The Studio as Contemporary Autonomous Zone:
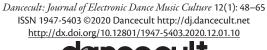## Crisis and Creativity in Electronic Music

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Abstract

This article explores electronic music making in a context of precarity and climate crisis. I use ethnographic research conducted in the Australian city of Adelaide and the provocative ideas of nineteenth century German philosopher, Max Stirner, to situate the electronic music studio as a contemporary autonomous zone, an interface between creative expression and capitalist existence. I argue that the studio functions as a physical and psychological space to develop what Stirner termed "ownness", taking possession and realizing one's own capacity and power. I propose ownness as a theoretical tool for understanding the studio as a site of self-realisation and micro-political action, investigating how electronic music practice shapes subjectivity, autonomy and resistance. The contemporary studio emerges as a refuge from the anxieties and uncertainties of late-capitalism, a therapeutic outlet and means of becoming, an opportunity to find voice and vocation in the violence of the present.

Keywords: studio, creativity, electronic music, autonomy, Stirner

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Introduction

This article explores how contemporary music makers situated themselves, their art and creative practice in response to the alienation of late-capitalism and existential crisis. The studio in electronic music can take the form of a bed, a bedroom or a dedicated music space, and production technologies range from a cheap laptop and cracked software to thousands of dollars of hardware. Using ethnographic research conducted between July 2016 and January 2018 in the Australian city of Adelaide, I attempt to understand how contemporary uncertainties around precarity, employment and environmental issues were influencing subjectivity. I consider the electronic music studio as a contemporary autonomous zone, a physical and psychological interface between creative expression and capitalist existence. This observation is an update on what Bey termed a TAZ, or Temporary Autonomous Zone (1991), an impermanent space outside structures of control. Born made a similar comparison, arguing that musical practice could function as a "space of exception to larger structures of social power" (2010: 235). I apply the ideas of nineteenth century German philosopher, Max Stirner, to show how the music studio could enable the individual to achieve a meaningful sense of ontological freedom (Newman 2017: 156). Drawing inspiration from Stirner's philosophy of ownness, I investigate three ways that contemporary electronic music practice worked to shape subjectivity, autonomy and resistance.

Firstly, I show how the studio was used to forge new modes of self-expression. In his key work *The Ego and Its Own* (1845), Stirner emphasised the importance of individualism and "uniqueness"; to be free in a real sense, one must become an "owner" in terms of self-will and self-possession (1971: 238).[1] The powerful and often relatively accessible musical tools of the contemporary music studio allowed infinite opportunities to produce music and the self. The studio functioned as a space where subjectivity was composed and enacted through creative processes, aided by skills and technologies and achieved with commitment and perseverance. The stories of dedication, invention and becoming through music practice, I argue, were suggestive of Stirnerian strategies of self-construction.

Secondly, I situate the studio as a refuge from what Jeong termed the "melancholy of modernity", an oasis from the existential anxieties and uncertainties of late-capitalist existence (2017: 4). Stirner was an early critic of democratic modernity, suspicious of state power and subservient faith in moral idealism. He perceptively understood the vulnerability of autonomy to the economic competition and government coercion of emerging liberal societies in the nineteenth century.[2] Stirner located an innate capacity for freedom within the individual as a bedrock from which to build "self-defining, self-constituting and 'egoistic' forms of subjectivity outside of any prescribed standard or norm" (Newman 2017: 156). As apocalyptic scenarios and austerity attenuated hopes for the future, electronic music was reported by over a third of my interlocutors as a therapeutic outlet; the studio emerged as a space that could evade and escape societal systems of control. Music practice became a vital way of processing the present, a means of achieving autonomy in the face of structural conditions seen as manipulative and alienating.

Thirdly, the studio allowed sonic strategies of resistance to articulate what I call a politics of the personal, a response to contextual circumstances rooted in subjective experience.[3] I demonstrate how music's enduring potential for rebellion, coupled with the technological affordances of the modern studio, enabled intensely personal and counter-hegemonic expression. In the striving to realise one's own creative voice I identify an echo of Stirner's exhortation for the individual to actualise their own path of freedom. I propose ownness as a theoretical tool that could understand the studio as a self-directed space where music became an empowering practice of creative self-mastery and personal fulfilment.

Stirner and the Studio

I first encountered Stirner's ideas while working in an anarchist bookshop in the late 1980s, a collectively-run operation that seriously attempted to put into practice its members' political convictions. Stirner was and remains something of a controversial outlier even for this most radical of political philosophies.[4] Contrary to his contemporary Karl Marx, the ownership of private property was considered an inevitability which Stirner extended to all aspects of the self (1971: 169). He saw property offering the potential for autonomy and constituting a problem of access rather than possession. However, to be free in a real sense, one had to become an owner in terms of self-will, someone independent and indifferent to social and moral laws: "Ownness . . . is my whole being and existence, it is I myself. I am free from what I am rid of, owner of what I have in my *power* or what I *control*" (Stirner 1971: 112).

Stirner believed action at the level of the large group or society could only be warranted by an appeal to an abstraction such as freedom and morality, what he termed the "spooks" of the humanist age (1971: 56). He avoided making prescriptive statements about what freedom was or should be, arguing that as an expression of the individual's power and capacity, freedom could only be determined by the self and its particular interests (Newman 2019: 159). This uncompromising standpoint has left his work open to a range of evaluation. It has been called a "philosophy of unsparing nihilism" (Paterson 1971: ix), psychological egoism of self-interested motivation (Jenkins 2009: 224) and an ideological foundation for libertarian hyper-capitalism (Ashford 2014: 979).[5]

Newman has arguably gone furthest in rehabilitating Stirner's influence; he identified a poststructuralist aspect to Stirner's anarchism, rejected notions of an essential form of subjectivity and advocated the subject's ongoing self-constitution (2017: 172). If power and freedom were always relational and unstable, autonomy would become less a final state of emancipation that one reaches and more an ongoing experimentation with different forms of existence and ways of relating to oneself (Newman 2011b: 204). Postmodern notions of identity conceived of multiple narratives of the self and described identity as a becoming rather than being (Frith 1996: 109). Such ideas had a close connection to the way music functions in identity construction (Born & Tilley 2011: 381). DeNora showed how

music worked to affect individual memories and emotional states and to construct personal meanings, describing it as a central component in the "conglomerate" of the self (2006: 24). I acknowledge Stirner's emphasis on self-construction downplayed the individual's constitutive relationship with wider society, well argued as it was in social theory.[6] However, his philosophy did identify the possibility of personally meaningful transformation that ultimately can only be done for oneself. I argue the studio allowed Adelaide's music makers to experience this self-in-process through an engagement with music.

In his anthropological study of power, Rapport identified a capacity of the individual to "create personally meaningful and viable environments and to traverse these in the pursuit of their own life-projects" (2003: 3). Rapport saw a potential in everyone to apply a seriousness and commitment to practice that allowed the subject to escape from the control and influence of external forces. For Stirner, an intrinsic egoism affirmed the self even in the absence of external freedom and formed the basis for self-liberation. It was this reading of Stirner that resonated with my ethnographic material and led me to apply his philosophy to a contemporary context. In allowing the synthesis of a range of processes, objects and contexts through aesthetic expression, the studio was central to how my participants constructed their subjectivity. I therefore consider the electronic music studio as a place of liberation in this Stirnerian sense, "an ontologically anarchic space of subjectification" which gave the subject the possibility to define their own path, or paths, of freedom (Newman 2017: 18).

Methods and Results

A total of 62 participants aged between 18 and 52 took part in semi-structured interviews focussed on the practice of electronic music production, with an average age of 30.25 and a mode age of 24. The project aimed to examine the impact of digitalization on society by exploring the subjectivities and capabilities of a cross-section of music makers with respect to how and why they make their music. My interview questions covered the context of commencing electronic music practice, how music was produced, attitudes to digital platforms and their perceived influence, the importance of social relationships within music and how my participants' practice related to their beliefs and values. I identified 85 per cent of my participants as male, a figure closer to 70 per cent for those 25 and under, although attitudes to gender and sexuality were nuanced and fitted more into a fluid spectrum of possibility. 27 of my participants used a mixture of software and hardware to make their music. Of the 26 who only used software, 18 were aged 25 and under. The results highlighted the importance of the age variable with a clear enthusiasm for digital methods of music making further down the age range. This predilection was expressed in attitudes towards computer technology elsewhere in life, such as engagement with social media, developing and maintaining friendships online and acquiring musical preferences.

My fieldwork period in Adelaide fruitfully coincided with a brief "golden age" in the city's electronic music milieu. The scene itself was a patchwork of various micro-scenes, often

with little contact with each other.[7] Despite its fragmented nature, it was soon clear that there was loads going on. I attended 88 events where electronic music was performed, but 3 in particular became significant case studies. *Sidechain* was a fortnightly event showcasing four live electronic acts. The monthly *Experimental Music Night* featured three live acts, often electronically-based. And *Club Sync* was a sporadic club night playing disparate music sourced from across the world but featuring a strong cohort of local producers. All 3 events had an implicitly inclusive policy of booking acts that ensured a wide diversity of music makers had the chance to perform, often for the first time. This abundance of research material meant I was forced to select who to approach for the project. The objective requirements of my research question demanded a broad data base, and I always aimed for a representative demographic and stylistic range. Significantly for this paper, however, I also found myself following an instinctive feeling for those I perceived to have an original voice in their music.

I promised to keep my participants' identities anonymous as I wanted everyone to speak deeply and sincerely, without any expectation that what they said would be identified by others and considered "cool" or "correct". Consequently, I asked people to come up with a pseudonym, or leave it to me to think of one. My research provides an insight into an invisible sector of contemporary music making, often ignored in music writing since Finnegan's 1989 ethnography *The Hidden Musicians*. As someone with a long history around electronic music, it quickly became apparent that Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC) had expanded to accommodate a wide array of electronic music makers; experimental musicians, sound art creators and laptop-tweaking singer-songwriters were among those I encountered. As I visited studios and witnessed performances, delved into musical histories and creative processes, the motivations and ambitions, hopes and fears of a diverse range of music makers emerged. When I asked participants how the contemporary conditions of life may be affecting their music, 60 per cent replied that the wider context of world events and social issues was significantly reflected in their music practice.[8] Of the other 40 per cent, two thirds said instead that their music was all about their personal and/or emotional experiences.[9] 23 (37 per cent) of my interlocutors reported that music practice for them functioned as personal therapy.[10]

What made the repeated accounts of music's role in strategies of personal development and wellbeing significant was their representation across the age range and stylistic spectrum. Seeking to understand how electronic musicians display a personally meaningful relationship with musical practice drew me to the ideas of Stirner. "Freedom" was a word that often came up throughout my discussions with electronic music participants in which the studio served as a space of possibility outside of the restrictive pressures of society. Stirner's notion of ownness became a theoretical tool that I could use to understand the electronic music studio as a place for constructing new modes of subjectivity and ways of life.

The Studio and the Self

One question I increasingly asked participants as my research progressed was whether they considered "a sense of self-development" as an important part of their music practice. On reflection, this was an ambiguous and ill-defined concept on my part, but 41 of my interlocutors agreed, with an average age of 30.4. The following accounts refuted the power of economic determinism as a driver in music creation by describing how participants defined self-development in their practice. Personal values and experiences were the bedrock and foundation of individual expression, nurtured in sonic safe spaces and manifested with the musical means available. The comparative affordability of Adelaide, compared with the major metropolitan centres of Sydney and Melbourne, made a domestic music room a realistic proposition, but headphones or even earbuds were enough to turn on, zone in and let it out.

Jane (19) was one of my youngest interlocutors but a prolific music maker, who described "being in the zone" as extremely important, the zone being the space "where everything comes from". Jane's account raised the important question about the boundaries of autonomous space in the networked age. This was a time when software upgrades and the influence and inspiration of specific social media platforms provided a seemingly infinite choice of cultural options to explore and articulate. Feeling unable to make music casually as something on the side, Jane had to "lock herself in" spatially and psychologically, focusing with tunnel vision on her musical process. She recalled a lifelong desire to make music that, given her lack of music education, seemed a distant possibility until the internet provided the inspiration and the means to make it happen. YouTube rapidly matured her tastes, and downloading Ableton—a DAW with an intuitive user-interface—allowed her to express her expanding and eclectic aesthetics.[11]

Jane was in no doubt about music's role in her self-development, associating her practice with personal discovery: "I'm always thinking about that actually, like where am I going from here? And it seems like naturally to happen, I develop more and more". Her early attempts, "a lot of atonal noise stuff", were considered an important phase of expression, and she had begun exploring a range of styles including ambient and Jersey Club, a process that she felt was organic and reflected the broad and shifting interests of her personality.[12] Her attitudes to musical expression articulated a politics of the personal.

> Jane: For the most part it is about honing-in on hyper specific emotions that I have had in the past, that are sort of reoccurring. Yeah, it is more to do with myself and my feelings and self-expression, more than the world around me.

Brother Lucid (37) talked in a similar way about the studio as a creative sanctuary. Having immersed myself in his extensive Bandcamp discography, it was clear that his ADHD diagnosis, late in life, was now an important part of his personal identity and an inspiration for his music. It emerged in his online promotion, in his track titles and as soon as we started talking. Like others with ADHD, the need to block out internal and external

distractions meant he would get "mad scientist in the laboratory" about his studio work: hyper-focussed, not eating. He saw the impulsivity and hyper-creativity of ADHD more widely in the information age. For people with ADHD, the short attention spans and mad scrolling through social media feeds was "mental, really crazy".

In the studio Brother Lucid made his music simply, looping beats into Audition on his laptop and playing in everything else manually over the top in separate takes.[13] He described the elements like certain "characters". He told me that with every track he needed to be doing something that he hadn't heard anyone else do, a constant challenge as he couldn't afford lots of gear and had to adapt whatever was to hand. He labelled this process as "post-apocalypse DIY".

Bloodbottler (27) was happy to describe himself as "a bit of an anarchist at heart", and his up-tempo brand of breakbeat bricolage fused fast-cut vocal samples from cult films with juxtaposed snippets of saccharine pop. The aim was to startle and offend an audience into questioning what he saw as the manipulation of the powerful. He first learnt music by trying to recreate drum and bass tracks on an Electribe sampler before developing his own style. YouTube tutorials provided him the knowledge of how to use DAW software like Pro-Tools and Reason. Bloodbottler acknowledged that music practice had made him put in "a lot more effort" than other areas of his life; it was something he could focus on and develop. He described getting a new piece of equipment as an extension of the self and learning to do more through it: "I feel like the better I get at producing, the better I get as a person. That sounds really stupid and egotistical, but it is true".

This association with learning, self-development and new equipment provided a fresh insight into associations of excessive consumerism regarding studio gear, perhaps exemplified in the name of a producer forum like GearSlutz.[14] Any new equipment was a rare occurrence for Bloodbottler, who was looking for work and made do with a minimal hardware set-up and an old Apple laptop which he used to maximum effect. After meeting makers of eye candy Instagram videos featuring impressive studios and twinkling modular monoliths, my suspicions of shameless displays of cultural capital were supplanted by the tangible joy of those sharing an intimate and usually long-gestating relationship with sound.

Kyle (34) was a case in point, with a well-honed social media presence and a studio set-up reinforced by the corporate sponsorship of a Japanese synthesizer company. Kyle started off making music in his teens using a basic tracker program on an Amiga computer.[15] Now he made commercially popular big room club music and considered his music as a form of self-expression that could connect with people on a fundamental level. He saw the need to "upgrade this vehicle" with more forms of self-expression as an important factor, but it was clear that sound itself was paramount. "I have pure joy in playing keyboard, you know, at home, just turning the keyboard on, and just playing keys, that's it". I first met him shortly after his performance at a very well-known Australian music festival. He was at the stage of his career that many I spoke with would like to get to, yet it obviously came with its own inherent complications.

Like many musicians, Kyle's identity revolved around the individuality and self-expression of the "authentic artist" and the aim to make music that was satisfying for himself as a musician and music fan. A sense of self-development emerged when he talked of his ability to successfully adapt to the shifting tastes of the market; he saw it as a way to challenge himself and bring in new ideas. He admitted to going through his own low periods of self-doubt, and said he made music against the side of himself that would drag him down. His was a work against his shadow side: "I'm not sure if it reaches the psychological level of self-actualisation, but it is close enough to it because I wouldn't have known how to express myself if it wasn't for music".

Peter (22) was a young producer also aspiring to make commercially popular music. I first met him after a performance at *Sidechain* toward the end of my fieldwork. As soon as the music began, my ears pricked up. Everything was fat, sharp and clean, and the harmonies were really good. Peter's investment in his craft was evident in his production quality. At our interview he told me how he allocated a few hours a day to the process. He was happy to try and make music a career but only by doing music he liked, although he hoped other people would enjoy it. Peter considered self-development in music as facing what you did not know, particularly at the performance stage when he said it was easy to stop learning. As an example, he suggested taking a break from song-writing to learn a new synth until you were confident with it, as it was easy to get distracted by just making songs.

Music had always been an emotional outlet for Peter. He recounted how teenage awkwardness had been relieved through learning the guitar and how to write expressively, a process he had transplanted into making electronic music on Ableton. He saw society becoming more "closed off" in terms of physical interaction with each other because of social media and considered music as a way to understand himself and express emotions. His accounts spoke of an inherent sincerity and honesty in self-composed music that was always emergent, regardless of conscious intention.

> Peter: When you are making music, you are letting out your subconscious emotions. Even if you don't think you are doing it, you are. You just make something and then you think, well that is a part of me, that was in me somewhere but now I have got it.

It was important to distance these stories of self-development from a neoliberal agenda of entrepreneurialism, consumption choices and self-aggrandisement. These accounts placed the studio as a separate space, physically and psychologically, from the normative ideals and control structures of society, which emphasized the liberating creativity of the present moment. The studio allowed the development of subjectivity through music; it enabled the music maker to answer what Jenkins considered a fundamental Stirnerian question: "Have I been able to determine what and who I am?" (Jenkins 2014: 19).

The Studio as Refuge

While advances in computing and communication enabled more people "to envisage themselves as active producers of information, knowledge, capability and meaning" (Stalder 2016: 22), such technologies have also been considered as a lubricant for the spread of

globalisation and neoliberalism.[16] In the contemporary condition of late-capitalism, debt servitude, right wing populism and post-Fordist work practices conspired to encourage alienation and paranoia.[17] Optimism around the potential of capitalism to open avenues for more varied forms of independent work ignored the reality that creative opportunities were used by many in Adelaide during their free time as an escape and as a way to deal with contextual conditions.[18]

Making music had elements of diversion and the chance to live vicariously through creative activity, and Stirner's own biography revealed some uncanny parallels with studio practice. Carroll said of the writer that "a drab and inconsequential reality was compensated by an assertive philosophy concerned with limitless possibility" (1971: 17). Research by Gross and Musgrave confirmed the importance of music to a person's well-being and sense of self-identity, but they also stressed that the precarity and conditions of the environment a person worked in was the source of problems with mental health (2017: 7). For many of my interlocutors the studio provided a safe space, an opportunity to disengage from the restrictions and pressures of external conditions but also to envisage an alternative.

Roy (18) saw the studio as a refuge and path of self-discovery. His studio set-up was basic; using Ableton and a couple of hardware synths, he sang his own songs along to his music. This process allowed him to be "super-personal", more than he felt he could be with his friends.

> Roy: It is like my deepest feelings, my deepest thoughts and emotions. Really just enjoying that with myself. That is what I feel is the beauty of making music, because it just enables you to do that. I suppose that it is like an escape, to make music for me. Just an escape from everything, just zone out, just like go into my own world, and create my own art, and just feel comfortable with it.

Although he considered himself something of a "misfit" in his school community, Roy felt his style of music has helped other people understand and accept what he was like and how he was feeling. Music had become all about freeing himself up to "do whatever the hell I want". His recent album, released on Bandcamp and Spotify, contained songs that related to him personally and to how he thought other people might feel in society. He said that in helping him reflect on who he was as a person, making music had been a huge part of his personal growth and developing maturity.

> Roy: I am slowly learning my own morals and everything on the way as a result. I feel it is definitely really important, it is the direction I would like to keep going, to keep making music, and learning from my own music, and learning about myself through my own artistic process.

Andy (43) evidenced similar attitudes to his music practice. A veteran of Adelaide electronic music, he told me stories of the heyday of rave in the city, when it was easy to get venues in the abandoned buildings of the inner city. We discovered a shared a punk background, a biographical feature of six other male interlocutors from across the age range in my

research, that signalled a possible musical and ideological rite of passage. Now he preferred to "hunker down" in the studio with a Nord drum machine and modular gear to focus on creating quality and "timeless music". Again, the studio's value as an expressive conduit and safe haven were made clear:

> Andy: I couldn't survive without it; it is a sanctuary for me. I know that I can walk in there and kind of almost decompress life through it. . . . The way you are feeling really comes out in the sounds you are creating.

Andy said he had to have an artistic outlet, a voice in the world, or he "would go crazy". Electronic music could be this outlet because there was more room for different frequencies that were emotive and could create and communicate feeling. He was in no doubt that music and self-development were like a symbiotic process, "like a therapy process". At the present moment with "the world in turmoil", he found himself returning to the ideals of punk, using music as a platform to express hidden statements in some of his tracks. He said he always had hope and had seen it in the youth and their desire to save the planet.

Moe (29) was a producer/performer currently leading a high-profile existence in Adelaide EDMC. She had a savvy and strategic media presence, and she described herself in our interview as the "social media queen". Many of her posts and promotional shots featured glamourous poses and scenes of hedonism and hands-in-the-air elation. Yet when she discussed her social media "brand" in our interview, Moe acknowledged there was a certain happy and bubbly persona that she had to maintain. She told me how she would suppress aspects of her personality, such as illness or depression, because she did not want to show weakness or engender sympathy.

As a self-confessed "control freak" with a past in band performance, the studio allowed Moe the space to work to her own timeframe, to play and record everything herself through Ableton. Music allowed Moe the opportunity to mine her emotional history, to transmute autobiography into therapeutic release through music and lyrics. She described the process as "more like a therapy for me, what I'm going through". She thought of music as an extension of herself, especially in "darker themes" which she felt could be relatable for people going through hard times; perhaps it helped them to know others had experienced the same feelings.

Jay (39), a hip-hop producer well-known locally in the genre's Australian "golden age" of the early 2000s, was similarly forthright about the therapeutic value music provided in his life. He made music on Logic but highly valued "crate-digging" for elusive sampling gold. I conducted the interview in a food hall in a Southern suburb of Adelaide, and it was clear by the frequent waves and smiles to passers-by as we talked that he was well-known in the local community. Yet Jay confided bouts of depression that coincided with a relationship separation. Music was the medium he used to get through this episode.

> Jay: I really used it as a therapy, I had a lot of drama, when I was making a beat I was off with the fairies, so I used it as therapy, I was unhappy, and a lot of my good music came from being unhappy.

Jay reported that the music he made was not political in the protest sense but was deeply connected to his individual experiences. He was adamant that he wanted to prove his individuality, and he reasoned upon reflection that he was driven by himself and by a desire to contribute to Australian music more broadly. Although Jay said the times when people had told him his music had helped them through life were important, music as therapy and self-development was not dependent on positive feedback and validation from others. Instead he felt "you should always be expanding. Like anything in life, you should always be learning".

Amber (24) was a classically-trained musician for whom the computer made it easy to sequence music without having to own instruments. A lack of finance kept her studio down to a laptop, soundcard and headphones. She used FL Studio, a DAW at the more affordable end of music production. Amber saw herself as a musician, artist and writer and described creativity as the "centre" of her identity. "I think I am a very individualistic kind of person, to be honest, I have a bit of an ego, and that's why I see myself as an artist". Like many other producers at the creative coalface, genre took second place to personal expression, as Amber proclaimed an aim to be different from everyone else and not influenced by trends. In a poignant moment in the interview, when she talked about promoting inclusivity in her music that extended to all humans and species, a small bird flew down to her feet.

Like others in this article, Amber wanted her music to move others on an emotional level; in her case, her listener might have considered their "spiritual connection" with the land. She said her lyrics could be taken as political and she made music against those who wanted to uphold the status quo, or who were "selfish and unaware of their privilege". But most often her music was more about escape. She felt a sense of helplessness and despair for the generations to come and, while optimistic about the tolerance of the young, she wanted her music to be an escape from austerity as well as a reminder. "Its real bleak. . . . We all need to escape from reality when it gets too dark, too horrid. But we also need to be reminded about it so we do something about it if we can".

The studio provided a refuge from the pressures of existential angst, a physical space that could alleviate the alienation of late-capitalism and release feelings that may have been easier to express elsewhere in less-restrictive periods in the past. While Stirner found his own identity and independence through his writing, music for my participants worked to survive or subvert contemporary conditions; it functioned as a fulfilling creative practice and as an outlet for generating affinity and micro-ethical expression.

The Studio as Resistance

Stirner's solutions to ensuring the individual requirements of living through the need for collective enterprise were transitory associations of egoists; the micro-political and ethical strategies he favoured needed to be created for people by themselves. Rather than committing to cooperative goals or serving altruistic intentions, each egoist would benefit from undertaking a shared activity of mutual interest (Shone 2013: 233). This kind of informal social arrangement based on shared affinity resonated with the patchwork of

micro-scenes, networked interest groups and shifting taste coalitions that characterised the contemporary Adelaide electronic music milieu. Sharing some parallels with Cooper's conception *Everyday Utopias*, the city's sonic socialities and music studios could be viewed as networks and spaces that offered the chance to perform everyday life in a different fashion, creating change by building new forms of experiencing the world (2014: 227). Many of my interlocutors revealed an ethical driver to their creative practice, one that did not fit with any defined political identity or allegiance. While for some this was about choosing to ignore the political, seeking an escape and release from real world pressures, for others their music was an explicit part of an ethical identity through which they could express and comment upon the experiences of day to day living.

One of the emerging features of Adelaide electronic music was the rise of singer-songwriters utilising electronics and vocals in their recorded works and performance. I encountered producers singing or speaking the lyrics of a personal statement about themselves, their relationships, vulnerabilities and values along to their own productions, often accompanied by little more than a laptop and midi controller, unencumbered by any need to make people dance. It was expressed by one of my interlocutors, Ali (22), as writing music "in terms of a realism people can relate to".

Ali was a classically-trained musician who had realised composing her own music, rather than playing someone else's, was far more fulfilling. She turned to the laptop because it allowed her to make "radio-worthy" music more easily. Ali used the laptop as a MIDI controller and sequencer—playing notes in by hitting letters on the laptop keyboard or drawing them in on the Ableton graphic user interface timeline—to overcome certain musical weaknesses like drumming.[19] She also enjoyed the problem-solving part of the process: "like I hear something in a track, and I want to do that and I don't know how to do that. I will literally sit there for two hours until I figure out how to do it". The internet's resources for cracked software allowed her to try out an array of studio tools, and she felt some of the plug-ins now available could "make anything sound amazing". Her current music reflected her own circumstances of life.

> Ali: I don't write new music about a certain topic, you know. Like a social stance or something. But I do write music that I feel relates to people my age in terms of realism and just how it is to be like alive and living in your own bubble.

Not everyone was relying on the spoken word to channel these understandings. The gentle music of William (23) articulated a connection to geographic place with a sense of the political firmly rooted in personal experience. He described his music as process-driven and very much based in the computer where he began with a "seed of audio", a sample or riff which went through various processes to get something he wanted. Sound was something malleable, pulling details out, chopping it all up, reversing and stretching. He described his work as music to fall asleep to, or that would sit with you, as music that that allowed for melancholy and was open to interpretation. For William it was a way of dealing with life. He likened his practice to mindfulness and being in "the zone" for long periods.

William's music was designed for connected listening and intimate engagement, for a focus on the subtle changes and dynamics that could convey the conceptual intentions of the composer. It was also aimed at others; William made it available to torrent for free in a low sound quality format, as well as through Bandcamp at a higher bit rate. He considered music a part of bringing society closer together, and he started a label with friends in order to "be the change". While he thought about the prevailing context of the times when composing, he viewed his music as more of a subjective journey, exploring personal issues.

> William: I'm not one for obvious stuff. . . . It gets to a point where you are not looking at frequencies, you are not looking at what you are hearing, you are looking at what you are actually feeling in your gut as you are doing it.

This sense of an inner moral compass was echoed by Red Robin (35), a prolific musician with a similar commitment to music as process. He saw his practice as an effort to express an understanding of the world he lived in, an attempt to make it a "better" place though whatever means and skills he had to do so. A long-running piece of sound art he was working on explored the famous 1865 Goyder's Line that delineated the boundary of land in South Australia that received sufficient rainfall to allow cropping. Due to climate change, recent projections had brought the line further southwards. Characteristic of many of his recordings it brought together a strong sense of place and an ecological sensibility.

The work consisted of two saw tooth waves fed into a vocoder and outboard effects. The carrier frequency was based upon the traditional Goyder's Line and the second was the modulation frequency, based on a prediction of the future trajectory of Goyder's Line incorporating climate change. The sounds played against each other, creating a drone and subtle modulations. The programming software Max MSP in Ableton Live was used to map the lines, and the piece conveyed the sparseness of the landscape that inspired Red's work. Although stressing that his work was firmly bounded in reality, Red was drawn to the dystopian near-future science fiction of the *Black Mirror* television series. He viewed the contemporary times as weird and dangerous, "terrified of climate change"; it is this terror from which his music was an escape and to which his music offered a challenge.

> Red: The best thing I can do for the sake of my optimism and my mental health and sustaining relationships and friendships with people, before I take to the streets with a sandwich-board shouting the end is nigh, is really working within my own space.

I interviewed Nix (34) shortly after his attendance at an outback "DIY survivalist" festival. A veteran of experimental free jazz and psych rock bands for around 15 years, he now preferred to perform and improvise electronic music with hardware. Most of his gear was bought second-hand and housed in a home-made road-case on a self-built table. He felt most of the music he was making with a poet collaborator was all about "the potential apocalypse", with lots of dark eerie textures.

> Nix: There is often this kind-of immanence, and this feeling of something is about to happen, or you are in this zone of the unknown, and stuff like that. And I do feel that we are in a place where things could just easily topple over the edge at any time.

Nix considered his music and art was all part of a process of "constant self-development and transformation" that tied into a spiritual understanding of himself as a "part of everything else". His music was an attempt to help catalyse and transform the people and everything around him, to get "myself and people moving to the next step where they need to be, keep going forward and growing, not in some linear evolutionary terms, but just however you want to see it". Nix's music articulated these aspects in himself as "a personal, self-driven thing" that he wanted to share with others to make them "feel inspired or uplifted or intense or whatever". A sense of self-construction was a major part of his art, personal path and mythology: "I've started to come to terms with and understand the feeling there's a role. . . . It's a constant self-development, and its transformation".

Nix's comments seemed to combine a Stirnerian sense of self-mastery with a distinctly social dimension, to fuse music's potential for instigating a personal sense of renewal with a wider social project. There was a sense in these accounts of an ethical foundation for creative practice from music-makers engaged with an open and personal sense of what constituted the political outside of fixed ideologies. Stirner's psychological focus on change saw improvement occurring through individual effort and collective understanding, rather than through causes and ideals (Newman 2011a: 9). The studio was a means to articulate fears and relieve existential anxieties but also to affect and nurture a sense of affinity with others.

Conclusion

It was clear when talking to people about music practice that self-expression was considered valuable in and of itself, regardless of whether you could make a living from it. As the space for this to happen, the studio was the story behind the music you listened to and the tunes you danced to, from big room anthems and tech house chuggers to modular explorations and ambient excursions. Away from festival euphoria and the excitement of clubland or gallery chatter, as a music maker, sooner or later, it was just you and the machines. Every creative ego has to deal with its own.

In a society saturated in digital communication channels and media seductions, in moral panics and negative news, the studio was a chance for my interlocutors to disable distractions and enter "the zone", an unrestricted play space and uninterrupted flow state. Given the number of people that talked of music practice as therapy, it was possible to see music practice as a form of spiritual and philosophical estrangement from many aspects of contemporary life: technologies of control, climate change, growing wealth disparity and precarity and an economic condition that prioritised desire over meaningful fulfilment. The importance of creativity to health and well-being was supported by the centrality of music practice to my interlocutors' lives.

The limitations of applying a nineteenth century philosopher's ideas to twenty-first century music producers were obvious. What about digitalisation and dynamic range? Streaming platforms and social media? While changes in external context are constant,

the internal challenges of finding meaning and satisfaction in them are timeless. There was something in Stirner's insistence for individuals to work it out for themselves that held as true today as ever. His non-prescriptive openness and belief in the individual fit well with the wide cast of colourful characters from my research who resisted any reductionist move to essentialise identity, let alone musical style.

Stirner argued that the egoist could freely determine their own practices, relations and ways of living outside of the control of centralized institutions. He perceptively saw through the hollow illusions of the emerging political and economic landscape, the sacrificial subservience to ideals of freedom, democracy and progress. His philosophy of ownness was a refutation of passivity and leaving things to others. The exhortation to conscious egoism and ethical responsibility appeared as a different path for liberation and psychological wellbeing, different from waiting for government policy, benevolent capitalism or "leaders" that always disappointed. I argue that in the contemporary autonomous zone of the studio, in attitude and spirit, many music makers have come to a similar conclusion.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   For a succinct overview of Stirner's ideas and influence on anarchist Benjamin Tucker, see Steve Shone's "Max Stirner: Hanging Out With One's Own" in *American Anarchism* (2013: 207-35). Shone's focus is on what Stirner's individualist approach can contribute to those dissatisfied with the contemporary political system in America.

2   Autonomy is defined here as "self-determination" (Hesmondhalgh 2010: 235).

3   Resistance here is used in both of Moore's conceptualisations of the term: as "symbolically subversive practices" that can be vulnerable to being subsumed into consumer culture; and as the active engagement in resisting "the dominant ideologies encoded in the texts and commodities they consume" (2011: 1213).

4   See Marshall 2010 on Bakunin's collectivist anarchism; Kropotkin 1902 on Kropotkin's non-hierarchical organisation; and Mueller (2018) on recent debates that use the collectivist approaches of Proudhon.

5   Other scholarly interest in Stirner has focussed on questions of anarchist orthodoxy (e.g. Schmidt and van der Walt [2009] and Ferguson [2011]) or philosophical interpretation (e.g. Welsh [2010] and Jenkins [2014]).

6   See for example Bourdieu's 1984 text *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

7   I use Straw's understanding of the term "scene" here to denote the multiple aspects of electronic music practice in Adelaide (2014: 477).

8   28 of 47 (with an average age of 30.5) replied that the wider context of world events and social issues was significantly reflected in their music practice. 2 of 47 (with an average age of 27.5)

were unsure and 17 of 47 (with an average age of 29) said that there was no connection.

9   12 of 17 said instead that their music was all about their personal and/or emotional experiences.

10 23 of 62 of my interlocutors said their practice functioned as a form of therapy, with an average age of 30.6. This figure may be conservative as the theme emerged during interviews and became further explored as the research progressed.

11 A Digital Audio Workstation is an all-in-one music software platform that provides a virtual studio complete with instruments, effects and a timeline architecture in which to combine the elements of music production.

12 Jersey Club is an electronic dance music genre, developing in the nineties, with a fast 130-140 BPM tempo and characterised by chopped staccato beats and vocals.

13 Audacity is a free recording and audio editing application software.

14 GearSlutz is one of several online electronic music producer forums that emerged in the 2000s as a site for discussion between music makers of varying levels of experience, and as a resource for researching and reviewing music making equipment.

15 A basic tracker is sequencing software characterised by positioning notes on a vertical timeline. It is heavily dependent on the use of samples.

16 Taylor claimed digital technologies were not only facilitating neoliberal policies but had helped to introduce them into work and culture (2015: 120).

17 For more on the contemporary condition of late capitalism, see Stahl (2010), Braidotti (2013) and Harvey (2018).

18 See Florida (2004) and Banks (2010) for optimistic takes on capitalism and creative work.

19 Musical Instrument Digital Interface is a communications protocol to connect instruments such as synthesizers or samplers via cable or USB so they can communicate with each other.

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