



## DIY cultures and underground music scenes

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To cite this article: Evangelos Chrysagis (2019): DIY cultures and underground music scenes, Popular Music and Society, DOI: [10.1080/03007766.2019.1650522](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2019.1650522)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2019.1650522>



Published online: 05 Aug 2019.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**DIY cultures and underground music scenes**, edited by Andy Bennett and Paula Guerra, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2019, 250 pp., \$140.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-415-78698-0

During my ethnographic fieldwork on Do-It-Yourself music practices in Glasgow from 2010 to 2011, I encountered an array of different definitions of DIY among my interlocutors. In a seemingly offhand remark, one of them told me that DIY was not “an excuse to do things in a piecemeal way.” Although he believed that DIY, as an overused and commodified term, had lost its powerful meaning, he had a point: the stigma of amateurism associated with DIY reflected a distorted view that sought to legitimize more “serious” pursuits.

I recalled my interviewee’s words when I attended the conference Keep It Simple, Make It Fast! (KISMIF), organized by Andy Bennett and Paula Guerra, and upon which this edited volume is based. Taking place in Porto in 2014, the first iteration of the conference (further editions followed) had all the positive characteristics of DIY and none of its perceived shortcomings: it was exciting, welcoming, and friendly, but also formal and well-organized, bringing together a number of young scholars alongside established figures in the field of DIY “culture.” If it can be said that a project has a tendency to be isomorphic with its subject matter, then KISMIF demonstrated the best elements of DIY.

The KISMIF conference informed the book in other ways, too. In 2002, [Andy Bennett](#) wrote about the importance of documenting the work of early career researchers in popular music and youth due to the increasing lack of funding for such research beyond PhD level (461). It is refreshing, therefore, to see many of the younger conference participants being included in the list of authors.

The eighteen chapters on offer, in addition to the introductory section, speak to the heterogeneity and vibrancy of current research on DIY music practices cross-culturally, which emerges as a promising field. Indeed, highlighting and accounting for the global reach of Do-It-Yourself cultural practice constitutes the book’s main contribution (though Africa is not represented here). The essays revolve around four themes, which map onto the book’s structure: the importance of urban space in the proliferation and sustainability of DIY music scenes; the complex interrelationship between grassroots music practices, cultural policy, and commodification; the ambivalent stance of DIY cultural producers towards technological innovation; and the forms of collective memory and knowledge associated with particular music genres and social networks in the history of DIY.

The examples mobilized to analyze these themes are both diverse and fascinating. In one of them, Will Straw provides an account of the Mile End neighborhood in Montreal, Canada, and the factors contributing to the local music scene’s (in)visibility. As Straw explains, despite the prolific music activities in Mile End – the home of Godspeed You! Black Emperor and other influential Canadian music actors – it may be difficult to represent visually the geography of the scene. This is due to the “cultivated casualness” (21) of DIY music scenes, which results in music practices becoming embedded within the humdrum of everyday life in the city. Elsewhere, Sarah Benhaïm grapples with dilemmas surrounding creativity and commerce by exploring the practices of five noise music labels in Europe and the United States. Focusing on

how these labels seek to preserve the ethical, aesthetic, and cultural values of DIY music-making, Benhaïm argues that their record-related practices privilege “use-value over exchange value” (122). As a result, record production and distribution emerge as emotionally laden activities stressing the anti-commercial character of noise music.

Such an emotional attachment to music is also a theme explored by Jeder Silveira Janotti Jr. and Victor de Almeida Nobre Pires in the Brazilian context. The authors discuss the practices of Sofar Sounds, an initiative that, against a backdrop of economic crisis, allowed DIY music to flourish in the country before becoming a global movement. Sofar Sounds relies on volunteers and carefully chosen guests – “a small and restricted audience” (142) – to put on intimate shows that recalibrate the way in which audiences consume music. Although the network’s aim has been to reconfigure listening practices and musical appreciation through the unmediated experience of performances and a sense of “respect” towards the artists, the disseminating power of the Internet has been a key publicity tool for Sofar Sounds, driving its international expansion.

In a fourth example, J. Mark Percival discusses the history of legendary Glasgow-based independent record label Chemikal Underground, as recounted by its four founding members in a series of interviews he conducted with them between 2000 and 2014. Percival identifies the label’s pragmatic attitude and its accumulated social capital within Glasgow’s music scene as being critical to its survival and success. Chemikal Underground’s “ideological flexibility” (216) and approach, oscillating between two notions of “independence,” has allowed them to establish a viable business by simultaneously retaining artistic integrity for over two decades.

The chapters are relatively short, thus becoming sharp, succinct statements on the dynamics of DIY practice. As such, they capture the liveliness of the KISMIF conference and encapsulate the vitality of DIY (“Keep It Simple, Make It Fast”), but the volume’s remarkable breadth does not allow for a critical reappraisal of the meaning of DIY. Thankfully, an introductory chapter by Andy Bennett and Paula Guerra deals with the thorny issue of what DIY *is*. DIY, they claim, is a decidedly urban practice that has transcended the realm of “underground” cultural production – “the loose term that brings together notions of youth conviviality, artistic production, mainstream defiance, ritual performance” (11) – to become a global “aesthetic” that pervades specific lifestyles. As the editors point out, there is an important difference, as well as overlap, between DIY lifestyles as forms of cultural consumption and DIY as a way of life that has resonance across different social realms (13–14). This is a timely and crucial observation supported by several case studies in the four subsequent sections. Yet it is less clear how DIY constitutes an “aesthetic” – a notoriously difficult term to pin down. Does it refer to specific characteristics of DIY, for instance “an aesthetic of simplicity” (149) that [Sara Cohen](#) encountered among post-punk bands in Liverpool? Or is DIY aesthetic closer to what [Nicolas Bourriaud](#) has termed “relational aesthetics,” which emanates from the web of social relations embedded in their cultural context?

The book seems to privilege the latter. Yet the appeal of DIY lies precisely in its elusiveness; DIY thrives on such indeterminacy – ambiguity is what gives it its force and authority. In this sense, the volume does not foreclose DIY’s inherent possibility for change, and offers a careful and sensitive examination of a plural, complex, and ever-evolving phenomenon. *DIY Cultures and Underground Music Scenes* is an essential and accessible reading for researchers of DIY practices across the humanities and social sciences, but also DIY practitioners, who will find here much food for thought.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2019.1650522>

