of fame and fortune from their efforts while these fans reap neither. Hopes fans have of converting their social capital into economic capital in the future may never materialize.

From the perspectives of these amateur expert fans, this is not a black and white issue, nor is it one they all understand in the same way. There are costs they all share, foremost among them time, and they all gain cultural and social capital (e.g. music, expertise, travel, influence, relationships) they could not otherwise attain. But they differ in how they position themselves vis-à-vis the industry and those within it. Some see themselves as outsiders and feel it devalues them and the artists to suggest they deserve fiscal conservation. Others see themselves as peers, engaged in a social exchange relationship rather than an economic one (Blau, 1964). Some view their efforts as an investment toward economic advancement within this scene. Even an individual's perspective on his own balance may change over time, as was the case with Levine feeling first empowered by helping to break a band yet later questioning whether he had been justly compensated for his efforts.

To argue this is exploitation, one must assume that the rewards that fans attain are less valuable than those they deserve, and that the fans' perceptions of their practices are evidence that they have been seduced by the power dynamic that exploits them. We are loathe to dismiss their claims of affective pleasure and the desire they feel to spread what brings them joy as evidence of exploitation. Their social response to the pleasures of

music is situated in deeply meaningful social phenomena that harkens back to much earlier phases of musical history, phases before there was an industry, when music was always performed in communities by locals for locals rather than by distant celebrities for adoring fans. These fans value spreading the pleasures they have enjoyed and building relationships with others in their (often intersecting) on and offline communities more than they value cash. They also value the social status and influence these practices enable them to attain. To claim that these people are exploited is to ignore how much these other forms of capital matter in the well being of well rounded humans and to deny the capacity of these individuals to stop doing what they do (indeed, by publication of this article, both *Sounds of Sweden* and *Tack!Tack!Tack!* had closed up shop).

It may be easier to make this argument in an indie scene such as this (Fonarow, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Kruse, 2003) for several reasons. Barring flukes, neither the bands nor label entrepreneurs anticipate nor are they likely to make much money themselves. Indie music has thrived in large part on a DIY (Do It Yourself) aesthetic. Its organizing values of integrity and authenticity have long positioned the bands and labels as ordinary people like those in the audience. Indie performers who have hit songs and get rich are routinely criticized for “selling out” and lose their claims to the integrity and authenticity that makes them truly indie. Would these fans’ behavior seem more like exploitation if they were laboring on behalf of Disney or Madonna? Perhaps, but the social value of the rewards they attain should still not be dismissed. It is notable that major labels and artist are more likely to view this sort of fan activity as a threat and respond with law suits. The power these fans have outside the industry does challenge their power base, particularly since they can no longer control the illegal but free flow of

their own product. We need more nuanced ways to think about the varieties of fan practices, the variety of incentives for enacting them, and the nuanced and complex interrelated ways in which people – fans and those who wish to make a living through their purchases – implicitly negotiate the boundaries between labors of love and exploitation in different constellations of industries. The theoretical frameworks we need to understand these phenomena may have to be built from the ground up.

The Swedish indie scene is notable for its commitment to working with fans. Labels do things like give mp3s away and seed their labels' recordings on peer-to-peer file sharing sites. We mentioned briefly the label coalition The Swedish Model, which explicitly seeks to further a vision of the music industry in which fans, labels and bands use technology to spread the music and build community around it. This is in obvious contrast to the dominant rhetoric of file sharing that pervades the public discourse in which fans are portrayed as pirates and thieves killing an industry. The model described here, in which the service the fans do is rewarded and appreciated, offers a positive strategy for adapting to the changes in the music industry and exemplifies one direction music and other entertainment industries may eventually go.

In closing, we want to consider the internationalism of these amateur experts who coalesce around bands and labels from a country of nine million people. What we see in what we have described is not only a flow of resources amongst artists, bands and fans, but also a flow of cultural materials across national borders in ways that have been made possible only by new digital media. At the same time, many of the fans' efforts are intensely local, as they bring the Swedes to their cities so that they, their friends, and everyone else can see them. These fans labor also on behalf of Sweden, a country whose

government has recognized music as one of its most successful international exports. These fans are cultural ambassadors, contributing to and reshaping the mediascapes, technoscapes, and financescapes (Appadurai, 1990) that connect nations to one another in an increasingly digital global society. Rather than thinking of this as either good or bad, we must recognize that it is so, and move forward in building better understandings of the work fans and others do, the logics that motivate and sustain it, and its personal, social, cultural and economic consequences.

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