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Music As Subversion: Musical Innovation in Miami's Predatory Art Scene

Abstract

Artistic expression, in the form of musical creation, is easily one of the most lucrative methods to generate capital for bourgeois interests. However, within the localized context of Miami, Florida, the local structure of underground entertainment deviates in its qualitative essence from the entertainment industry on a grander scale. In this piece, the idiosyncratic nature of Miami's economic output, predominantly lying in service industries and tourism, is analyzed with the detrimental effects on working class artists in mind. Elements of Miami's economic underpinnings, broken down to the relations between real estate interests, landlords, and working-class musicians, elucidates the circumstances of what it means to individually express artistic ideas in Miami. Moreover, a critique of the traditional Do It Yourself ethos, such as independently rented venue spots, develops the necessity of newer strategies to create working-class solidarity between artists.

Keywords

Underground Music, Miami

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Cover Page Footnote

Rafa Pacheco is a 24 year old political science student from FIU with a focus on Marxist theory and existential philosophy. Running in parallel with his efforts in political theory is his work as a musician in various underground electronic genres.

Underground music, as it functions in the cracks and crevices of metropolitan areas reliant on service industry economies, exists in a paradoxical form that rejects the maxims of capital accumulation on its surface through its art and allows at a deeper level the entrance of speculative capital. Miami in this sense, one of the few examples of an American city held together by the service industry, is the quintessential quasi-experimental environment isolated from all other industrious production. As an area geographically and culturally distanced from many other municipalities in the United States, local musicians as artists feel alienated from the incessant undertakings of local economies that cater to service industries.¹

In other cities across the United States, lower class methods of gathering income depend on the diverse qualitative aspects of their respective economies. However, the driving industries of tourism and service in Miami implies an idiosyncratic social atmosphere. Perpetual debacles of transportation and ever increasing rent payments remain fixed in the minds of those who have no other option but to transport themselves over large distances to sell their labor within a stagnant local job market.²

The burdens produced from this social environment also plague the aspiring local musician to an intensified degree. In any city, a musician splits their livelihood between placating the economic structure of capitalism during the day and satisfying their own expressive wants during hours otherwise designated as leisure time. Musicians making their rounds in Miami mimic this work ethic as well but in all aspects of their livelihoods; they are selling services to consumers more so than most cities in the United States.

Laboring for musical success presents itself as a service for paying audiences to enjoy. The venue's existence, as a host for musicians exchanging their leisure time in hopes of monetary compensation never guaranteed, lives off the purchases of alcoholic beverages. The implication by association determines the essence of music as something of consumption along with other pleasures for those who can afford them. Booking managers of underground music venues, assuming the role of gatekeepers to liminal spaces of escape from social conventions and pressures, in reality, perpetuate social norms of consumption in a local economy dominated by consumption.

The role of drug use is elemental to create marketable content for both musicians and audiences. Using drugs in this sense facilitates the sale of products in whatever form they may appear in. Mirrored in the world of expression, the stimulant pushes the musically inclined to create and perform for audiences releasing inner daily stress similarly. Use of coffee, cocaine, and amphetamines, for instance, is helpful to both the car salesman and the songwriter. Depressants complete the picture of local decadence through alcohol sales, cannabis use, opiates, and benzodiazepines for those coping with social difficulties in alternative methods that further jeopardize the physical and mental health of the individual. Musicians as human beings subject to their material conditions, deal with this dilemma of mounting pressure to perform, and the

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages*, (Washington, US: United States Department of Labor, 2016), accessed July 18, 2018, https://data.bls.gov/cew/apps/table_maker/v4/table_maker.htm?type=5&year=2017&qtr=4&own=5&area=12086&supp=0

² United States Department of Labor, "Miami Area Employment May 2018 : Southeast Information Office : U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, last modified June 27, 2018, https://www.bls.gov/regions/southeast/news-release/areaemployment_miami.htm

necessity to portray themselves as the Ubermensch of bohemian values. Subjugation to these cumulative pressures eventually bonds with substances that illustrate a method of escape from an antagonistic social world and the underlying exploitative conditions of wage labor.

For the musician in Miami, the struggle manifests against an audience keen on experiencing narrow definitions of dance, punk, and hip-hop music, booking managers that maximize their own profits via predatory tactics, rising costs of living that may displace individuals, daytime occupations demanding amiable accommodations towards consumers, and the conditional presence of transportation. Yet, toward the end of their workday, there is no guarantee there will be a satisfactory compensation for the labor poured into artistic working hours that would have otherwise been time for leisure.

From the vantage point of the speculative capitalist, rent as a tool of economic repression holds the greatest leverage over all other classes. Between venues long established as cultural centers and spaces run by lone individuals with a genuine interest in musical expression, the common obligation is a monthly payment to those who own the land they inhabit. The great inequality present between temporary self-run venue spaces in the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) scene and long-term stable venues such as Churchill's Pub, stems from landlords demanding rent. The predictability of discovering through hearsay that certain DIY venues have shut down illustrates how ever-increasing property values decimate any channels for new music.

Rent and the expansion of real estate industries hinder the possibility of artistic creation embodying the ethos of innovation and subversion of current situations. More explicitly, gentrification enters into neighborhoods plagued with the most intense instances of systemic violence, and over a period of time are able to oust its inhabitants with ease. Now unable to collectivize with the looming threat of eviction backed by repressive law enforcement departments, communities among the lowest economic rungs are both physically and motivationally displaced.³ What is built with the economic seizure of this community is a reliable source of income through new venues, rather than individuals who are intermittently able to pay wealthy landowners. These new venues offer the promise of creative freedom with the caveat of arbitrary speculation designating the exchange-value of commodities. For those willing to create music, they must view their labor as a commodity, and this commodity must sell under the obligatory conditions dictated for the musician's success in capitalism. For this reason, all that is considered cultural broadly falls under this expansive shadow of inevitable commodification.

While the first manifestation of musical movements are more often than not completely embracing social taboos, these taboos as arbitrary definitions in the social world are reconstructed with ease to benefit the existing social order. In this way, culture is always something to be desired yet never truly felt. The accelerant nature of capitalism has transformed every aspect of material and social existence into a sellable product. This is the only promise that free market systems can guarantee towards individuals willing to create.

A piece of music will only exist and be recognized as such if it sustains itself in the market. This is especially the reason why local shows see the constant rehashing of musicians, bands, song structures, genres, and scenes. Churchill's Pub as it stands to satisfy the want for rebellious outings, lives on exploitative tactics towards bands wanting to make a name for themselves. Gramps facilitates sections of the Miami populace ambivalent toward the unsavory

³ Andres Viglucci, "There's a Bit of Wynwood Developers Haven't Touched. Will They Gentrify That, Too?," Miamiherald, last modified November 17, 2017, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/midtown/article185212378.html>

atmosphere of Churchill's Pub with the selling of nu-disco and funk. The incessant need for these venues to revive long expired formalized genres simultaneously serves the interests of local landowners while stripping these genres of any contemporary social relevance left.

In turn, the nature of capitalist society, as a social world deprived of authenticity and material meaning, serves as the foundation for acts of depravity. In the context of underground music subcultures, morality is not a mere reflection of values within greater capitalist society. Rather, it is a perversion of individual power between working class peers. Rather than facilitate interactions beneficial to all parties seeking new avenues of creation, the practice of capital accumulation asserts individual power as the ability to take possession of desirable objects at any cost with miniscule consideration for the well-being of others within similar working class conditions. Instances of instrument theft, sexual harassment, and unwarranted violence are rooted in the alienated nature of music. In each of these cases, theft is the universal trait that transforms potential collaborators into spiteful adversaries.

The implicit message derived from an individual who commits such an act is rooted in the existence of private property and the false equivocation ascertained between private and personal property. The perception of another's personal artistic tools as private property to be seized and exchanged, the objectified body of another human being as something to take by force, or the violent assault of another person justified by the trivialization of others are behaviors heightened by the ideological cornerstones of bourgeois liberalism. Therefore, underground cultural circles, in attempting to balance the rejection of unethical acts produced by capitalist enterprise and the sustainment of their endeavors that ultimately reinforce speculative capital in the services they produce, have effectively negated the essence of their non-conformist mission statement.

Moreover, culture in the form of rebellion towards violent and normative behavior sanctions the practice of commodification by granting relief to anguished individuals robbed of free will in a system of social relations where individual agency is theoretically enmeshed in every aspect of its existence. Contained in the scope of Miami politics, the functioning of counterculture becomes a futile splash in an immense ocean of passivity towards worsening urban conditions. The waves created by this angst only exist in the short-term sense of socially conscious activity, however cathartic they might appear to be in the moment.

The delusional faith maintained toward subversive cultural tactics has a kinship with the practice of elevating individuals to the status of groundbreaking innovators in a local context. Faith in this form creates a class divided community within the larger class system of capitalism. The monopolization of ideas introduced by long standing figures serves as an implicit reflection of branding in markets. Here, the organic nature of ideas as they come to fruition in a collective sense is erased for the unflinching acceptance of seasoned individuals who supposedly built the current bases of musical expression and by extension validate any prejudice demonstrated towards emerging artistic ideas. By proposing that all of those who have come after any given individual's existence in an artistic scene are in debt to this individual, all the social significance of past individuals who also paved the direction for current musicians are judged to be irrelevant. The other problematic facet of this situation is the despotism created by these assumptions that a small group of individuals created these conditions that allow artists to create. As a result, the elite class of spectacular innovators becomes the sole jury for the judging of content and any of its artistic merits. These few influential figures perform functions that aid in the molding of underground scenes in aspects that complement the predatory existence of venue managers and event organizers.

The mentors of the current local scene give a human face to the unapologetic tactics of venues that control who performs on their stage. They rationalize the distanced decision making of booking managers, tap the shoulders of musicians that comply with the nepotism of superficial friendships, and restate old entertaining anecdotes so that others can vicariously enjoy the experience of higher artistic status in a city aptly visualized as a fish bowl when compared to other cities that have an incredibly vast sea of creative output.

The unspeakable truth of Churchill's Pub, Gramps, and other supposed artistic safe havens in Miami is that their true essence is identical to that of a black hole. These voids leech on ideas that were once voluminous in appeal and integrity. Yet, reticence dominates members of the local music community due to fears of losing the few venues South Florida can actually claim as its own. Survival via passivity aside, real estate investors do not see cultural worth, artistic integrity, or the existential need for creation in these places as much as they see the speculative gains to make with these elements as a lure for local economic growth. To begin any action that may effectively combat these influences, musicians must mirror the economic elite's view of these venues and acknowledge their essence to be purely economic in nature.

For the volatile socioeconomic environment of Miami, collective organization dispersed among various small artistic circles does not suffice in challenging the dominance of the commercial apparatus. It requires a lateral consolidation of strength supported by the solidarity of aspiring musicians in order to reap any possible authentic fulfillment. The exercise of artistic self-dominion will not manifest within antiquated methods of community creation. The exhaustive structure of the music industry exists with the intent of detecting new counter-cultural forces to profit from. This is self-evident with the persistent hammering of rehashed cultural aesthetics via large and small music publications. Antiquated cultural extremes formed in decades past have lost all the elements that cause onlookers to feel unsettled in the wake of apparent belligerence. For that reason, the exhaustive appropriation of artistic ideas must be met with such a creative reaction that in turn negates the efforts of the few who aim to commodify artistic movements. With the sober understanding that the presence of capitalist structures implies a perpetual struggle to create artistic products of labor that inevitably are sucked of their essence and sold on a market, escalation of radical creativity must also be engendered so that the venues and networks expropriating the labor of artists are constantly robbed of their economic utility. This asymmetrical process of tit-for-tat must deliver the immediacy of performing for artists wishing to authentically assert their creative powers. Simultaneously, equal importance must be placed on the vitality of working class artists to remain consistent in their solidarity with the rest of the working class population. Without these two facets of class struggle running in parallel, there can be no small or large scale advances made for working class emancipation.