

Fabian Holt
***Everyone Loves Live Music:
A Theory of Performance
Institutions***

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The social, economic, technological, and political changes of the last 30 years affected music culture and music industry in significant ways, but because these changes are very recent, they remain difficult to properly assess and analyze in all of their complexity. Since our lives are also equally affected by these changes, and we internalize many of the accompanying ideologies and discourses, it is sometimes difficult to adopt a critical stance to phenomena we take for granted. Such is the case with “live music”, which virtually everyone loves (regardless the genre and taste differences). Hence, not everybody is ready to question this concept at face value. However, and fortunately, there has been a rising interest in academia in scrutinizing the phenomena of “live music” from a more critical perspective (e.g., Auslander 1999; Porcello 2005; Sanden 2013), including, most recently, a valuable contribution to this discussion by Fabian Holt’s new book *Everyone Loves Live Music: A Theory of Performance Institutions*.

Some readers might be wondering at this point, why “live music” should be considered a *recent* phenomenon. In practice, it has existed in different shapes and forms from time immemorial, but this does not also apply to the “live music” term or discourse, as this could only come into existence after the appearance of its oppositional pair concept (and technological reality) of “recorded”

music, therefore, only since the beginning of the 20th century. This conceptual opposition of live/recorded music has been employed extensively in marketing and authenticity discourses surrounding music recordings and music technologies throughout the 20th century (Frith 1986; Katz 2004; Wicke 2009), but has gained a new prominence and conceptual framing following the emergence of digital (mp3, p2p) technologies in the 1990s and 2000s, and the concomitant restructuring of the international music industry. This is also the moment from which Holt’s new book takes its starting position, as he states that “digitalization weakened its [music industry’s] hegemony, and this stimulated the exploitation of commodity forms other than the sound recording. [...] The recession in the recording sector stimulated a general shift of emphasis to the performance sector and accelerated its international corporatization and branding as a live music industry” (1). The “live” music performance (especially club and festival music performance), and the recent social and historical changes related to it, are therefore the main focus of Holt’s new study, which aims to provide “a historically grounded analysis of the commercial institutionalization of the Anglophone popular music performance culture [that accelerated in the 1990s] in the United States and Western Europe” (1, 3).

Holt’s focus in this regard brings a welcoming new perspective on the “live music” phenomenon which was not explored in the other publications mentioned above, particularly through his historical and structural (political economy) perspectives, enriched by (occasional) ethnographic observations and by

an (minimal) employment of discourse analysis. His goals are quite ambitious, as he endeavours to study the “live music industry” phenomenon from a variety of positions, thus incorporating both micro (ethnographic, performative) and macro (historical, structural) perspectives, as well as media, and discourse analysis (i.e., study of narratives of “liveness” and authenticity), constructing in this way an interdisciplinary study that combines historical sociology, ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, performance studies, media studies, event studies, and tourism studies. Holt’s contribution is significant mainly in regard to the more macro (historical, structural) and media analysis approaches, partially also in relation to his ethnographic inquiry (mainly in chapter four, to some degree in chapter seven), but less so with respect to the study of the “liveness” discourse, which is very minimally incorporated into the main analytical chapters (it appears mainly in the introduction, pp. 12–19, with exception of pages 131 and 145), and even there mostly in relation to the phenomena of recent discursive rebranding and renaming of organizations and institutions into “live” entities (e.g., BBC’s Live Lounge, Billboard Live Music Summit, Live Music Forum, Live Nation, LiveStyle, Live Music Capital of the World, Dansk Live, Livemusik Sverige, Live Europe, etc.). Judging from the first part of the title of the book, and from the first pages of the introduction, the work should deliver more in the way of “liveness” discourse, but somehow neglects this issue with the progression of chapters.

In continuation, I examine particular chapters, and identify further strengths and weaknesses of this work. As a side

note, it should be noted that Holt presented the findings included in this book already in many of his earlier studies (e.g., 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017), but he extends the discussion, and adds more context, data, nuance, and complexity in his current work.

After his initial elaboration of the main conceptual issues of the book in chapters one and two, Holt dedicates chapters three to five to the study of music clubs, and chapters six to nine to the study of music festivals, which he regards as the dominant live music performance institutions of the early 21st century in the Global North, and thus they are also central to his argument about the corporate institutionalization of Anglophone culture in this time and place. Holt establishes a cursory outline of the literature on the history of “music in cities” (as somehow vaguely related to the history of the music venues and rock clubs) in chapter three, but much more relevant history and literature could be added to this discussion, especially in relation to the history of urban music performance institutions that would provide a suitable contextual background to the latter transformations in this regard (e.g., Bennett 1980; Forsyth 1985; Gilmore 1987; Hazzard-Donald 1990; Carney 2003; Chatterton and Holland 2003; Strachan and Cohen 2005; Fonarow 2006; see also Verbuč 2021).

Chapter four then focuses more narrowly on the transformation of rock club institution and neo-bohemian neighbourhoods in New York City, from the early 1970s (CBGB, Lower East Side), to the current situation (gentrification, corporate institutionalization of the indie rock club), and adds a comparative ethnographic analysis of the current Brooklyn DIY

warehouse scene. The chapter offers a rich and nuanced analysis of different stages of gentrification from both macro and micro perspectives, and thus successfully demonstrates how larger socio-economic and political forces shape changes in architectural design, technological features, organizational characteristics, programming, promotion, demographics, and music aesthetics of current indie rock clubs.

In the subsequent chapter, Holt extends his analysis to the transformation of rock clubs in Europe, especially in Amsterdam, Brussels, and Copenhagen, and shows similar processes of corporate institutionalization, but with a European bent, which puts more emphasis on non-profit clubs subsidized by city governments. However, the growing gentrification, neoliberalization, and corporatization of cities in the past three decades has also affected clubs in Europe, which manifests itself in declining public subsidies and rising rents for clubs, clubs' dependency on corporate agencies, increase in headliners, and decline in programming diversity and socio-political engagement. However, Holt's strength in this chapter is also in demonstrating the complexity of this transformation, and how it differently affects particular clubs in various cities (there is less of such variety and complexity presented in chapter four, in relation to the contemporary professionalized indie rock clubs in New York).

In chapters six and seven, Holt first provides an illustrative survey of the history of festivals and their accompanying worldviews in Europe, showing in this way the transformation from more civic to more commercial and institutionalized forms of festivals, before moving to a case-study

analysis of several larger (Roskilde, Sziget), and smaller niche festivals (Sonar, Iceland Airwaves), among others. Through these case studies, the author demonstrates the recent transformation in festival culture, in terms of the increased number of festivals, the doubling of audiences, the growing number of stages, the rise in the number of Anglophone headliners and stars, the popularization of EDM DJs and festivals, growing festival corporatization, and a decrease in programming diversity. Chapter eight takes into account larger issues in this transformation, such as the headliner economy, and the relation between festivals and mainstream culture in terms of gentrification, tourism, fashion, promotion, and social media.

The last chapter then shifts perspective to festival media culture, specifically scrutinizing the emergence of new festival cinematography, such as trailer videos, live-casts, and aftermovies. While this discussion offers some intriguing insights into the contemporary visual and promotional festival strategies, it also leaves out unexamined much of the social media territory related to the festival culture, especially with respect to other types and strategies of festival promotion (apart from marketing video), and other types of festival-related uses of social media (for example, by audiences). There are also only two brief ethnographic references to fans' online and offline festival activities in chapter nine (pp. 254, 257), but Holt otherwise concludes in this regard that

Social media could have brought popular music festivals in other directions, as illustrated by the early participatory culture at Tomorrowland. [...] But in the hands of

the festival industry, social media became a tool for the further transformation into mass culture, epitomized by the main-stage euphoria, glamour, and spectacle of EDM pop, with audience behaviours scripted by festival marketing video (259).

This also brings me to some general critiques of Holt's book. First, while Holt dedicates himself to not only dismissing audience consumerism but also showing fans' agency in his work (240), he does not deliver on this agenda in his analyses (except for a couple of sentences on fan behaviour on two pages mentioned above). This relates not only to his discussion of festivals (see above), but also to clubs, as he himself states in chapter four:

The indie rock club theatre appeals to desires for leisure, aesthetic pleasure, sophistication, and intimacy, but it also indicates how the working life ideology of professional authority permeates leisure and imposes constraints on the concert ritual. [...] Corporate structures have thus constrained the space of individual and collective agency at the microlevel (121).

Holt therefore reintroduces the same weakness into his book that he otherwise blames on Timothy Taylor, when he states that Taylor "ignores [...] the dynamics between [...] structure and agency" (26). The actions of indie rock club and festival audiences in Holt's book are mainly interpreted as "constrained" and "scripted" by structure, as we also hear very little of their voices in this book (except for a few quotes from questionnaires given to festival goers on page 239, and one interview quote about indie rock clubs on page 118), and learn very little about their behaviour at festivals and even less in indie rock clubs. Second,

this is not only an interpretive problem, but also a problem of methodology, which is also my next critique here. Several generalizing interpretations in Holt's work, not only those above about the perceived non-agency of fans, but also about other issues (e.g., the author claims there was no presence of young urban middle-class indie rock fans and musicians at Occupy protests, or in Brooklyn warehouse scenes, and no nostalgia among young middle-aged professionals for the gritty clubs; see pages 116, 118, 121), are not based on any transparent methods, as they often appear to depend on hearsay or on author's personal impressions of the scene. The readers are in these cases left alone with questions such as: Where did the author get this information? How can we confirm these claims, even if they might be true? Or, maybe they might be true in part, but not for all participants. Holt's ethnographic fieldwork in clubs and at festivals was not so intensive as to indicate any sufficient or intuitive response to these methodological questions (e.g., 75, 107, 221, 243).

Third, while Holt's book incorporates extensive and relevant literature on the corporatization of clubs and festivals in the Global North, it also misses some important contributions on the topic of history of music venues and rock clubs (see above), on festivals (e.g., Taylor and Bennett 2014; Gibson and Connell 2016), and on the gentrification, corporatization, and neoliberalization of music cultures and scenes (e.g., Chatterton and Holland 2003; Krims 2007; Moore 2010). In terms of the strengths of the book, in addition to the ones mentioned in the introduction (intriguing historical, political economy, and media analyses), Holt also provides

brief but particularly welcome and astute discussions of gender, race, class, and sexuality issues in relation to the contemporary club and festival culture, which are interspersed throughout the book.

In conclusion, *Everyone Loves Live Music: A Theory of Performance Institutions*, presents an important contribution to the study of contemporary clubs and festivals, by way of critical and informative historical, political economy, and media analysis, but also with a few shortcomings related to the agency-structure interpretations, methodology, and literature. It offers a significant albeit partial view on the recent re-emergence of the “live music” phenomena, advancing important scholarly insights regarding the questions pertaining to historical, structural, and media analyses of contemporary performance institutions, while leaving ample space for further studies on the topics of agency and discourse in relation to these same phenomena. We do not learn in the book why everyone loves live music, in a sense of a discursive formation, or individual practice, but we do reach an understanding of the structural and historical aspects of this contemporary phenomena.

David Verbuč
(Charles University)

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