IS MUSIC BECOMING PLACELESS?
THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON NODES OF POPULAR MUSIC PRODUCTION BETWEEN 1991 AND 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Geography

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Without sound, space itself contracts, for our experience of space is greatly extended by the auditory sense which provides information of the world beyond the visual field.

– Yi-Fu Tuan
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ABSTRACT

IS MUSIC BECOMING PLACELESS?
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The purpose of this study is to investigate whether or not music is becoming placeless in this age of mass internet communication. Digital media have made it possible for anybody with access to the internet to buy and share music. Additionally, inexpensive audio recording programs have made it increasingly easier for the average person to make high quality music from the comfort of his bedroom. In this unprecedented era of musical democratization I find that nodes of popular music production have changed very little over the past twenty years. I contend that music production still largely remains in the hands of a few giant corporate conglomerates who have not allowed for the democratization of music production, and therefore, the diffusion of nodes of production.
1.0 Music geography?

The vast majority of human geography has been concerned with the visual world. Geographers have paid little attention to the soundscapes in which we live. There are few studies of the olfactory or auditory landscapes that are all around. Geography is, after all, a social science; and scientific observation is most commonly conducted through vision. However, vision alone is not enough. Persistence of a bias toward visual analysis in human geography is problematic because it encourages us to neglect the role of all the senses in structuring and experiencing space and place; it creates a body of scholarship that excludes, or is irrelevant for, people who are blind or experience severe visual impairment; and it excludes a major art form – the production of sound generally, and of music in particular – from geographic study (Smith 1994).

Despite the general lack of attention to soundscapes, a growing amount of research in music geography has been conducted. Geographers have produced more than 100 journal articles, theses/dissertations, monographs, and books, which will be examined in the succeeding sections. Moreover, special sessions on the geography of music have been organized for the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) and Association of American Geographers (AAG) meetings (Carney 1994).

There is no good reason why the spatial perspective should not be applied to music. Reference to music and musical themes can help inform geographical interpretations of the cultural landscape (Smith 1994). Every human culture appears to include some kind of music, even if this relies on a very broad definition of music. The presence of musical instruments, excavated from archaeological digs from at least 7,700 years ago, suggests that this may have been true throughout history (Connell and Gibson 2003). Yet during the beginnings of the sub-
discipline in the 1970s, people criticized George Carney for being “frivolous” and “non-scientific” when he pushed for music geography (Carney 1994). We have come a long way since then. As Thomas Paine so befittingly stated in his *Common Sense*, “Time makes more converts than reason.”

Much of the existing research on music has focused on the deep roots of music in the spatial context of various places. Indeed many places can hardly be imagined without reference to the music of those places. New Orleans, Nashville, Memphis, Liverpool and San Francisco are all cities whose place associations are strongly entwined with music. However, in recent decades, artists are increasingly able to record music with reasonable quality from their own homes which they can promote through various internet channels (YouTube, MySpace). Many of the peculiarities of place, so critical in the peculiarities of place-based music, now seem irrelevant. I will examine whether or not the production of music is becoming, or has become, placeless in this age of mass internet communication. If this change has facilitated the democratization of music, then we should see artists becoming dispersed over time. This study shows that place still matters. Musical production in the United States remains largely controlled by the same production centers that dominated the musical landscape before the age of the internet.

1.1 History of research

Over four decades have passed since Peter Nash (1968) of the University of Waterloo authored “Music Regions and Regional Music,” the first scholarly article on music written by a professional geographer. In his (1973) *Cultural Geography of the United States*, Wilbur Zelinsky, the “Dean” of American cultural geographers, wrote that many untapped research topics existed for cultural geographers, including music. By 1994, geographers had published
some 100 articles about music in such highly respected international journals as *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, The Canadian Geographer, and Progress in Human Geography* (Carney 1994). Most of the research has centered on American folk and popular music, although several notable studies on music in the global arena have been completed; including, but of course not limited to, Nash’s (1968) work on world music regions, Curtis and Rose’s (1983) article about Cuban Music in Miami, and Kong’s (1995) work examining the politics of music in Singapore. More than fifty percent of all music geography output has concentrated on American country music and its various substyles, lyrics, and instrumentation. Rock music and its myriad spin-offs accounted for roughly twenty percent (Carney 1998). The remainder of the scholarly works has explored a variety of music genres, including popular, classical, folk, gospel, jazz, blues, and ethnic. More recently, a couple of important books have been published which interpret the spatial meaning of music through fresh new approaches and in doing so further our understanding of broader social relations and trends, including identity, attachment to place, cultural economies, social activism and politics (Connell and Gibson 2003; Johansson and Bell 2009).

1.2 Major Themes

When Peter Nash and George Carney wrote “The Seven Themes of Music Geography” (1996) they were well into their careers. These men are widely regarded as, among others, the founders of music geography as a sub-discipline. The seven themes are (1) origins, (2) world distribution types, (3) location analysis, (4) source areas of musical activities, (5) trends based on electricity, (6) impact on landscapes, (7) global music, and an eighth “emerging” theme labeled technological innovations.
The first theme is concerned with the origin, or “prehistory”, of music. Where did music come from? The second theme deals with the distribution of music around the world; how and why music varies from place to place. Theme three suggests the specific involvement with location of musical activities, such as the compositions and travels of their composers, rather than broader world distributions of regional delineations. The fourth theme involves source areas of musical activities, with their concomitant phenomena of migrations and diffusions. Theme five deals with electricity as the common denominator, without which radio, television, and electric guitars would not have been possible. Theme six is the analysis of how music has an impact on towns, cities, and regions. Their seventh theme examines the tonal impact of music on the listener, but on a global scale. Theme eight, which they label an emerging theme, examines how technological networks will help establish equilibrium between the local and global, working to make the world more homogeneous.

1.3 Purpose of this study

This study will examine whether or not the production of music is becoming placeless. Digital media have made it possible for anybody with a personal computer (PC) and internet access to produce and consume music. Record stores that once served as a gatekeeper restricting interaction between producers of music and consumers have largely disappeared. Inexpensive audio recording programs have made it relatively easy for the average person to make high quality music from his bedroom. Their homemade musical production can be published and promoted via internet media.

The democratization of music production and consumption following the invention of magnetic tape led to a vast increase in the number of record companies during the post-war years in the Anglo-American world. Similarly, an explosion in music retailers, particularly in the
United States led to a vast expansion in the consumption of musical products created by the expanded recording industry. One of the results of this expansion was the restructuring of the landscape of musical production in the United States. Traditional production centers, like New York City and Los Angeles, could no longer monopolize the production of popular music records, and in turn allowing cities like Memphis, Tennessee to become major production centers (Ford 1971).

If Ford’s theory about the evolution of Memphis as the cultural hearth of rock n’ roll music is correct, then it stands to reason that in this latest round of technology-based democratization of music production and consumption nodes of popular music production should once again display a dispersion away from the well-established centers.

In order to test this hypothesis the top fifty best-selling artists were analyzed over the past twenty years. The places where the artists come from were mapped and measured for dispersion. Though, some have analyzed the global/local link regarding music production and consumption (Connell and Gibson 2003; Keough 2009; Kruse 2009), generally concluding that place does matter, despite ever expanding communications technology, the local remains obstinately powerful. However, none have used the approach of measuring dispersion by quantifying Billboard data. The implications of this study can be profound. If there is no diffusion, then the internet has done little to disperse the production of music. This could mean that there is a big difference between producing music in a basement and the massive marketing and distribution machinery still owned by the big record companies. Theories need to be refined. If there is dispersion, then it would appear that Ford is correct and that technologies that democratize the production of music indeed have a spatial effect, and we may perhaps expect that musical innovations (like the invention of rock n’ roll in Memphis) are more likely. If, on the other hand,
we find that little dispersion of the centers of production have occurred, despite the obvious
democratization of the tools of production, then perhaps Ford’s ideas about Memphis can be
applied less widely. We may be forced to conclude that other forces are at work which are
undermining the production of music away from existing industry centers. This in turn may
undermine the repetition of the pattern of musical innovation in peripheral locations noted by
2.0 Music Industry

The music industry is a terribly complex network to deconstruct; and doing so will not only be a painstaking task, but moreover, not particularly beneficial to this study. Instead, the following review will serve two purposes: (1) to give the reader a brief history of the music industry, and (2) to present relevant geographic literature on the music industry.

2.1 A brief history of the music industry

All industries are concerned with perpetually increasing profit, and the music industry is no exception. This industry sells intellectual property in the form of musical compositions, recordings, and performances. A good synonym for it is “music business.” Today, four major corporate labels dominate the business of recorded music. They are (1) Universal Music Group, (2) Sony Music Entertainment, (3) Warner Music Group, and (4) EMI (Cashmere2007). The business of live music is dominated by Live Nation, the largest promoter and music venue owner (Waddell 2007). Clear Channel Communications is the largest owner of AM, FM, shortwave, and satellite radio (Clear Channel 2011). And Apple is the owner of the world’s largest music store, iTunes (iTunes 2008). But, of course, it was not always this way.

The multi-billion dollar a year industry (Cashmere2007) has a relatively recent history. In 1877, Ohio born Thomas Edison discovered how to record and replay sound with the invention of his phonograph. And it was not until the 20th century that this process became good enough to efficiently record and widely distribute music (Milner 2009). Before this, there was no recorded music, and therefore no recorded music business. There was, of course, sheet music; but this was not nearly as lucrative a medium as recorded sound. The 20th century also saw the invention and distribution of the radio receiver. These must have been magical times. For the first time in history, a family could listen to recorded music, on demand, in the luxury of their own home.
Records replaced sheet music and became the industry’s largest force. A multitude of record companies came and went. Some noteworthy ones include Columbia Records, Decca Records, Edison Bell, The Gramophone Company, Invicta, Kalliope, Pathe, Victor Talking Machine and many others (Milner 2009). Many record companies died out as quickly as they were formed. For many decades the industry was a continual toss-up, but by the 1980s, the “Big 6” companies rose to form an oligopoly: EMI, CBS, BMG, PolyGram, WEA and MCA. Sony bought CBS Records in 1987 and changed its name to Sony Music in 1991. In 1998, Polygram merged into Universal Music group (formerly MCA), dropping the leaders to the “Big 5.” They became the “Big 4” in 2004 when Sony acquired BMG. Although independent labels have grown to make a substantial mark on the industry, the music business still continues to be dominated by the Big 4.

Nielsen SoundScan, the official music sales tracking system of the United States, reported that the Big 4 accounted for eighty two percent of the US market in 2005.

Figure 1 Market Share (Nielsen SoundScan 2005)
According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), more than ninety five percent of the total revenue from music in 2003 was derived from the thirty major countries in the proportions shown below, organized roughly by geographic location.

![Figure 2 Music Revenue Apportioned by Country (IFPI Report 2010)]

Thanks to breakthrough technologies, the dawn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century saw a revolution in the way which music was captured and distributed. The dawn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century is seeing a similar phenomenon. In the first decade of the 21st century, consumers spent less money on recorded music than they had in the 1990s, in all formats (McCardle 2010). Worldwide, total revenue for CDs, vinyl, cassettes, and digital download dropped twenty five percent, from $38.6 billion in 1999 to $27.5 billion in 2008 largely due to piracy (IFPI Report 2010). The \textit{Economist} (January 2008) suggests that this downward trend will most likely continue into the foreseeable future.

The decline in revenue has caused large scale layoffs and has forced many in the industry to consider a new business model (Knopper 2009). The computer and internet are to the 21\textsuperscript{st} century what the gramophone and radio were to the 20\textsuperscript{th}, somewhat respectively. In 2003, Apple opened iTunes, the online digital music store, which exploded almost immediately. In 2009,
more than a quarter of all recorded music industry revenue worldwide came from digital
download (IFPI Report 2010). However, The Economist (January 2008) reports, "paid digital
downloads grew rapidly, but did not begin to make up for the loss of revenue from CDs."

The balance of power between record company, artist, record store, and consumer has
changed dramatically. Big box stores like Wal-Mart and Best Buy sell more CDs than the now
rare stand-alone music stores. Artists now rely even more heavily on live performances and
merchandise sales for the majority of their income. This unfortunately puts them at the mercy of
Live Nation, which currently has a monopoly on promotion and owns many music venues (The
New Yorker 2009). Many up-and-coming artists do not see a “record deal” as an integral part of
their business plan at all. Inexpensive hardware and software has made it possible to record
reasonable quality music from the convenience of the artist’s bedroom (USA Today 2009). This
has caused problems for recording studios, record producers, and audio engineers. In 2009, The
Los Angeles Times reported that more than half of the recording studios in that city have failed.
Changes in the music industry have given consumers a wider variety of music than ever before,
at a price gradually approaching zero (Knopper 2009).
Additionally, YouTube has been a critical medium for music distribution. The California based website does not allow the uploading of copyrighted material, but one can still listen to virtually any song by any popular artist. This is because most popular artists and several media corporations have agreed to upload their content onto YouTube in exchange for advertisement revenue; much like how it would be done on television. The difference is the “on demand” factor. Unlike music television or radio, the listener does not have to be at the mercy of the DJ’s playlist or the TV programmer’s broadcast schedule. He can listen to whatever he wants, whenever he wants, all for the price of an internet connection. Because of this, YouTube has seen tremendous success. In fact, eight of the top ten most viewed videos on the website are music videos; with Justin Bieber’s “Baby” at first place, with an astonishing 632,729,305 views (as of October 4, 2011, 10:06pm).

![YouTube Uploads](image)

**Figure 4 YouTube Uploads (Hypebot 2011)**

YouTube can also be incredibly advantageous for up-and-coming artists. Artists can create their own YouTube channel and essentially upload their entire album as individual songs
with a still picture (the album cover) for the video. These clips of music can be embedded to the artist’s website, Facebook, or blog. Interestingly enough, the artist now with the most viewed video on YouTube had his humble beginning on YouTube. When he was twelve years old, Bieber entered a singing competition in his hometown of Stratford, Ontario, and placed second. His mother posted the video on YouTube for family members to see. Bieber was eventually picked up by Scott Braun, a former marketing executive of So SoDef, who clicked on one of his videos by accident. He is now signed to Island Records, a subsidiary of Universal Music Group (Billboard 2010).

It should be emphasized, however, that Bieber’s wild success is a rare case. Achieving fame through YouTube in some ways mimics the problem of the pre-internet era. With most its virtual space occupied by already famous artists – plus hordes of other up-and-comers – there still exists the tremendous difficulty of trying to get people to pay attention to you; getting your voice heard. Anybody anywhere can upload a video, but chances are good that it will become drowned by all the existing noise, just like an individual’s voice will become drowned in a crowd of a hundred thousand people.

This is where the power of the big record companies continues to play out spatially. The record companies have traditionally been responsible for marketing records. They take out ads in newspapers, magazines, and on TV on occasion. More importantly, record companies use an array of tactics to get the artists on their rosters on radio and on tour with more well known artists. Without radio play or a spot on important tours, it is very difficult for up-and-coming artists to get noticed.
2.2 Geography of the music industry

The music industry is a topic little studied by geographers. This is not surprising, given the already minimal work which exists in music geography as a whole. It is, however, disappointing because by its very nature, the industry is an incredibly geographic phenomenon. Trends of globalization, internal corporate restructuring, and global-local relations are as evident in the music industry as in any other sector (Leyshon, Matless, and Revill 1995). The big four record labels have grown to dominance by reaping the benefits of merger and acquisition activity on a global scale. The global-local link is also important for the success of the industry. Music is realized as a commodity which is locked into particular locations. Negus (1992) describes the key role of A&R (Artist and Repertoire) staff in fostering a contact network covering a range of production companies, minor record labels, publishers, managers and lawyers at the local scale, so that what is happening across the country can be communicated to and assessed by the global corporation. Proximity to centers of music talent becomes important, and the major labels anchor business in these select few nodes, namely Los Angeles and London (Amin and Thrift 1992).

Graves (1999) gives an alternative history of the music industry. Working within the framework of Anthony Giddens’ (1986) structuration theory, he suggests that the consumer is the most important agent in determining the success of the industry. The most profound consumer behavior is the failure of consumers to respond to the marketing efforts directed at them by the music industry. Shifts in consumer taste preference have left the industry in disarray. In this way the industry can be likened to a species which spends hundreds of generations adapting so finely to its environment, only to see that environment completely change overnight.

This is a particularly spatial phenomenon. Consumer tastes have always changed throughout history, sometimes drastically. Entire genres, like disco and heavy metal, have been
abandoned. When this happens, the corporate research and development (R&D) team sends out A&R agents to scout for new, lucrative sources of talent. These talent scouts flock in “gold rush” fashion to certain places. When one scout hears about a grunge band being picked up in Seattle, he rushes over to pick up a band of his own. Then another scout moves to find a band for himself, and eventually you have a multitude of talent scouts sifting through the local scene, each anxious to find a band of his own. This has happened throughout history: rock-n-roll in Memphis in the 1950s, hair metal on the Sunset Strip in the 1980s, grunge rock in Seattle in the early 1990s, to name a few classic examples. Will this business model continue to work into the 21st century? Does the place of music matter in the age of the internet?
3.0 Music and Place

The concept of place sits at the very core of geography as a discipline, yet geographers have been unable to arrive at an agreeable definition of the word. The matter of defining place becomes peculiarly frustrating because the word is not just some abstract, theoretical concept confined to the jargon of academia, but a notion that everybody uses on a regular basis. There is no place like home. Disneyland is the happiest place on earth. Find a place in your heart to forgive her. What does place actually mean? Is a Petri dish a place? What about interstellar space? The human heart? Yi-Fu Tuan tackles the question head on, and arrives at a rather simple answer: place is a named space. The moment a space has been subjected to human experience, it becomes a place. It is important to note that “space” and “place” require each other for definition. Space is emptiness, nothingness, the lack of place. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa (Tuan 1977).

Political geographer John Agnew (1987) suggests that place must contain three fundamental components: location, locale, and sense of place. Location is perhaps the most straight-forward. All places are located somewhere, whether as coordinates on earth or in outer space. Locale is the material setting of a location in which social relations are acted out; it is a location’s distinct flavor. If location is the stage, then locale is the play, including all of its props, actors, dialogue, and drama. By “sense of place” Agnew means the subjective emotional attachments people have to place. One’s hometown, for instance, might evoke a strong sense of place, which he may share with neighbors, but not with outsiders. And this is important for the music industry, because according to Graves (1999) artists and A&R executives alike rely upon sense of place as they make critical choices effecting the music industry’s operation.
Kent Ryden (1993) isolates the sense of place as a specific genre of regional folklore offering four “layers of meaning” familiar to local residents but invisible to visitors, cartographers, and even scholars: (1) local and material lore including local names for flora, fauna, and topography; (2) handed-down history, much of it intimate, some of it apocryphal; (3) group identity and place-based individual identity; (4) the emotions or affective bonds attached to place (which Tuan calls topophilia).

Place is man’s domain. His entire life, from cradle to the grave (and even before and after), is carried out in it. He is bounded by it, like a puppet bounded by strings, and cannot escape it; yet, in a peculiar way, is free to move about in it. Edward Relph (1976) wrote:

[T]he significance of place in human experience…is apparent in the actions of individuals and groups protecting their places against outside forces of destruction, or is known to anyone who has experienced homesickness and nostalgia for particular places.

Music and place are inseparable. Place creates music and music creates place. Music has a significant impact on the landscape. Consider, for instance, how different New Orleans, Louisiana would look without its historic jazz clubs. Music not only creates space literally, but also conceptually. How different would the outsider’s perception of California be if it were not for surf rock and gangster rap. Additionally, sound in general, and music in particular, is tied into the fabric of the landscape, just as time is tied into the fabric of space. This has come to be known as the “soundscape.” And of course, music does not simply remain in one single place, but diffuses from its cultural hearth (place of origin) out to other places, where it might morph into something different and diffuse yet again.

Traditional patterns of diffusion (and notions of place and the role of space) have recently been challenged by the exponential growth of information communication technology (ICT). Ever increasing bandwidth and PC data storage capacity have begun to democratize production
and consumption of music, although this process has been largely confined to the developed world. Inexpensive digital audio recording programs have turned American bedrooms into reasonably good recording studios. The inexpensively produced music can in turn be effectively promoted by the artists via internet. The geography of music faces unprecedented times.

3.1 Place creates music

Place has been a focus of research in music geography because place both shapes, and is shaped by music. The reasons why place-specific music develops typically involve a combination of factors, including: migration and settlement patterns; ethnicity; social group values, institutions, and traditions, including musical heritage; socioeconomic conditions; cultural liberalism; and the role played by community institutions such as the church, schools, and government (Curtis and Rose 1983).

The industrial geography of post war Birmingham, England was a critical variable in the development of an entire genre of music, heavy metal (Harrison 2010). The founders of this genre are Black Sabbath and Judas Priest, each of which includes members who grew up in poor, working class families, and who frequently cite the industrial landscape of Birmingham as a factor in the creation of the specific style of music they jointly created.

Geographic factors have also been well documented and analyzed in the birth of rock-n-roll in Memphis (Ford 1971), grunge rock in Seattle (Bell 1998), and “the Miami Sound” from South Florida (Curtis and Rose 1983). Rock-n-roll was a product of time/place factors that came together in Memphis circa 1955. This probably could not have happened anywhere else. Memphis was at the crossroads of Mississippi Delta blues, New Orleans Jazz, Nashville country, Texas Western, Kansas City rhythm and blues, and Chicago urban blues. This is a sort of musical fusion; when two or more types of music come together and form something new and
different. The new sound is not simply a sum of its elementary parts, nor is it “more than the sum of its parts,” but is something different entirely, just like sodium chloride is not simply sodium plus chlorine. That is what makes the new sound so appealing; it has an entirely new taste. This also happened in Miami during the 1980s. Afro-Cuban salsa fused with American 80s pop and created the “Miami Sound.” Again, time/place factors that perhaps would not have happened anywhere but Miami, Florida. Interestingly, the exact opposite situation can also birth a new genre of music. In many ways Seattle during the late 1980s was a “cultural island.” They were not well connected with the major labels. Popular artists touring the United States would only go as far north as San Francisco, then turn back around. Seattle’s geographic isolation made it too costly for travelling artists to visit. So the bands developed a do-it-yourself attitude and a local, independent industry was established. In this case, isolation, not hybridization, fostered the birth of a new genre. The biological analogue works well here: a species left long enough in isolation will evolve into an entirely new species.

3.2 Music creates place

Music creates place in two ways; literally and conceptually. Music has quite literally morphed the built environment (Connell and Gibson 2003). One does not have to venture far to see these effects. Every major city has (or lacks) places dedicated to the production and consumption of music. Consider, for example, the myriad of recording studios present in a musical city like Los Angeles, and how this differs from a not so musical city like Philadelphia. These recording studios take up real physical space, morph landscapes, and make cities like Los Angeles what they are. And it does not end there. Where there are recording studios, there will be music stores, music clubs, concert halls, and museums. The landscape of Los Angeles’s iconic
Sunset Strip would not exist at all if it were not for its music clubs and venues. Here, music has literally constructed a place.

Figure 5 Google Maps Search for “Recording Studios in Los Angeles”
Music also creates places conceptually. This is quite a tricky and subjective matter. The image depicted by artists who sing about places can range from horribly inaccurate to wonderfully authentic. And people often accept the artist’s depiction at face value. This puts a certain degree of power into the hands of the artist. He decides how that place will be created in the imaginations of all his listeners. This can have an enormous impact on the place itself, especially if the artist is popular. For instance, the image of California, mostly a false one, has been represented in song throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Lyrics about the Golden State have changed quite radically though, from a distant, tropical, romantic paradise to a crime-ridden, drug-abusing misogynistic gang territory (Romig 2009). Song writers have captured the geographic imagination of millions of outsiders. Here, music has created a multi-faceted place in people’s minds, but at the cost of accuracy. A much more accurate picture of California is painted by the Red Hot Chili Peppers (Pesses 2009). The band seems to have an obsession with their hometown of Los Angeles, and do not glorify nor condemn it. Instead of presenting a meta-
narrative of the city, they present multiple narratives. For the band, LA is a city of tension and hypocrisy. The band members were not raised in the ghetto, but are by no means elite Angelinos. They are of a world that acknowledges the anger of Compton, while not discounting the opulence of the West side, and are actually able to produce a version of LA that speaks to all classes.

3.3 Soundscapes

The soundscape is the audible environment (Smith 1994). What vision is to landscape, hearing is to soundscape. Of course, everything from bird calls to car horns can be considered a part of the soundscape, but the specific focus here is on music. Music in the environment can have tremendous impact on the way in which we define places. Imagine for a moment, travelling through the middle-east, but instead of Arabic music, hearing polka played in all the towns and cities. Most people would find this odd because it would be inconsistent with the regional soundscape we have developed in our minds. A mariachi song, for example, may evoke images of a Mexican cowboy wearing a sombrero, riding his horse through semi-arid country. Music has and constructs meaning: it can evoke a sense of space and of society that differs from, and is complementary to, that evoked by sight (Smith 1997).

3.4 Diffusion of music

A major theme threading through much of the geographic literature on music is diffusion (Nash 1968; Gordon 1970; Ford 1971; Glasgow 1979; Butler 1983; Arkell 1991). Music, much like any other geographic phenomenon, is born in a particular place – often called the cultural hearth – and then diffuses elsewhere. Professor Everett Rogers popularized social diffusion theory in his book *Diffusion of Innovations* (1962). His theory seeks to explain how, why, and at
what rate new ideas and technology spread through cultures. Four main elements influence the spread of a new idea:

1. Innovation: an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.

2. Communication channels: the means by which messages get from one individual to another.

3. Time: rate of adoption, or relative speed with which an innovation is adopted by members of a social system.

4. Social system: a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal.

That is, diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system.

Geographers have worked within the framework of this theory in order to present a history of various forms of music, including blues, jazz, and rock. At the root of almost all forms of American popular music is blues, born from the Mississippi Delta (Arkell 1991). This exclusively American creation eventually diffused outside the homes of rural Black folk and took hold in other parts of the country, where it morphed into new forms and diffused yet again. In New Orleans it greatly influenced the birth of Jazz, another American innovation.

Jazz received popular acclaim in Chicago and the Midwest before it was generally accepted in New York and the Northeast. The rate of adoption was slower in the latter region because of the attitude of the social system. White society in the Midwest was more willing than that in the Northeast to assimilate elements from the black culture of the Delta South. The Big Apple, home of Tin Pan Alley, did eventually adopt jazz music, but this raises an interesting
idea. Diffusion of cultural innovations from smaller to larger places in the urban hierarchy, from the periphery to the core, may not be at all unusual (Glasgow 1979). The study of the diffusion of country music found a similar pattern of reverse diffusion; and for reasons comparable to those observed here (Carney 1977). It may be that certain kinds of innovation, as exemplified by music geographers, tend to occur more often in places remote from the core area of social and cultural interaction, which is often viewed as promoting innovation.

3.5 The internet’s impact on the geography of innovation

Some economic geographers have argued that location remains ever important, despite the massive boom in information communication technology (ICT). Of course, ICT has greatly facilitated communication, but it has not dissolved the importance of place (Feldman 2000 and 2002). Our modern (mis)conception that the internet is shrinking the world and making places placeless is not all new. The telegraph boom of the late 19th century saw a similar reaction. The expected impact of the telegraph mirrors current predictions about the internet so closely that Tom Standage (1999) describes the telegraph as “The Victorian Internet”. One hundred years later, with the internet at the height of its influence, economists are still finding a spatial dimension to innovation. Perhaps the best example of this is California’s Silicon Valley. Its groundbreaking innovations highlight the importance of regional specialization to economic activity, the importance of locational clusters as a source of increasing returns, and the productivity effects that stem from co-location of industrial and university research and development. Thus, despite telecommunications technologies and global capital flows that have vastly expanded the geographic range of economic interaction, regional milieus remain central to economic development in the 21st century (Zook 2005). The development of the internet industry is fundamentally embedded in geography and defies simple expectations of diffusion and the
demise of cities, and instead illustrates the continued importance of particular regional and urban nodes in an increasingly globalized economy.

3.6 The internet’s impact on the geography of music

It is important to remember that globalization is not a homogenous, but a selective, process. In 2003, according to the A.T. Kearney/Foreign Policy Magazine Globalization Index, Western Europe, the Commonwealth nations, and the United States constituted seventeen of the top twenty most globalized nations on earth. The great majority of the world, particularly Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, remains poorly integrated, in terms of investment by multinational companies, political engagement, and personal contact (Agnew 2009). Particularly pertinent to this study is the global geography of internet connection. The map in figure 7 demonstrates just how incredibly unbalanced this component of globalization is. It seems like there is more traffic between Europe and the United States than between all other regions of the world combined; and Africa is almost entirely disconnected.

Figure 7 Internet Traffic
In the early part of the 21st century, of course within the integrated regions, internet access speed (bandwidth) became fast enough to efficiently transfer music across home computers. The exponential growth of bandwidth, coupled with the growth of PC data capacity (hard drive size), has almost completely made hard-copy media (i.e. compact discs) obsolete. In 1999 bandwidth was at three megabits per second (Mbps). By 2009, it had climbed over 26,000 percent to 800 Mbps. Furthermore, average PC data capacity has seen exponential growth, from about ten gigabits (GB) in 2000 to 1,000 GB in 2010. Music lovers can now download and store a seemingly infinite amount of music almost instantly. The portable mp3 player, namely the iPod, moves the listener’s music library from his PC to everywhere else – car, gym, friend’s home – with much better efficiency than the compact disc. Indeed, music has become unbelievably maneuverable, not just for the listener, but for the producer as well.

![Internet Bandwidth History](Ball State University 2011)
The production and distribution of music has become increasingly decentralized. Inexpensive digital recording software and hardware has made it possible for musicians to record with reasonable quality from the comfort of their own homes. The recorded music can then be published via internet channels, particularly YouTube. This means that artists no longer need to “land a record deal” in order to acquire recognition. The industry model has forever changed. Connell and Gibson write:

The rise of home recording cultures in many non-metropolitan areas has suggested the potential for decentralization, through cheaper and more accessible technology, Internet resources, and capabilities for global distribution and marketing for unsigned bands.

This whole situation tempts, almost seduces, us into drawing certain conclusions: “Now anybody anywhere can become famous! Place no longer means anything!” But as we will see, much of the literature suggests otherwise.
Holly Kruse has extensively studied the impact of the internet on the geography of music, particularly in the local independent music scene in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois (Kruse 2009). She concludes:

The exposure of local and regional music to geographically distant audiences has not always served to lessen the importance of locality and local identity – in fact, sometimes such dissemination has the opposite effect. New communication technologies do not necessarily cause the death of the local. Given the history of utopian narratives about new communication technologies creating global communication and understanding, and the continuing existence of local and regional cultures and of barriers to technology and information access, the complete erasure of physical space in subcultural music identities, histories, and institutions is not likely to happen anytime soon.

In St. John’s, Newfoundland, instead of the internet disseminating music’s sense of place, it has helped to maintain it (Keough 2009). Residents were forced off the island in search of employment following the cod fishing ban of 1992. The Diaspora was found using the internet as a means of listening to St. John’s radio stations, which play distinct local music particular to Newfoundland. Additionally, Newfoundland music is beginning to expand its reach to others beyond its Diaspora, thanks in part to internet broadcasting. While still small, there is now a world market for this music. New broadcasting technology (internet radio) helped ensure the survival of local terrestrial stations in Newfoundland, hence the internet helped maintain music’s sense of place.

Famous country singer Trace Adkins said in a recent interview (Adkins 2011):

I remember a guy tellin’ me once when I was playin’ clubs in Texas. “You know what,” he says, “You just need to move to Nashville,” he says, “That’s where the factory is. That’s where they make what you want to be.” And it’s still true.

And it’s still true…
4.0 Concluding the reviewed literature

Music geography has indeed come a long way since Peter Nash (1968) first proclaimed, “Geographers have given few of the non-visual aspects of man’s life the attention they may deserve.” The past four decades have seen (and heard) a considerable bounty of work in what has become a more robust sub-discipline of cultural geography. While the literature is fairly impressive, a number of research questions have gone unanswered and several social/cultural theories beg to be tested (Carney 1998). Geographic publications about world and ethnic music is relatively minimal. Little has been published about religious music. And despite America’s great bounty of marching bands in local communities, armed services, and college campuses, geographers have almost ignored martial music. Stage and film music has likewise been neglected. The pool of music data which geographers can tap into is enormous, including data on concert halls and clubs, music festivals, and magazines like *Rolling Stone*. Now more than ever, the internet can be used as a highly effective tool to gather these data. Quantitative research methods have not been used by many music geographers. The vast amount of data out there can be used to formulate and execute some productive hypotheses.

This study aims to fill an exceedingly important gap in the literature. Hopefully, the breadth of this “social revolution” the music industry is undergoing since the turn of the last century has been made clear and has caused reason for concern. Never since the invention of the phonograph and radio receiver has the geography of music seen such abrupt and extensive potential for change. Nowadays, anybody with a PC and internet access can become a producer and consumer of music. This has challenged the very structure of the music industry and has left its wealthiest companies scrambling for new business models. But how has it changed the
geography of music production? Are the traditional loci of music production failing in digital age? Can anybody, anywhere really become a star? Is music still connected to place?
5.0 Data and Methods

The general question this study seeks to answer is whether or not music is becoming placeless. Particularly, have the origins of the fifty bestselling artists become more dispersed, concentrated, or remained stagnant over the past twenty years, 1991-2010? This time frame is ideal for study because it spans a period during which internet technology developed to efficiently produce and distribute music digitally, while PC data capacity expanded enough to store vast amounts of digital music. Perhaps more importantly, this is when recording technology became advanced and affordable enough for home use, effectively turning the average musician into a reasonable engineer. Furthermore, the latter part of this time period saw the speedy rise of self-promotion apparatuses such as YouTube and MySpace. In theory, these factors combined should provide an adequate infrastructure for the production and dissemination of music.

The data is obtained from the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles charts: annual lists of songs based on chart performance over the course of a year based on Nielsen Broadcast Data Systems (a service that tracks monitored radio, television and internet airplay of songs based on the number of spins and detections) and SoundScan (an information and sales tracking system; the official method of tracking sales of music and music video products throughout the United States and Canada).

Additionally, it would be a good idea to compare the results to other forms of music using the same tools to see if any dispersion has taken place there. If the best-selling artists represent the “one percent” of musicians, how have the bottom “ninety-nine percent” fared? One way of measuring the effect of technology on the bottom “ninety-nine percent” of musicians could be to analyze a sample of album oriented rock (AOR), an American FM radio format focusing on album tracks by rock artists. AOR focuses on albums and not singles, suggesting
that the artists themselves are involved in composing the music, which may indicate that this form of music could manifest itself in the landscape differently than pop music.

In order to map this genre, *Billboard*’s 100 year-end best-selling albums charts were taken at five year increments from 1991 to 2010. The AOR artists were extracted, plotted in ArcMap, and – using the same set of tools for the best-selling artist maps – were measured for dispersion for the same time span.

### 5.1 Assigning a point of origin to each artist

Identifying the year-end best-selling artists is relatively easy. The more difficult task is assigning a place of origin to each of the artists. Even Johansson and Bell (2009) admit, “In some cases, the evolution of a band is a complex process and it is not possible to determine one single ‘point or origin.’” Many artists will make deliberate career moves to music centers like Los Angeles and New York City. Therefore, classifying based on where the artist was “picked up” will be problematic; the music industry centers would be overrepresented.

Classifying bands is much easier than classifying a single artist. A band can be easily classified by where its members congregated. Each individual member might be from a different place (although usually not), but where the band was *formed* is ultimately most important. AC/DC is officially referred to as an Australian band, but its members come from England, Scotland, Wales, as well as Australia. Van Halen hails from Pasadena, CA, but its members come from The Netherlands and Indiana. Assigning a point of origin to group acts makes sense because individuals frequently choose to migrate to specific locations, such as Los Angeles, to take advantage of specific industry infrastructure, including recording studios, showcasing clubs and proximity to record company headquarters.
For solo artists there are two possible ways of assigning place of origin, each containing its own inherent advantages and disadvantages: (1) place of birth or, (2) essentially, someplace other than place of birth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros (place of birth)</th>
<th>Cons (place of birth)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Soundness of classification: the data will be smooth and manageable.</td>
<td>- People move: the artist might have moved the moment after birth. This new place has undoubtedly shaped his musical style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- No worryment about the artist’s future choices: i.e. career moves.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros (someplace else)</th>
<th>Cons (someplace else)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- A chance of knowing the artist’s true hometown, instead of just where he was born.</td>
<td>- Pinpointing this place: He might have moved every other year.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Career moves: many artists move to music centers deliberately.</td>
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Although not perfect, classifying by place of birth seems most error-free. Besides, the great majority of artists will expectedly not have strayed far from their places of birth.

Geographers have a tradition of labeling the United States an intensely mobile nation. Americans may be more mobile than most, but according to the United States Census Bureau, only 16.8 percent of the US population moved in the one year period between March 1992 and March 1993 (this time frame was chosen randomly and represents no bias), most of whom made local moves. 61.9 percent of these movers moved from one residence to another in the same county, and 19 percent moved between counties in the same state (United States Census Bureau, Geographical Mobility 2011). And these rates have remained constant throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when most of the musical artists under consideration would have been born and raised.
And so, the hometown of a band will be where its members congregated, and of a solo artist simply where he or she was born. This information can be readily accessed through Wikipedia, which is a reliable and nearly exhaustive source of information regarding popular music artists.

However, if the artist’s biography on Wikipedia specifies certain details about his or her upbringing, these will be taken into consideration. If he is born in one place but moves very early on to another, then that other place obviously better represents his place of origin. In order to make the data quantifiable, a cut-off date must be established. The cognitive psychologist David Rubin found that about ninety percent of childhood episodes recalled by adults occurred after their fourth birthday, and many adults remember hardly anything before the age of seven (Sabbagh 2009, 4). Based on this, an adequate cut-off date would be the age of four. If there is information indicating that the artist moved at or before the age of four, the place he moved to will be his place of origin. If the artist moved after the age of four, his place of birth will be his place of origin. Of course, this system of classification is not without potential flaws, but represents a common sense approach to building a reliable database.

5.2 Mapping the data

In order to analyze the effect of ICM on the production of music in recent decades, five maps were generated (1991, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010). On each of these maps are the hometowns of fifty artists, which were first tabulated in Microsoft Excel, then geocoded in ArcGIS and are displayed as red points.

My first task was to find the median center of these data points. This was quite easily done in ArcMap with the use of the “median center” tool under spatial statistics. ArcGIS defines this tool in two ways: (1) a location representing the shortest total distance to all other features in
a study area, and also (2) the location of a single x, y coordinate value that represent the median x-coordinate value and the media y-coordinate value for all features in a study area. This, displayed as a green square point, will essentially show us the geographic center of all the data points, giving us a median point which we can track along our twenty year time span. The median center functions as a constant by which we can begin to measure any shifts or movements in the locus of production.

It was also important to measure any distributional trends for the set of data. To do this, the “directional distribution: standard deviational ellipse” was used in ArcMap. This tool measures the trend for a set of points by calculating the standard distance separately in the x and y directions. These two measures define the axes of an ellipse encompassing the distribution of features. The ellipse is referred to as the standard deviational ellipse, since the method calculates the standard deviation of the x and y coordinates from the mean center to define the axes of the ellipse. The ellipse allows us to see if the distribution of features is elongated and hence has a particular orientation. While we can get a sense of orientation by simply plotting the data points on the map, calculating the standard deviational ellipse makes the trend clear. This tool helps us measure dispersion over time. There can be three distinct outcomes with this measurement. If the ellipse becomes larger and more circular over the twenty year time span, then it will be clear that dispersion of production has occurred. If the ellipse remains the same in size and shape, then no dispersion is happening. If the ellipse becomes smaller and more circular, then it is safe to assume that nodes are becoming more clustered and concentrated over time (the opposite of dispersion). Hence, directional distribution is an ideal tool to measure dispersion of our data points over time.
6.0 Results

Below are a series of maps displaying the hometowns of the top 50 artists of each year, the median center of those points, and a standard deviational ellipse.
Figure 10: Best-Selling Artists of 2005 and 2010.
7.0 Discussion

The incredible lack of dispersion of popular music artists over this twenty year time span is immediately apparent in the sequence of the maps. Some dispersion seems to have taken place in the year 2000, but by 2005 artists become more concentrated than even 1991, and 2010 shows even less dispersion than 2000. The overwhelming majority of artists have come from the United States and, to a lesser extent, Western Europe. On all five maps the directional distribution ellipse covers the majority of the United States; and in 2000, the United States is fully contained within the ellipse. Additionally, in all five maps the median center stays within the eastern half of the United States, though it does move toward the center during the last decade. It is safe to say that internet communication technology and inexpensive home audio recording programs have had little impact on nodes of popular music production. With a few exceptions, the chances of an artist from outside the United States and Western Europe making it to best-selling status are nil. Artists from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even Eastern Europe and Australia – no matter how well connected to the necessary technological infrastructure – have, sadly, not made it to the top of the music charts. Although the United States and Europe are well connected to these new tools of production and distribution, much of the rest of the world is not (see figure 7); therefore, they may not be able to leverage these tools. The pattern of production continues to reflect access to the tools of production and distribution.

7.1 Juxtaposition

These results counter Amin and Thrift’s (1992) findings that proximity to centers of music talent becomes important, and the major labels anchor business in these select few nodes. The corporate research and development (R&D) teams, they declare, still send out A&R agents across the land to scout for new, lucrative sources of talent. However, it appears talent scouts do
not necessarily need to flock to shifting centers of music production. The emergence of local scenes like rock-n-roll in Memphis in the 1950s, hair metal on the Sunset Strip in the 1980s, grunge rock in Seattle in the early 1990s, may continue into the foreseeable future, but these continue to be unusual occurrences. The old centers of production (Los Angeles, New York, London) remain solidly in charge.

My results support Florida’s (2010) findings that musicians and recording industries cluster because an economy of scope can be a driving force for their locations. He finds a significant correlation (0.447) between employed musicians and population of a city, suggesting that the music world is not “flat”. In other words, bigger cities contain many more musicians per capita than smaller cities.

Furthermore, my results support Leyshon’s (2009) paradoxical suggestion that new recording and mixing software have embedded the music industry further into established agglomerations. It is highly unlikely that the giant multi-billion-dollar-a-year empires controlling the production of music will collapse. History has taught us that industries, instead of accepting sudden collapse, often reconfigure their strategies and adapt to changing environments. One example of this adaptation is the phenomena of TV programs like “American Idol”. This program, first aired in 2002, is the brainchild of long-time music producer Simon Fuller. It uses a talent-show contest format to scout potential performers. The real genius is that Fuller is able to expose these performers to a massive audience without the help of any other media. Several of the contest winners have gone on to sell millions of records, appearing numerous times in the database used in this study.

The music industry, once reestablished around these new technological assemblages, may become even more profitable than ever before. For example, digital formats like MP3s, which do
not involve all the traditional investments into material and human capital (brick-and-mortar record stores, labor power, etc.), may be sold over the internet with a profit margin of nearly 100 percent.

7.2 The curse of technology

There is a great economic myth that technology is bad for employment because it dissolves certain industries and therefore puts people out of work. The belief that technology creates unemployment simply holds no logical consistency. As renowned economist Henry Hazlitt (1946) put it, “Not only must we be causing unemployment with every technological improvement we make today, but primitive man must have started causing it with the first efforts he made to save himself from needless toil and sweat.” First of all, unemployment is not necessarily a bad thing. The economic goal of any nation, as with any individual, is to get the greatest results with the least effort. The whole economic progress of mankind has consisted in getting more production with the same labor. It is for this reason that people began putting burdens on the backs of mules instead of their own; that they went on to invent the wheel and the wagon, the railroad and the motor truck. It is for this reason that people used their ingenuity to develop a hundred thousand labor-saving inventions. Instead of focusing on employment, our primary motive should be to drive technology forward in order to increase production. As long as this technological progress is maintained and the consequent product distributed evenly among its producers, wealth is sure to follow. Instead of concerning ourselves with stubbornly conserving the music industry’s archaic 20th century business model, we should invest in driving technology forward: continue to develop advanced and inexpensive audio recording software, increase bandwidth and data capacity, and encourage the free exchange of ideas (“intellectual property”) through the internet. This will facilitate the democratization of music and create a
greater amount of good for a greater amount of people by challenging the social hierarchy so inherently ingrained in today’s music business model.

Again, Connel and Gibson (2003) argue:

The rise of home recording cultures in many non-metropolitan areas has suggested the potential for decentralization, through cheaper and more accessible technology, Internet resources, and capabilities for global distribution and marketing for unsigned bands.

There are some key words which they have chosen carefully here. “Potential” is one. Home recording technologies are indeed growing in many non-metropolitan areas, but this does not mean the absolute end of the music business as we know it. Like the internet, this technology is merely a tool. Even if the great majority of musicians from outside of the traditional nodes of music production (Los Angeles, New York, Nashville, London) were fully utilizing these tools – recording top quality music from their bedrooms and distributing it via internet channels – they will likely not get very far without access to the oligopoly which governs distribution and marketing. The object of today’s rising musician is to gain consumers, which will usually not happen on a massive scale via non-mainstream media. Another key word from Connell and Gibson’s passage is “capabilities”. Unsigned bands, without a doubt, have the capabilities for global distribution but they generally do not have the access to it.

7.3 The corporate manufacture of music

In a truly democratic society, music should indeed be democratized. However, through the use of geography, it appears that the democratization and diffusion of music production has not yet begun to happen, even after many of the necessary tools have long since created an environment ripe for change. A reasonable explanation for the stagnancy of nodes of popular music production over the past twenty years could lie in the nature of the profit-driven industry itself. Like all capitalist endeavors, the music industry is primarily interested in the
accumulation of capital and pursuit of profits. It becomes risky for companies, heavily invested in genres of music which are known to be profitable, to explore and experiment with new up-and-coming styles and artists. These companies have a formula, and it works. The vast majority of artists producing best-selling hits are not actually producing them at all (Negus 1999). It has for a long time been clear that songs are systematically manufactured for them by mechanistic “song factories” engaged in the routine bolting together of standardized interchangeable melodies, lyrics, and rhythms. In his comprehensive investigation about how the music industry produces culture, Keith Negus (1999) tells us, “The artists signed by record companies and the repertoire prioritized for recording and release are not in any straightforward way a reflection of the talent that is available.” He goes on, “It is a selection made according to a whole series of commercial judgments and cultural assumptions.” It is not an exaggeration to say that the small oligopoly of major labels has a significant influence over what we hear on the radio every day. The songs which we hear running through our airwaves are largely the result of a systematic top-down production which lies in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Four companies are essentially in charge of what type of music the great majority of the public listens to. As a matter of fact, in the time it took me to write this paper EMI was bought out by Universal (current owner of music) and Sony (current owner of publishing), officially reducing the “Big 4” to the “Big 3”. If current trends continue, we can only predict that absolute control of our music will lie in the hands of one giant company. Also, each of the “Big 3” companies belongs to enormous diversified conglomerates. In July 2011, Warner Music Group was bought out by Access Industries, a privately held US based industrial group involved in natural resources and chemicals, media and telecommunications, and real estate. Universal Music Group completely belongs to Vivendi, a French multinational company involved in the production of music, film,
pay television, television broadcasting, telecommunications services, and video game publishing. Sony Music Entertainment belongs to the Sony Corporation, a Fortune Global 500 company involved in the production of consumer electronics, semiconductors, video games, media/entertainment, computer hardware, telecom equipment; and, curiously, involved in financial services, insurance, banking, credit financing, and advertising.

The funneling of wealth into the hands of increasingly fewer men is not surprising. In our capitalist age music is seen as a commodity which ought to be manufactured and sold for a profit much like almost everything else: food, fashion, property, transportation, ideas, national defense (and offense), and drugs, among many others. The integrity of music’s artistic content is largely overshadowed by the profit it can create, thus driving the giant companies to “dumb down” their music in order to appeal to the lowest common denominator. These sorts of decisions bring growth and earn their executives promotions and raises, further consolidating their power over the control of music production. Our system rewards these decisions and celebrates their makers as “good entrepreneurs” instead of challenging their undemocratic rise to power and challenging their control of our cultural production. The road to music democratization will be difficult, if not impossible, with the current structures in place – even if the people have access to the necessary technology.

7.4 The bottom “ninety-nine” percent

It is quite clear that pop music production is not becoming placeless. However, it is important to mention that this is a genre which has never been place-bound. In other words, part of the reason we may not see dispersion over this twenty year time span could possibly be attributed to the genre’s historical lack of attachment to place. For example, Maria Carey, who was on the charts year after year, is from New York, but her music is not part of a place-bound
genre, a “New York Scene”. Michael Jackson, from Gary, Indiana, was not associated with a place-bound genre. Pop music has rarely been tied to place in the way other styles of music have: California Surf Rock, Heavy Metal on the Sunset Strip, Southern Rock, Chicago Blues, East/West Coast Rap, to name a few.

For this reason it is necessary to analyze rock music using the same methodologies to see if there has been a dispersion of production in that genre. One way of measuring the effect of technology on the bottom “ninety-nine percent” of musicians could be to analyze a sample of album oriented rock (AOR), an American FM radio format focusing on album tracks by rock artists. The term “album orient rock” was coined by Radio & Records editor Mike Harrison, who developed the format while program director at KPRI in San Diego from 1973 to 1975 (Peeples 1977). AOR artists focus on album sales and not singles, and this music is not always radio friendly. Rock music artists also are largely responsible for the composition and instrumentation of their own music. Because AOR is composed by the artists, rather than professional songwriters, AOR is far more tied to place than pop. Some notable artists include The Eagles, Led Zeppelin, Bon Jovi, Def Leppard, Pink Floyd, Black Sabbath, Queen, and Styx. Each of these artists are commonly associated with the place of their origins.

This genre would be relatively easy to measure for dispersion. Billboard’s 100 year-end best-selling albums charts were taken at five year increments from 1991 to 2010. The AOR artists were extracted, plotted in ArcMap, and – using the same set of methodology engaged for the best-selling artists maps – were measured for dispersion for the same time span.
Best Selling AOR Albums of 1991

Source: Billboard Year End Album Charts
Best Selling AOR Albums of 1995

Best Selling AOR Albums of 2000

Source: Billboard Year End Album Charts
Figure 11 Best-Selling AOR Albums

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The results of this set of tests are interesting. We find the same general pattern here as with the top 50 best-selling artists. In fact, in both cases the year 2005 (with the internet in full swing) shows the least amount of dispersion. This is not surprising considering that many of the artists appear in both charts. It is not likely to have a best-selling album without a best-selling single. And, having a best-selling single does not necessarily disqualify an artist from the AOR category. In fact, it may even help the artist sell the album. Some critics of AOR have noted that it no longer represents AOR at all. Radio programming rules such as time allocated to artists and artist rotation have largely left out much of the up-and-coming bands and have turned many AOR radio stations into essentially “classic singles” stations. For example, the best known AOR radio station in Los Angeles, KLOS (which is owned by Cumulus Media, the second largest owner and operator of AM and FM radio stations in the United States, behind Clear Channel Communications), will hardly ever play anything other than the best-selling singles by the best known bands of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

I have demonstrated that *Billboard’s* best-selling AOR albums do a bad job of representing the bottom “ninety-nine percent” of musicians. It could even be said that they do a rather good job of representing the top “one percent” because the artists from both charts overlap. There seems to be little difference between the origins of best-selling AOR artists and the origins of best-selling singles artists during this twenty year time span. A better representative sample of the bottom “ninety-nine percent” must be compiled in order to find if dispersion has occurred within them, suggesting democratization.
8.0 Conclusion

According to this study, nodes of popular music production have hardly seen any dispersion over the past twenty years. Instead of interpreting this as a benevolent sign of music’s stubborn attachment to place, I have taken a different approach and argue that the democratization of music has not yet begun to happen (at least not to a significantly measurable degree), even though the necessary tools have long been available to the people. Through the use of geography I have argued that music production – an important part of cultural production – remains largely a top-down process currently under the control of three media conglomerates. This brings us to an enormous and intriguing question: Who is in control of our music production? Moreover, who is in control of our musical tastes?

If the best-selling artists in the preceding maps represent the “one percent” of musicians, how have the bottom “ninety-nine percent” fared? This is an important question and one worth considering. Unfortunately, gathering data for the bottom “ninety-nine percent” is almost impossible, and it would not make much of a difference because control of music production is largely a top-down process in the hands of the “Big 3” record companies. There is no single organization in charge of keeping tabs on the progress of every musician in the world. Nevertheless, this remains a major shortcoming of this study which future studies should investigate.

It is important to mention the greater implications and inferences of my findings, and would be naïve and short-sighted to end with music alone. By using simple tools similar to the ones I have used, some other facets of top-down control in society may be exposed and analyzed. Music production is obviously not the only feature of oligopolistic control. Nearly every part of modern life in the Western World is somehow tied to it: the production of food, furniture,
transportation, housing, finance, ideas, weapons of war, politicians. The effects are not abstract and hidden from view, but quite tangibly and ubiquitously manifested in our everyday landscapes. Perhaps the spatial perspective will help us decode more of them.
References


