Bringing the Banjo Back to Life

The Field of Dutch Independent Folk Music as Participatory Culture

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Abstract
In this paper we investigate the factors underlying the social production of independent folk music (indie-folk) in the Netherlands. By studying the production, distribution and reception of indie-folk music through in-depth interviewing, we argue that the production of indie-folk is effected by the shift towards ‘participatory culture’ brought forward by the rise of the Internet and Web 2.0. This is observed, firstly, in how digitization helped musicians to self-develop a career in music business. Secondly, from the part of both musicians and gatekeepers, it can be observed in how participatory culture links with their preference for participatory aesthetics by which they aim to decrease the distance between creator, promotor, and user. Thirdly, from the part of the audience, it is observed in how active fans contribute to their field by self-organizing small-scale events, enabling them to establish (trans)local scenes and to reframe music as a social experience. By investigating the logics behind these musician, distributor and fan-based practices, this paper aims to contribute to existing sociological research on the impact digitization has had on changes in both the production, distribution, and aesthetics of popular music.

Keywords: Indie-folk, Music scenes, Participatory culture, DIY, Production of culture
1. Introduction

After the quenching of the ‘1960s folk revival’ (Rosenberg, 1993) and spending a few decades somewhat below the radar of the mainstream, folk music rose to the surface once more at the start of the new millennium. Starting in the early 1990s, new genres of folk music have been added to the so-called ‘folk music stream’ (Ennis, 1992), including ‘free-folk’, ‘New Weird America’, ‘freak folk’, and ‘indie-folk’ (see Keenan, 2003; Petrusisch, 2008, Encarnacao, 2013 for a historical overview). In ways very similar to the ‘1960s folk revival’, the genre even gained widespread public attention through the popularization of acts such as Fleet Foxes, the Lumineers, Bon Iver, alt-J, and Mumford and Sons (IFPI, 2013). In this article we investigate the social processes that allowed such folk acts to emerge and gain the attention of the global music industry and its audiences in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This study will be particularly focused on investigating the production (and distribution) of contemporary folk music in the Netherlands, a relatively small European country of 16.9 million people (CBS, 2015) located at the semi-periphery of the global music market, with the scope of its domestic music activities generally oriented towards global trends in pop music (Hitters & Van de Kamp, 2010). The domestication of global music into a national context also holds for contemporary folk music: with ‘indie-folk’ becoming an industry-based genre (Lena, 2012) in the mid-2000s, Dutch musicians started to produce indie-folk music for the local market. This resulted in a second wave of folk music revival activities ever since the Dutch version of the ‘1960s folk revival’ in the mid-1960s through to the late-1970s (see Van Poecke, forthcoming).

Independent folk music (indie-folk) is defined here as a genre, structured around a set of key aesthetics (see section 4.3. below), rather than an ethos or mode of distribution (cf. Fonarow, 2006). Although there are marked differences in aesthetics and institutional politics between the various subgenres listed in the first paragraph (Petrusisch, 2008, Ch. 15), we choose to not strictly differentiate between them. This is because of two reasons. First, because our empirical work indicates that Dutch folk musicians generally position themselves within the broader category of ‘indie-folk’, and disregard the other genre classifications as too narrow or, in the case of ‘freak-folk’, as somewhat offensive. Second, because this research indicates, in ways similar to Hesmondhalgh (1999), that ‘indie-folk’ defines itself partly by distancing itself from punk ethos, and thus by moving from the margins of the music industry towards its center; hence becoming a term designating a particular sound or genre rather than an oppositional attitude (ibid: 51).

In this paper we argue that the production of indie-folk is effected by the shift towards ‘participatory culture’ brought forward by the Internet and Web 2.0 (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Benkler, 2006; Wikström, 2009; Baym, 2011). Although folk music has traditionally been seen as the antithesis of industrialization and technological development, and as this article suggests still taps into this romantic
discourse of ‘authenticity’ (Rosenberg, 1993), we at the same time argued that the genre of indie-folk fits well with the new conditions of media production embedded in participatory culture. Tellingly, this results from the fact that indie-folk is grounded in a romantic folk ideology expressing egalitarianism, participation, and inclusiveness (Frith, 1981: 160). Similarly, online participatory culture is often ideologically defined as the folk culture of the digital age, as it builds community by sharing, operates on the basis of collective instead of individual ownership, and thus implodes the hierarchy between (specialized) producers and (passive) consumers (Jenkins, 2006: 136-141).

While the rise of Web 2.0 and the emergence of indie-folk in mid-2000s happened simultaneously, and, as we suggest, can be related to each other, systematic links between these phenomena are rarely addressed in the literature. It has been suggested that digitization would lead to the resurgence of music with a “folk culture-like quality” (Ryan and Peterson, 1993: 195) This is often understood, however, as the emergence of online “digital folklore”, such as amateur re-workings and re-circulations of commercial video clips (Blank, 2009). We would like to take this argumentation a step further by looking at the relevance of participatory culture in a different habitat – that is, the domain of independent labels, DIY music producers, and active music fans. Drawing from 47 in-depth interviews with indie-folk musicians, gatekeepers and audience members, we argue that the shift towards greater participation due to the emergence of Web 2.0 not only constitutes the creation of online digital folklore, but is also constitutive of the creation and production of contemporary folk music structured around a set of “participatory aesthetics” (Turino, 2008; see below).

This article will proceed as follows. In the following theoretical sections, we first (2.1.) look into how innovation in popular music production can be studied from a ‘production of culture perspective’ (Peterson & Anand, 2004). Secondly, we investigate to what extent the Internet and Web 2.0 has changed the structure of the global music industry as well as the conditions of music production and distribution in this new structure. Accordingly, we provide an overview (2.2.) of relevant work on music scenes. After having introduced data and methods (section 3), we continue with presenting our research findings in section 4, which is structured in four parts, focusing on (4.1.) DIY career building; (4.2.) self-organization among active indie-folk fans; (4.3.) the distancing from punk ethos in indie-folk musicians’ careers; and (4.4.) changes in the institutional politics of Dutch indie firms and platforms. We end this article with a reflection on the emergence of folk music as a strategy to bring authenticity back to music.

2. Theorizing innovation in popular music production

2.1. Participatory culture entering the music industry

Sociologists working within the ‘production of culture perspective’ have emphasized that although culture generally evolves gradually it can be nonetheless subject of rapid change (Peterson, 1990).
Change may occur not because of special accomplishments by a few creative individuals (the ‘supply side explanation’), nor due to changes within audience characteristics and/or consumer patterns (the ‘demand side explanation’) but rather because of changes in the structure that constitutes the system of cultural production (ibid). Accordingly, Peterson and Anand (2004) have identified six ‘constraints’ or ‘factors’ that facilitate the production of culture in systems: ‘technology’, ‘law and regulation’, ‘industry structure’, ‘organizational structure’, ‘occupational career’, and ‘market’.

Peterson (1990: 313) also highlighted the fact that ‘technology’ and ‘law and regulation’ often are the two factors that can set change in motion, and therefore “define the context in which the others operate”. This can be observed, for instance, in relation to the emergence of television in the mid-1950s, which was an important factor in the rise of rock ‘n’ roll music displacing the then dominant jazz-aesthetic in the U.S. popular recording industry (Peterson, 1990). Furthermore, it can be observed, according to Ryan and Peterson (1993), in relation to the advent of new digital technologies, which could lead to a change in job skills and aesthetic standards. More specifically, it could lead to the emergence of music with a “folk culture-like quality” (ibid: 195) due to the advent of relatively cheap Do-It-Yourself (DIY) computer equipment and software.

With their 1993 article, Ryan and Peterson were at the basis of a debate in (‘new’) media studies in which various scholars over the last two decades argued that digitization has drastically changed the internal structure of the media landscape (see Slot, 2013: Ch. 1 for a theoretical overview). A returning issue within this debate is the notion of ‘media convergence’, understood by Jenkins (2006) not simply as a technological shift – as the transition from ‘old’ (mass) to ‘new’ (digital) media – but, rather, as the confluence between two systems of cultural production. In his own words,

‘convergence (...) is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process (...). Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers’ (Jenkins, 2006: 18).

Media convergence would thus shift the power balance between specialized media companies, on the one hand, and independent firms and everyday users, on the other; and would thus fade the boundaries between ‘active’ producers and ‘passive’ consumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Jenkins (2006: 331) therefore refers to this new system of media production as ‘participatory culture’, a culture “in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content”
As Ardèvol et al. (2010: 264) have convincingly argued, what remains problematic in the debate on media convergence “are questions of power relations, agency and the role of the media industry in shaping ‘media practices’”. Although they admit that in the current media landscape the traditional roles of producers, gatekeepers, and audiences are changing, they question whether the fading of boundaries between producers and consumers undermines the hegemonic power that media conglomerates might still have in agenda-setting (ibid).

Focusing particularly on the music industry, the question of changing power relations has led to diverging opinions. Wikström (2009: 4-8) has argued that digitization has transformed the music industry to such an extent that it is relevant to talk about a “new music economy”, which would be characterized by three basic features: (i) “high connectivity and little control”, (ii) “music provided as a service rather than as a product”, and (iii) “increased amateur creativity”. The emergence of a ‘new music economy’ is somewhat contradicted, however, by recent statistics, which indicate that the contemporary recording industry is still highly centralized, with approximately 74% of the physical and digital music market controlled by three major companies: Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group (Music and Copyright, 2014). Though a large cohort of independent firms thus dominates more than a quarter of the international music market, the persistently large market share of the major record companies sustains. This counterbalances views on the internal dynamics of the commercial music industry, arguing that they can be interpreted as a dialectical movement showing long moments of dominance by large firms on the one hand and short periods of resurgence by independents, often due to technological changes, on the other (cf. Peterson & Berger, 1975; Lopes, 2002).

Drawing from the work of (amongst other) Jenkins (2006) and Wikström (2009), and by applying their insights to investigating the organizational structure of Swedish independent record firms, Baym (2011: 26-27) has argued that this part of the music industry has been able to reconcile to participatory culture more so than the major record firms.¹ Rather than approaching the audience as a ‘market’ owners of independent labels approach their fans “as equals with whom they can build a larger community that benefits them all” (ibid: 22-24). By giving away free-samples, hosting file-sharing on their websites, writing label-blogs, and by creating direct interaction between fans and musicians, they are able to built community by sharing. In doing so, they adapt ideologies and practices of the gift economy based on values of trust, rather than producing music for the market economy. Although in practice, Baym suggested, both types of economies are often interrelated, placing indie-producers in a sort of balancing act between being strictly art-minded and business-oriented (ibid: 26-32).

In their study of international fan labor in the Swedish independent music market, Baym and

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¹ Strachan (2007) has found similar practices among independent labels in the U.K.
Burnett (2009) have found that also fans themselves are often creating communities without industry-support. They do so by forming relations with artists and by forming relationships for those artists, often by organizing small-scale events. According to Baym and Burnett (ibid: 434), such active music fan communities are the “manifestation of the ‘participatory’ culture behind Web 2.0”. Talking about these fan practices they argue that “their social response to the pleasures of music is situated in deeply meaningful social phenomena that harkens back to much earlier phases of musical history, phases before there was an industry, when music was always performed in communities by locals for locals rather than by distant celebrities for adoring fans” (ibid: 446).

By investigating the role of fan labor in the Swedish independent music market, Baym and Burnett approached the reception of popular music as a form of cultural production in its own right (see also Ardèvol et al., 2010: 263). By doing so, they went beyond the production of culture perspective by emphasizing that when studying (innovation in) cultural production it should be explored “how people’s media practices mix with institutionalized media practices and how they contribute to define cultural production” (ibid: 265). In the context of popular music production and distribution, such active fan labor often takes place in (trans)local music scenes (Bennett & Peterson, 2004). Since music scenes occasionally form the spaces where ‘scene-based industries’ emerge (and fan practices thus mix with institutionalized media practices), we turn to relevant work on music scenes. We particularly focus on how digitization has effected the production and distribution of music within (trans)local scenes.

2.2. Music scenes: Between professionalization and bohemianism

Ryan and Peterson predicted in 1993 already that digital music technology could lead to the revitalization of local and regional music scenes (Ryan & Peterson, 1993). They argued that “[b]ecause it is now easier than ever to produce a professional quality product, and yet it is so difficult to promote and distribute it nationally, many artists [will] focus on developing a reputation within the area where they are known from frequent live appearances” (ibid: 193). Local and regional scenes are thus central for the (local) distribution of music and the establishment of musicians and, according to Ryan and Peterson, increasingly more so after the introduction of digital music technology.

Apart from distribution, scenes are also sites of cultural production (Currid, 2007). As Currid argues, social and cultural activities are comprised within cultural scenes, of which the boundaries, yet often invisible and highly elastic, are based on genre, activity, and location (Straw, 2004). We therefore

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2 This links with criticism form researchers working within the field of cultural studies, who criticized the production of culture perspective, since it has studied innovation in popular music only in relation to music produced within the confines of the recording industry (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Strachan, 2007). It has been suggested that this is a limited view on studying innovation in music production, since outside the boundaries of the recording industry numerous actors are involved in the (small-scale) production and dissemination of popular music.
define the concept of music scene, following Bennett and Peterson (2004: 1) as “clusters of producers, musicians, and fans [who] collectively share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others”. Moreover, we consider the concept of ‘scene’ at the intersection of community and genre: consumers form informal networks with musicians based around genre conventions, bring in their own skills and expertise, and thus co-creation activities and collaborations, both within and among different scenes, are quite common (see Currid, 2007).

Scenes are not only informal networks, but also serve as spaces where individuals acquire knowledge, form social relations, and learn accepted behavior, which serve as the bases for professional careers in the artistic fields (Straw, 2004: 413). Such informal networks occasionally form the center of scene-supporting industries, “the domain of small collectives, fans turned entrepreneurs, and volunteer labor” (Bennett and Peterson, 2004: 5). Scene involvement can thus involve a range of different roles. Fans, for instance, can function as publicists, promoters, archivists, and curators of the music they like and aim to promote among peers. The productivity of such scene members has been noted early on by Shank (1994), who, following the works of Deleuze, ascribed a ‘productive anxiety’ to scene members that would stimulate involvement, so that “spectators become fans, fans become musicians, musicians are always already fans” (in Hesmondhalgh, 2005: 27). While informal exchange is a central characteristic of scenes, Hauge and Hracs (2010) describe different forms of trade common within (trans)local music scenes. A more traditional way of trading is bartering, by which “individuals or groups trade goods and services for free” (ibid: 121). Other forms of trading are “adjustable value exchange” and “full value exchange”. Adjustable value exchange “implies the exchange of monetary payment commensurate with the economic and symbolic status of the individuals involved” (ibid: 122). Here, the amount is often determined by what is perceived as fair but can be lowered as well if individuals have little money but high cultural capital. Full value exchange, then, is “exchanging goods and services for full price” (ibid), but this raises the question of how monetary value can be ascribed to symbolic goods and services.

Creative collaborators paying each other full monetary value establishes a sense of professionalism. Hauge and Hracs (2010: 122) observe a growing sentiment among indie-producers that prefer formal and “professional agreements as more efficient, productive and creative”. Nevertheless, most transactions are still described as favors among friends. One explanation for this is that cultural producers invoke the bohemian ethic as a defense against accusations of “selling out” or being too business-minded. According to Hauge and Hracs, indie-producers need to brand and collaborate to compete, but they also need to disguise these strategies to make it appear unplanned and organic, because “‘trying too hard’ is no longer cool” (ibid: 120-121). Here, we thus observe a tension between the more traditional bohemia-careers rooted in the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ideology of the former punk movements,
on the one hand, and the notion that success for indie musicians is “increasingly predicated on their ability to embrace and operate within the mainstream”, on the other (ibid). This relates to earlier research conducted by Hesmondhalgh (1999: 56-57), who, as mentioned in the introduction, pointed to the fact that independent firms move towards professionalization through establishing (economic and political) relationships with corporate firms.

However, while Hesmondhalgh (1999: 52-53) interprets this move towards professionalization as a consequence of the ‘conservative’ ideology of independent firms, characterized by a preference for staying true to their aesthetics by forming a commercial ‘interstice’ between marginalization (‘burning-out’) and commercialization (‘selling-out’), Hauge and Hracs see it as a response to the new demands of DIY production due to new digital technologies. For digitization leads to an oversupply of cultural products (and thus to increasing global competition), it enforces “the ability of musicians to be original and stand out from the crowd” (2010: 118). Building relationships with professionals in the field, then, is a strategy of independent producers and firms to get their self-produced products distributed to (inter)national audiences. In the case of Toronto, Hauge and Hracs more specifically observed how entrepreneurial musicians strategically enlist “the services of other creative individuals to enhance the symbolic value of their products” (ibid). Moreover, they craft visual styles that support their sound, invest in other forms of cross-media packaging, and decide to professionalize their management (see also Hracs, 2013). As mentioned, this relates to our research on the social production of Dutch indie-folk music, in which a similar shift towards professionalization among independent musicians and institutions can be observed. We therefore turn to our research findings, after first introducing data and methods.

3. Scope of research: Data and methods
This article is part of a larger research project investigating the production, reception, and aesthetics of independent folk music in the Netherlands. In order to investigate the factors underlying the social production of Dutch indie-folk, gatekeepers, musicians, and audience members were interviewed. In total, 47 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, lasting between fifty minutes and two hours and

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3 Appropriating the DIY-attitude is traditionally influenced by American folk ideals with an egalitarian and inclusive approach to music (McKay, 1998). Articulated in the 1970s punk movement, DIY ethics can be described as “make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you” (Duncombe 1997: 2). It is thus more than ‘doing stuff yourself’. As Beaver (2012: 30) puts it, underlying DIY is “a rejection of ‘inauthentic’ mass-produced consumer culture in favor of an ‘authentic’ folk culture, a celebration of amateurism, and most importantly, the desire for individual control over cultural production”. Hauge and Hracs (2010) observed that musicians involved in small-scale production might be less affected by the increased professionalization but adhere more to participation, bartering, and creating a sense of intimacy. Here, the scene as a (trans)local cultural space might also remain of central importance for music distribution, as predicted by Ryan and Peterson (1993).

4 The research project, titled Reshaping Authenticity: The Production, Aesthetics, and Reception of Independent Folk Music in the Netherlands (1992-present), is conducted by the first author and funded by the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands.
twenty minutes. Two interviews were double-interviews, which eventually resulted in a sample consisting of 49 interviewees in the age of 18-55.

Most of the interviewees were living in the larger urban areas in the Netherlands (notably Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Groningen), and have similar (high) educational backgrounds in the humanities, arts, social sciences, and natural sciences. 39 of the interviewees were male; 10 were female. This gives a somewhat biased view, since the Dutch field of independent folk music characterizes itself as inclusive, and indeed seems to be more gender-neutral as compared to music genres such as death metal (e.g. Vasan, 2011).

All of the interviews with musicians and audience members were conducted face to face in a domestic setting, with the exception of two interviews using Skype. All of the interviews with gatekeepers were conducted face to face in an institutional setting, with the exception of one interview using Skype, and an interview that was done through e-mail. Names of the interviewees have been changed in case they wanted to protect their privacy. Most of the interviewees, however, clearly stated that they did not mind using their own name, or even that they were not in favor of using a pseudonym.

For the sampling of bands and musicians we used criterion sampling, meaning that either the musicians themselves, their record label, or the press should have positioned them within the category of ‘indie-folk’. All of the musicians (14 in total) were able to make a living with performing and recording music; some of them by employing multiple job holding (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013). The gatekeepers (10 in total) were selected on the basis of their long-term involvement in the (inter)national promotion and distribution of (Dutch) indie-music, and ranged from the head of business operations of a recently established independent music platform to one of the product managers of Warner Music Benelux. For the sampling of audience members, lastly, we used maximum variation sampling, aiming to include a diverse range of respondents within the sample, containing audience members from different age groups and both male and female audience members.

Most of the audience members (19 in total) were approached and selected during concerts of folk acts whose music, either by themselves, their record label, or the press, was categorized as ‘free-folk’, ‘New Weird America’, ‘freak-folk’, ‘indie-folk’ or ‘folk-pop’. Some additional respondents (6 in total) were approached using the snowball-method. All of the audience members were only selected if they considered themselves to be strong aficionados of indie-folk music in general or the indie-folk acts in particular.

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5 Audience members were approached and selected during the concerts of *Mumford and Sons* (Ziggo Dome, Amsterdam, March 30, 2013), *Woods* (Paradiso, Amsterdam, May 20, 2013), *Animal Collective* (Melkweg, Amsterdam, May 27, 2013), *CocoRosie* (Tivoli, Utrecht, May 29, 2013), *The Lumineers* (Heineken Music Hall, Amsterdam, November 18, 2013), and during the yearly Incubate festival (September 16-22-2013, Tilburg, the Netherlands) and the yearly *Le Guess Who* festival (November 28-December 1, 2013, Utrecht, the Netherlands).
The interviews were conducted following the epistemological guidelines of “active interviewing” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997: 113), which refers to a type of interviewing that defines the setting of the academic interview as an “interpretive practice” – as “part of a broader image of reality as an ongoing, interpretive accomplishment” (ibid). The interviews were structured around the following five topics: (i) musical taste formation; (ii) personal descriptions/definitions of indie-folk; (iii) personal affinity with indie-folk music; (iv) use and understanding of indie-folk music in everyday life, and (v) broader artistic, cultural and political interests. The interviews with musicians were complemented by questions based on the topics of (i) career path, and (ii) use and understanding of folk aesthetics. Interviews with gatekeepers, lastly, were complemented with questions on selection processes and the marketing and promotional strategies of indie-folk acts included in their rosters.

The interviews were transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti, enabling us to search for patterns in the interviews. The interviews were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis, placing premium on the content of the text (the “whats”), rather than on the “hows” of replying (Kohler Riessman, 2005: 2-3). Analyzing the interviews pointed out that the ideal-typical distinction between producer, gatekeeper, and consumer still makes sense, although the boundaries between the categories were often blurry. This can be interpreted as typical to the genre of folk music, where the bundling of tasks and the establishment of close connections between artists and audiences is rather common (see Alexander, 2003: 115-116). We continue with presenting our findings below, which is structured in four sections, focusing on (4.1.) how digitization relates to DIY career building; (4.2.) how Web 2.0 results in the formation and establishing of (trans)local indie-folk music scenes; (4.3.) how we perceive a shift from punk ethos towards folk aesthetics in the careers of musicians; and (4.4.) how we perceive a similar shift in the institutional politics of professional music institutions, partly resulting from the more relational instead of oppositional ideology characteristic of participatory culture.

4. The field of Dutch indie-folk as participatory culture

4.1. Building your own career: DIY production meets the industry

Studying the career paths of the musicians interviewed for this paper, we see that some of them followed conventional career paths, beginning at a pop academy, art academy or music conservatory, after which they started playing living-room concerts, toured the bigger music venues in the Netherlands, participated in local and national music competitions, and eventually signed record deals with either a major label or with a (large) independent record firm. Most of the musicians, however, are self-taught musicians, and have used DIY-strategies in developing their careers. In many cases, they established their own record label, built their own sound studio and rehearsal room, produced, recorded and mixed their own songs and

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6 The interviews were conducted by the first author.
records, designed and screen-printed their own album art, and sometimes even built their own instruments.

An example of such a DIY career path is explained, for instance, by Rikke (31, Rotterdam), singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist of the Rotterdam-based indie-folk band Half Way Station. During the interview, he explains how he decided to develop himself as a musician by learning to play the banjo and guitar using YouTube videos as instructor manuals:

(R): When I listened to folk back in the days, I watched a lot of YouTube indeed, but that’s something I don’t usually do anymore.
(N): But you got to know a lot of music through YouTube?
(R): Yeah, especially the folksy stuff. Those people are dead, so you have to.
(N): Yes, exactly. So you started searching. And how was it then? Then you typed in a musician, and then you started clicking and watching more videos?
(R): Hmm… I had a period that I was working on those American banjo players. I collected them.
(N): And so you learned to play the banjo that way?
(R): Yes, because of YouTube, and the guitar as well.

After graduating from art academy, Rikke decided to leave the art world and to start earning a living by writing folk songs and performing live music. He first performed as a singer-songwriter in the style of prewar bluesmen and the early Bob Dylan – “as just a guy with a guitar, banjo, and harmonica playing blues and folk songs in the local bar”, as he himself says. The local bar is also where he met his fellow singer and songwriter, who, during one of his concerts, spontaneously appeared on stage and started to play and sing along. Interestingly, Rikke frames the formation of his career as typical to the folk tradition: two self-taught musicians who accidently meet, learn to play and perform music through live performances, and started to spontaneously swap instruments on stage.

After touring along Dutch music events and festivals, and participating in several local pop music competitions, the two-man formation gradually evolved into a five-man band, including a pianist, a bassist and a drummer. Half Way Station has self-released two studio-albums, in 2012 and 2015, respectively, which were self-financed and for which band members did everything themselves: from building microphones to the writing, recording and mixing of songs, designing the album art and the print-screening of album covers. Rikke self-consciously frames his urge to do things himself as part of DIY discourse; more accurately, of the embattled stance that characterizes DIY ethos:

We’ve reached a point in our careers that we have done a lot of stuff ourselves… Print screening, cutting, folding, gluing, the recording, even the instruments, the microphones, we all made them ourselves. Everything done by ourselves. And we found a sort of confirmation in that. And now I am working on, ehm, if we now cooperate with people, it should be the right person. (…) These days nobody between 20 and 30 makes an arrangement for 20 years (…) or signs a contract for three years. (…) But that makes it very
difficult at the same time. Everything is very volatile. For example, many bands work like this: a songwriter, a bunch of musicians – of one label, or with whom they have studied at conservatory. They hire them, pay them 50 bucks per show, well, and they tour along the festivals. If it’s a hit, then, they continue doing it for another year, or try to make an album that flops then. If it’s not a hit, well then the whole group falls apart. And this is the kind of rhythm among which the bands that are stayers are the exception.

Underlying the appropriation of the DIY-attitude is often a rejection of mass-production or wider consumer culture in favor of a more ‘authentic’ folk culture (see Beaver, 2012). In many cases, the music industry against which DIY-producers define themselves is perceived as artistically homogenizing and exploitative (Strachan, 2007). This becomes apparent from the way Rikke describes his career as having grown ‘organically’, as well as from the way he critiques the volatility that marks the music industry.

Hence, his preference for being a ‘stayer’ in the field and building sustainable relations with co-musicians and audiences. The band, therefore, is organized as a foundation, which enables Rikke to build financial capacity, since the income the band generates is not paid out to the musicians but directly flows back into the foundation. This way of working, however, requires that Rikke and other band members earn a living outside of producing and performing music as well.

Tessa (26, Utrecht, semi-professional artist and music teacher), singer-songwriter and guitarist of the Utrecht-based indie-folk bands Orlando and Wooden Saints, provides a somewhat different example of DIY cultural production. After graduating from the Rotterdam Conservatory, she lives together with band members in cheap housing in the woods near Utrecht. In the house they have built their own rehearsal room and recording studio, and there is where they write and perform indie-folk music inspired by popular acts such as Bon Iver, Patrick Watson, and Sharon Van Etten. Tessa explains her motivation to do things herself as follows:

Right now everything costs a lot of money, such as practicing. For example, if you want to use a rehearsal-space, it costs money. Because we are living here, it is actually for free. Same thing with a studio, this is also very expensive. But we have it ourselves. Thus we make sure to do as much as possible by ourselves, also because it pays the most. You know, if you sign with a label, then part of the profit goes to the label. While if I sell it, taxes go off, but the rest is for us.

Here, we again see how digital computer technology allows musicians to create their own studios, record their own music, produce their own albums, and establish their own labels. However, the quotation also illustrates that tapping into DIY discourse is not necessarily part of an anti-establishment ethos only, since it is just as well the result of cost-reduction and pragmatic realism. Small-scale production thus enables indie producers such as Tessa to increase the scale of their operations and to compete with other professional musicians operating in the (semi-periphery) of the Dutch music industry.
We do not see, however, as is sometimes suggested, that digitization would enable independent music producers to circumvent intermediaries and gatekeepers, or that it would altogether lead towards a process of “disintermedialization” (see Slot, 2013: 21). Besides the willingness to do things themselves – either out of political and/or pragmatic reasons – Dutch indie-folk musicians are very much focused on building relations with professional institutions operating in the (inter)national music industry, rather than, as Rikke suggests, “aiming to be a religious DIY-er”. As our research suggests, they work together with bookers, pluggers, copyrighters, and marketeers, who organize concerts and arrange press coverage. Besides, they most often have distribution deals with the (larger) Dutch (independent) record firms (such as Snowstar Records, Utrecht, Excelsior Recordings, Amsterdam, V2 Beelux, Hilversum), through which their home-produced music is disseminated to Dutch music stores and international streaming websites such as Spotify.

Moreover, in order to be able to sign such distribution deals, they need to increase their local recognition and gain symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), for which they are dependent on key gatekeepers such as radio DJs, music journalists, and talent scouts; as well as that they have to participate in local music competitions. As Tessa explains, who, like most of the musicians interviewed for this article, explicitly mentioned the importance of participating in competitions such as the annual ‘Popronde’, a traveling music festival which tours along 31 Dutch cities:

(…) The first ‘Popronde’ [in 2012] we played in Nijmegen. (…) And there we did a session for ‘Cortonville’, from Erik Corton [Dutch radio DJ and TV personality]. He has this website, and our gig has been widely viewed on the Internet, that was our first thing directed to the outside world, although we were around for some time already. But we didn’t perform that much, I think this was our fourth performance. And that went really well. It was filmed, and Erik Corton said: ‘I want to follow you guys, because I think you are great!’ . So, in September we did the ‘Popronde’, and in November we recorded our first album. In the meanwhile, we also toured with Wooden Saints, and more and more bookings came in. More and more people heard about us and they loved it.

In short, then, these observations are consistent with theory on “media convergence” arguing that grassroots creativity coexists with corporate convergence, rather than undermining the power base of established institutions ‘within’ the music industry. Moreover, these observations are in line with the aforementioned research by Hauge and Hracs (2010), who observed a shift from traditional bohemian careers towards an increased professionalization. Dutch indie-folk musicians are ‘home-grown’ yet distance themselves from being a ‘religious DIY-er’, and choose to operate within the confines of what is referred to by one respondent as “the alternative mainstream” (Atze, 35, Utrecht, editor-in-chief, 3voor12).
4.2. Deep scene involvement: The active fan as organizer

Although the binary distinction between passive and active usage dominant in the debate on participatory culture is a bit of a false one, since ‘users’ are always actively interpreting media content on many levels (Jansz, 2010), it is worth observing that most of the fans interviewed for this article could be termed ‘active users’. They work as amateur-journalists, participate in online music contests, actively share music with peers through social network sites, and create online user profiles on P2P-websites such as Last.fm and 8-track in order to map their musical taste formation over time. Most of them, furthermore, explicitly refer to themselves as ‘active listeners’, expressing their discomfort with randomly skipping through digital playlists. Most of the audience members, moreover, purchase music on CD or vinyl, and explain to do so in order to be able to support their favorite artists and bands. Lastly, most of the audience members are amateur-musicians, playing music for the purpose of entertainment or to deepen the understanding of their favorite folk songs. Thus, although our interview sample is rather limited, these observations are contrary to well-known claims arguing that the commercialization of music would drive out the amateur-musician and would reduce the user to a silent consumer (see also Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 113-115).

Next to a deep involvement with their preferred indie-folk music, some of the fans are actively participating in the promotion and/or dissemination of indie-folk music by self-organizing small-scale events. An example of such deep scene-involvement is, for instance, provided by Rolof (28, Utrecht, health care social worker), indie-folk fan, amateur-musician, and founder of the Raspberry Sessions, a series of concerts taking place in a residential group located in the city center of Utrecht. At the start of the interview, Rolof explains his first ideas of organizing the event as follows:

I am also a musician and I was part of a band (…) I was thinking about opportunities to release material ourselves (…) So, releasing everything in-house so everything you are producing stays within a small circle of peers. Well, that didn’t work (…) But the name Raspberry Records was still on my mind and that has turned into the Raspberry Sessions, by way of self-organizing and inviting the people yourself and taking care of the musicians, that they are paid well for what they are doing and contribute to the event.

Here, we see how Rolof, struggling as a musician to sustain a micro-label, continued to be involved in the field by organizing events. The aim of the Raspberry Sessions, as Rolof explains, is to make sure that artists are paid a proper fee, which is achieved by asking visitors to pay a fixed entrance price:

Often they walk around with a hat, which is a nice gesture, but results in people thinking: ‘okay, I throw in two bucks’… whereas there are so many good musicians! I would like to take care of these musicians and make sure that they are properly paid for what their status is, as well as that their music gives people something cheerful on their free afternoons. Then I thought: well, we can work around that by charging a fixed ticket price.
Here we see how Rolof is adapting to a form of ‘full value exchange’ (Hauge and Hracs, 2010) in order to be financially sustainable and circumvent the risk of not being able to pay the musicians their fees. This could be interpreted as a form of “implicit commercialism” since the mission of the Raspberry Sessions is not to seek for profit. Underlying the organization of the event even seems to be a form of critique on how commercial music business works, as Rolof explains:

I like it when it happens within my own network. Thus, that you don’t need to use official music industry resources. For very slick pop music it is great if there is a direct link between the industry and broadcasting it on the radio. Then people can earn lots of money with it. But that’s not what I want.

As an organizer of the Raspberry Sessions, Rolof is thus concerned with adding value, to create contact between people on a more local level and to let them experience music in a more intimate setting. This is seen as contrary to “very slick pop music”, which is perceived as distant, industrial, and profit-driven.

The sessions can be realized due to the availability of facilities in the residential group where Rolof lives, for the house, which has a history in the 1980s squatting movement, has a small stage with professional technological equipment including a bar. Moreover, the residential group is the home of highly educated people employing creative jobs. These people have easy access to their networks and form strong relations with each other. The ability for Rolof to make use of and rely on such (human) resources seems to be central for the Raspberry Sessions to exist and sustain, as he explains:

The fun thing is that everyone wants to cooperate. So if I come up with a nice idea, that people are saying: ‘If you need help I can do this or that’. And that is awesome. In fact, the Raspberry Sessions cannot even exist without the help of those people. But I also need those people who are willing to join the event as a spectator. So it exists by virtue of my own environment.

Although the Raspberry Sessions are primarily promoted online, particularly on social network sites like Facebook and Twitter, and concert tickets are sold via e-mail, the event could not be achieved without ‘offline’ resources. As a space where an active music fan as Rolof brings in his own skills, expertise, and online contacts, it needs a physical place to facilitate strong ties, as well as that it needs social capital and “relational attributes” such as trust, loyalty, and duty in order to be able to exist and sustain (Nicholls, 2009). Thus, although digitization has lowered the threshold to self-organize (and particularly to self-promote) events, it is just as much driven by ‘offline’ networks, as well as that it plugs into an already existing (technological and physical) infrastructure, in this case the former local punk scene.

The organization of the Raspberry Sessions is an example of a contribution to the establishment of a local scene, “the clustering of fans, promotors, and musicians around a specific geographical focus” (Bennett and Peterson, 2004: 6). Harmen (29, Groningen, professional musician), singer-guitarist of the
Gröningen-based indie-folk band Town of Saints, provides an example of a contribution to the establishment of a translocal scene – local scenes that are “connected with groups of kindred spirits many miles away” (Bennett and Peterson, 2004, p: 8-9). Besides a professional musician, Harmen is the organizer of the Melodica Festival Gröningen. Melodica is the name of a festival concept founded by Australian musician Pete Uhlenbruch in December 2007, who also organized the first edition of the festival that took place in Melbourne, Australia. Ever since, various editions of the festival popped up around the globe, with the organizers forming (online) networks by maintaining contact through Facebook, as well as by regularly visiting each other’s events.

Harmen organizes the festival together with a group of friends and volunteers. Most of the public consists of (active) folk music fans, of which most of them are members of a local scene assembled by Wishfulmusic. Wishfulmusic is an organization that organizes living room concerts in the town of Gröningen already since January 2011, and of which the two co-founders also actively participate in the organization of the Melodica Festival. Wouter (36, Gröningen, customer service employee), one of the co-founders, explains his urge to organize small-scale indie-folk activities as follows:

The idea is to get musicians and the public together, to create a nice atmosphere through which beautiful music can be made and people feel comfortable. (…) Eh, it’s all about the experience. The experience of music is totally different during a living room concert from a concert in a popular music venue. There, there always is a certain division between the audience, the musicians, and the stage. (…) But during a living room concert, it’s a collective experience, then you listen to music intimately. And during living room concerts (…) there is no one talking during the music. So, all the attention goes to the musicians, and that’s pretty comfortable for them, that there are no disturbing devices.

In ways similar to the Raspberry Sessions, the aim of organizing living room concerts and the Melodica Festival is ‘to break down the stage’ – to create a sense of intimacy and community among musicians and the public and to establish egalitarian relationships between musicians and audiences; in short, to frame music a social experience rather than a commodity. This is confirmed by the mission statement of the festival, which is “to foster a sense of community in an increasingly challenging industry” (Melodica, 2014).

For their contributions to the festival musicians are paid by selling merchandise and by donations from the audience that are gathered throughout the weekend by volunteers walking around with a hat; which are both forms of ‘adjustable value exchange’ (Hauge and Hracs, 2010). The music played at the Melodica Festival is mainly acoustic folk music, referred to by Harmen as “coffeehouse folk”, a term by which he creates a linkage with the international coffeehouse folk scenes of the 1960s. The term ‘coffeehouse folk’, however, also uncovers the aesthetic politics of the festival, emphasizing ‘intimacy’ and ‘community’. This is evidenced from the request of the organizers to reduce ‘noise’ during and in
between performances. Throughout the festival they urge the public to silence their voices during songs, to mute or shut down their smart phones, and to discourage the audience to photograph and/or video record musicians. In doing so, they criticize the mediation and visualization of live music performances through user-generated content, which is regarded by the festival organizers as an indirect and insincere way of experiencing music (cf. Holt, 2011). That is, participants are expected to be fully immersed within the music (framed as a social and intimate experience), rather than to be distracted by devices such as smartphones, video cameras, or conversational chitchats.

This indicates that the self-organization of small-scale indie-folk events such as Melodica, although effected by the emergence of Web 2.0, could at the same time be seen as an ‘authentic’ antidote to the mediatization of popular music consumption. Moreover, although events such as Melodica are grounded in a folk ideology emphasizing participation and inclusiveness, indie-folk fans at the same time occupy the ‘commons’ by erecting symbolic boundaries. As evidenced from the quotations above, these boundaries are particularly oriented at distancing themselves from ‘mainstream’ popular music, which is predominantly imagined – and accordingly framed – as commercialized, insincere, and mediatized (see Crewe, Gregson & Brooks, 2003 on ‘the imagined mainstream’).

4.3. Relational over oppositional aesthetics: Distancing form punk ethos

Just look at our stage performance, how we play. That is simply four in a row. Just that all four of us are very close to the people. (…). That is very folksy; to draw the line towards the public like that (…). We sometimes play dynamic, but often very small as well. Many songs are acoustic. That is very much folk; that it’s intimate and acoustic.

This quote is taken from the interview with Danny (21, Utrecht, professional musician) and Samgar (27, Utrecht, professional musician), singer-guitarist and singer-percussionist, respectively, of the Utrecht-based indie-folk band Mister and Mississippi. It is exemplary for the intention of contemporary indie-folk acts to use a “participatory framework” in performance practice, defined by Turino (2008: 26) as “a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions (…)”. The use of such a “participatory framework” is exemplified, as the quote illustrates, by the intention of musicians to act and perform ‘sincerely’, whereby the use of the term ‘sincere’ should be understood as a conscious effort to reduce the ‘modern’ censure between performer and audiences (cf. Bohlman, 1988). A number of the folk musicians interviewed for this research perceive this artist-audience distinction as hierarchical, as a loss of their integrity, and as a devaluation of music’s capacity to experience intimacy and sociability. They intentionally contrast their own ways of performing music with what is perceived to be common in the “imagined mainstream” (Crewe et. al, 2003), often related to very ‘commercial’ and ‘mechanical’ forms
of popular music like ‘top-40 pop’. As Rikke explains:

You sometimes have the tendency as a band to choose the safe path. To make a set list and push it through; knowing each second what you are doing. (…) Usually all bands would do that. […] We are of course auto-didactics, but on a certain moment we noticed, when we were playing on larger festivals, that so many bands aren’t actually bands, but a songwriter with rented musicians. (…) The drummer has such a thing in his ear, “click clack, click, clack…” and you can imagine that if the drummer plays like that, that it is possible to play along with tapes of recorded orchestrations (…) and many bands make use of that.

The willingness to perform “sincerely” functions as an ideal, meaning that in their performance practice they do not literally aim to ‘tear down the stage’; even during (tiny) living room concerts there is at least a performative distinction between musician(s), organizer(s) and audience(s). However, when analyzing the interviews on how musicians define indie-folk, this produces a set of key aesthetics – based on ‘traditional’ folk idioms – by which they purposely aim to decrease the hierarchy between ‘creators’ (as specialists) and ‘consumers’ (as passive consumers). These key aesthetic features generally include (i) the frequent use of harmonic singing (to emphasize ‘communality’); (ii) the preferred use of acoustic over electronic instruments (to connote ‘simplicity’ and ‘naturalness’); (iii) the downplaying of musical virtuosity and soloing; (iv) the preferred use of constancy of rhythms (to connote ‘egalitarianism’); (v) the use of limited (and open) chords and arrangements (to connote ‘spontaneity’); (vi) a preference for more ‘open’ song structures through the use of improvisation; (vii) the use of polysemy and metaphor in language (to actively invite the audience to interpret lyrics in own terms), and (viii) the distancing from using persona(e) in performance practice (to emphasize ‘honesty’).

In the musicians’ preference for “participatory aesthetics” it is possible to look at similarities between ‘indie-folk’ and other genres associated with DIY ethos, such as ‘punk’, ‘rock’, ‘electronica’, ‘hip hop’, and ‘world music’ (see also Strachan, 2007). Similar to, or more accurately, inspired by ‘traditional’ folk music, also these genres are influenced by more inclusive and egalitarian ideals towards the creation and experience of popular music (cf. Beaver, 2012). Nonetheless, when analyzing the musician’s career paths, we also clearly observe a transition from punk ethos to folk aesthetics.

Although some of the musicians were already involved in the small-scale production of indie-folk music in an earlier phase of their careers, most of them switched from being a punk (or punk-infused) musicians towards becoming a folk musician. Most of the musicians interviewed for this article, moreover see something ‘folky’ in the ‘keep-it-small-and-simple’ way of making punk music, or even define punk as a form of “folk music on speed” (Tonnie, 38, Middelburg, professional musician and programmer). At the same time, however, they draw firm symbolic boundaries between punk and folk music.

An important factor underlying the distinction between folk and punk music seems to be that punk ethos is regarded as ‘out of sync’ with the social conditions of contemporary (‘postmodern’) society
characterized by a critique of the ‘master narratives’ of modernity (cf. Lyotard, 1984), including the master narrative of oppositional subcultures (Hebdigde, 1979). More accurately, it is believed, that being ‘anti-establishment’ is associated, somewhat paradoxically, with dogmatism. As Geert (36, Leeuwarden, professional musician) explains:

So we live in a god-less world, of course already for a hundred years, in a moral equilibrium. (…) I find it difficult to have a discussion about morality and ethics without a universal truth. I don’t get much out of that. (…) I think it’s interesting to not show it [music] as too one-directional. I do have certain ideas, but I think it’s not too exciting to put it on top of everything. I’m not a political punk-band.

The critical and reflexive attitude of indie-folk artists, as expressed by Geert, could be explained by the fact that they are part of a generation born in a postmodern world characterized by fragmentation, deconstruction, and irony, and are thus very critical of teleology and the modern believe in Utopia. Hence, their preference for polysemy and metaphor in language (as well as for ‘open’ song structures such as improvisation), rather than opting for a “final vocabulary” (Rorty, 1989). This relates to recent theory within literary theory, which argues that contemporary conceptions of authenticity “seem more concerned with re-establishing connections between individuals and society than in advocating individual protest and autonomy”; in other words, that authenticity “is redefined in terms of sincerity” (Haselstein et al., 2009: 18). This means that the notion of ‘authenticity’ has been detached from its embattled stance, and is reframed as an act of decorum – as a way of coming to terms with the morals and values prescribed by society. In the context of this research, the turn towards sincerity in contemporary folk music could be seen as an attempt of musicians (and fans) to distance themselves from the industrialization and specialization which characterizes the production of ‘mainstream’ pop, and to redefine the creation and performance of music as a social and transparent enterprise.

4.4. Doing Things Together (DTT) over DIY: Adapting to participatory culture

The appreciation of sincerity over authenticity can not only be found in the careers of musicians or in the ‘mission statement’ of local scenes. It is also reflected in the politics of institutions involved in the promotion and distribution of (Dutch) indie-folk music, of which the majority are part of Dutch indie culture. Analyzing the narratives of gatekeepers on the foundational history of their enterprises reveals

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7 Though some Dutch indie-folk acts have been picked up by a few major labels, such as V2 Records Benelux (e.g. Mister and Mississippi and Blaudzun) and Universal Music (e.g. Lucky Fonz III, who signed with Top Notch, part of Virgin EMI and Universal Music). As one of the product managers of the Warner Music Group informed us, “folk music is a trend like any other trend (…) and is only interesting when acts are able to make a cross-over to a broader audience, like Mumford and Sons did”. Although this research in limited in the sense that we were not able to reach out to more professionals working for the majors, it can be distracted from this quotation that the interest for
that most of them are ‘fans turned entrepreneurs’ (Bennett & Peterson, 2004). Thus, in ways similar to the ‘active fans’ in section 4.2. above, the gatekeepers have a history in earlier DIY movements and scenes and started their business as amateur-journalists, amateur-musicians, and/or as amateur-organizers of small-scale events.

Some of the gatekeepers have roots in former local punk movements (and gradually adapted to participatory culture), whereas others saw a direct opportunity to start their business with the advent of Web 2.0. An example of an institution that has roots in online participatory culture is provided by Atze (35, Utrecht), editor-in-chief of the multimedia platform ‘3voor12’:

In the 1990s, at 3FM [one of the major radio stations and taste makers in the Netherlands], you had this coordinator, and he decided to organize the station according to horizontal programming. That is, one profile, one concept on what the station should be. And no longer the fragmentation all the stations we used to until then. (...) The VPRO [one of the major Dutch broadcasting services] disagreed, which resulted in that they were marginalized. And then the Internet emerged. Well, 1998 still was the year of the so-called dialup connection, and ehm, streaming wasn’t there yet. However, the VPRO started protesting about this issue, and started to make a lot of noise. And the protesting was well received, so the VPRO kept investing in that, and gradually started to organize events and live sessions. Those were broadcasted on the radio, or were released online. And then there were all kinds of niche stations, when broadband came along this was suddenly available. Thus, a punk radio channel, a hip hop channel, no folk music, I guess.

Here, we see how ‘3voor12’ is exemplary for online participatory culture characterized by the confluence of both top-down (corporate) and bottom-up (grassroots) cultural production. Grounded in the advent of the Internet at the end of the 1990s, it allowed the VPRO as a major broadcasting service to divide itself into smaller niches aimed at the distribution of various indie-genres such as ‘punk’ and ‘hip hop’.

Currently, the platform has become institutionalized again, for it shares radio programming with mainstream radio station 3FM. In addition, however, it still has strong online components, for it hosts two digital television channels as well as a ‘pre-release’ streaming website (‘3voor12 Luisterpaal’) aimed at promoting albums that do not neatly fit with the conventions of more commercial radio programming. Moreover, although ‘folk’ was not part of a niche in the early days, it became part of their ‘core business’, as Atze explains, somewhere around 2005. From that moment on, ‘3voor12’ has been a crucial promotional platform for both Anglo-Saxon and Dutch indie-folk music, of which the promotion of the latter, as Atze emphasizes, is seen as “one of the tasks of a public broadcasting service”, receiving governmental money for their activities.

Other institutions, as mentioned, have roots in earlier DIY scenes and gradually reconciled to participatory culture. Interviews with gatekeepers produced various accounts of distancing from DIY contemporary folk music is framed as a “trend”, meaning that it is audience rather than product driven.
ethos and moving towards Dong Things Together (DTT). An example is Snowstar Records, an Utrecht-based independent record label, where a large minority of the musicians interviewed for this article have signed record contracts. Snowstar Records describe their business model as follows on their website (Snowstar, 2015):

Back in the days, Snowstar Records was about punk-rock and DIY. Since then the attitude stuck, but the genre shifted towards calmer music. Nowadays a typical Snowstar Records release would be indie/folk/singer/songwriter-esque. (...) Everyone in our roster knows each other and helped shape both the label and this scene by contributing in their own way. Most of the bands even share members, or have at least shared stages. The Snowstar family is about Doing It Together.

As the quote emphasizes, the label represents itself more like a ‘family’ than a ‘business’, emphasizing the ‘embeddedness’ of the label in the local Utrecht indie-folk scene. They describe the label as such, not only because acts affiliated to the label share members and stages, but also because it shares free content with fans from its website, and organizes events, label markets, and parties. In doing so, Snowstar Records lowers the barrier for fans to be in direct contact with both the musicians and the professionals working for the label, reinforcing a sense of community. This relates to research by Baym (2011) who, as mentioned, found that indie-labels are directed towards incorporating elements of the gift economy into their business model.

Peter (35, music curator, Berlin) provides a second example for how DIY is increasingly framed as DTT. Talking about the historical formation of the annual Incubate festival, a city festival organized in the city center of Tilburg, he explains the following:

The festival comes a bit out of the DIY and punk tradition. And there the idea is of course as well that you do everything together. It is do it yourself but actually it is doing things together and making sure that you are supporting the local scene. (...) But this festival has become more broad in the course of the last ten years, much more open, and we have left the negative attitude behind us (...). The last years we were very busy with involving as many people as possible with the festival. We even had topics like We are Incubate and You are Incubate. And we have had piracy as a theme, which is most of all about the sharing of culture as well instead of keeping it all for yourself. We were the first festival where people could share tips in public. And we opened up (...) the entire website. All on Wiki basis, anybody can change everything. Thus it is very much the open source idea. (...) Making culture together, and that is a much more positive attitude which we can also keep.

Here, we see how the institutional politics of the festival, grounded in the local punk scene of the mid 2000s, shifted from being oriented at debunking the ‘establishment’ towards a more cooperative attitude, aimed at building relations with other (indie) institutions; thus working ‘within’ the system. This could be interpreted as a way of explaining how the festival became institutionalized over the course of its ten
years of existence, for it currently receives public funding from the local municipality and thus needs to co-operate with other (local) institutions in order to legitimize their activities. However, the quotation also illustrates how institutionalization is no longer regarded as something ‘not done’ but, rather, as something that is ‘in sync’ with the open-source attitude of (co-)creating culture. Although the DIY ethos of the former local punk scene, as Peter explains, could be interpreted as a form of “doing things together” as well, it is also framed as a form of participatory culture that is very much ‘self-involved’. In contrast with the current mission statement of the festival, which is perceived as more inclusive and relational. Thus, although the festival is situated in a field characterized by (global) competition, as well as that the festival itself remains true to its roots by acting as an ‘incubator’ for indie culture (and thus prefers to create fences separating ‘indie’ from the ‘mainstream’), its relational attitude is nonetheless exemplary for the way Dutch institutions have adapted the logics and values of participatory culture. That is, to form relationships with audiences and partner institutions rather than being at the margins of the Dutch music industry. By doing so, they ‘sync’ with the aesthetic politics of indie-folk music.

This is not to say that we are arguing for a ‘homology’ between aesthetic and institutional politics. Indie-folk obviously is but one of the genres currently promoted by Dutch independent institutions, and thus co-exists with metal, techno, free-jazz, hip-hop, post-rock, and many other genres. Although these genres share roots in indie discourse, characterized by aesthetic values such as ‘proximity’ and ‘consensus building’ (cf. Fonarow, 2006, Ch. 4), they certainly not all explicitly emphasize the somewhat romanticized version of widespread participation common in indie-folk music. Nevertheless, we do see a relation between the abandoning of autonomy and going beyond punk roots, and the move towards connectivity and participatory ethos. Genres, such as indie-folk, emphasizing the participatory nature of popular music (production and consumption) better fit the relational attitude common within indie culture.

5. Conclusion: Bringing authenticity back to music
The significant growth of indie-folk music over the last twenty-five years is seen, as one music critic aptly wrote, as a way of a new generation of folk musicians (and fans) to “bring authenticity back to music” (Jonze, 2013). Looking over our shoulders at the history of folk music, that seems a plausible statement. With the phonograph and recording industry administering to an ‘oligarchy model’ in the first half of the twentieth century, popular music became a highly specialized and mass-produced commodity (Peterson and Berger, 1975). This article has emphasized how popular music is reframed by indie-folk practitioners as a social experience rather than a commodity. It is a strategy of a new generation, indeed, to bridge the

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8 In practice, the relational attitude has mainly resulted in the establishment of what the festival refers to as a “social festival model”, a website on wiki-basis in which users can create personal profiles and can contribute by editing artists profiles and by sharing and syncing festival timetables with other visitors and peers.
modern divide between producer, distributor, and consumer – which is in many ways counterhegemonic to the commodification of popular music.

As this research has indicated, respondents generally define the mainstream as mechanical, distant, profit-driven, mediatized, and accelerating. This indicates that indie-folk practitioners, in ways similar to their 1960s counterparts, aim to create fences between ‘folk’ and ‘pop’. More accurately, they somewhat regressively define indie-folk as a genre by distancing themselves from the (imagined) mainstream. This embattled stance causes indie-folk music to function as a more ‘authentic’ alternative to commercially successful music. Particularly within smaller (trans)local music scenes, indie-folk music is regarded as the ‘authentic’ antidote to mainstream pop music, enabling practitioners to form communities and to celebrate music in more intimate and social settings. However, the embattled stance might even be true for indie-folk music produced and disseminated ‘within’ the confines of the mainstream music industry. Here, ‘folk revivalism’ might be representative of a nostalgic aesthetic emphasizing the inherently relational and interpersonal nature of popular music production. It might be a strategy of the major firms to sell ‘authenticity’ in a music industry connoting specialization, industrialization and alienation (cf. Hesmondhalgh, 1999: 56).

In this article we have suggested that the field of Dutch independent folk music could be characterized as the participatory culture ‘behind’ web 2.0. This can be observed, firstly, in how digitization enabled musicians to teach themselves and, accordingly, to self-develop a career in music business. Secondly, from the part of the audience, it can be observed in how the emergence of Web 2.0 helped them in creating networks and to establish (trans)local music scenes – the social ‘interstices’ where aspiring indie-folk musicians often acquire the knowledge and knowhow before becoming a professional musician. Thirdly, from the part of the gatekeepers, it can be observed in how they have reconciled to participatory culture and became a platform for the promotion and distribution of (Dutch) indie-folk music. However, we also would like to argue that the emergence of (online) participatory culture does not stand in opposition to corporate cultural production, nor that it undermines the powerbase of the major firms, as is sometimes suggested. The contrary seems to be true, epitomized by the emergence of the ‘alternative mainstream’, which could be regarded as a metaphor for the emergence of a commercial zone where bottom-up production converges with top-down distribution.

This research has pointed to the fact that Dutch indie-folk practitioners, despite their discontent with the ‘mainstream’, at the same time distance themselves from the oppositional ethos characteristic of the former punk scenes. They do so by adhering to participatory aesthetics and by emphasizing DTT over DIY, within their own networks, but also by collaborating with actors working ‘within’ the confines of the (alternative) mainstream. This might be indicative, as Hesmondhalgh has suggested (1999: 57), of the longer history of independent music firms, characterized by the administering towards building
relationships with corporate capital as a means to stay true to their aesthetics by creating a commercial ‘interstice’ between grassroots and corporate production. This research, however, has indicated that the move towards professionalization within the field of Dutch independent folk music is constituted by social and technological forces as well. First, it is because punk ideology is seen as ‘out of sync’ with the deconstruction of autonomy and authenticity by postmodernism; hence the reframing of ideology in terms of sincerity and connectivity. Secondly, it is effected by the adaptation of online participatory culture by Dutch ‘independent’ music institutions, a form of institutional politics which better fits the genre of indie-folk structured around a set participatory aesthetics.

Moreover, while we see that changes in technology made it easier for musicians to create and produce music themselves, they at the same time seem to be generally dependent on the distribution systems of (‘independent’) institutions. This is most notably evident when it comes to developing strategies to “stand out from the crowd” – that is, to attract the attention of gatekeepers in an increasingly competitive industry (cf. Hauge & Hracs, 2010). Intermediaries thus remain crucial, enabling musicians to disseminate their music to (inter)national audiences and to gain the symbolic capital necessary to move from the margins towards the center of the music industry. Thus, indie-folk musicians building relationships with professionals should also in this regard be seen as the ‘product’ of digitization. While it lowers the threshold to create and produce music, it at the same time forces musicians to abandon their autonomy and to seek ways to market their music without either ‘selling’ or ‘burning’ out.

References


