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Throgs Neck: Anatomy of an Urban Underground Music Scene

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Abstract

Among the many contributions of The Bronx, one that does not receive as much academic attention as it should is the borough's long tradition of fostering local music scenes. Beyond being the birthplace of salsa and hip-hop, for the past 20 years, the Throgs Neck section of The Bronx has also been home to a vibrant independent, hyperlocal, underground music scene. The current paper uses case study as a strategy to understand the dynamics of this hyperlocal music scene. More specifically, the case study takes an inductive approach and tells the story of a scene that is very different from the historical salsa and hip-hop music scenes. The case study combines archives and observations collection from historical documents such as newspaper and magazine articles, Web sites, social media and documentaries. There are two main take-aways from the study: first, the Throgs Neck scene has not been commodified like the salsa and hip-hop scenes which has pros and cons; and second, the multi-faceted nature of the Throgs Neck scene has enabled the identity of the participants, both musicians and listeners, to grow and develop together.

Keywords: Bronx, music scene, underground

Introduction

The Bronx is the northernmost borough in New York City. It stretches 42 square miles and has an estimated population of 1.4 million (Bronx Historical Society, 2020). Since the first European settlers in the 1600s, The Bronx has been the site of constant upheaval. It was an arena for several civil war battles, saw a tremendous growth in population after WWI, became a symbol for urban deterioration during the 1960s and an inspiring story of community revival in the 2000s (Gonzalez, 2006). It is also the home of many popular

culture icons such as the New York Yankees, the Grand Concourse and the New York Post as well as specialized libraries, museums and cultural destinations such as The Bronx Zoo, Bronx Museum of the Arts and the Botanical Gardens (Burrows & Wallace, 1998). The Bronx, as Ultan (2009) describes, has made vast “political, economic and social contributions to history of the city, to the country and to the wider world” (p. i). Among the many contributions, one that does not receive as much academic attention as it should, is The Bronx’s long tradition of fostering music independence through the support of local music scenes.

According to Peterson and Bennett (2004), a music scene is a context in which clusters of producers, musicians, and fans collectively share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others. The history of The Bronx as an area for music scenes began in the post-WWII era with salsa. Indeed, as Singer and Martinez (2004) contend, the Bronx was a crucially important area for salsa in the 1960s as the borough helped propel the music into the mainstream. Beyond salsa, the Bronx also has legendary status in the hip-hop community as the area where rap found cultural and commercial success (Diallo, 2009). During the 1970s and 1980s, the economic and demographic changes to the popular music industry gave rise to a variety of local scenes in urban environments (Fikentscher, 2000). The Bronx was one of these environments where the popularity of mobile disc jockeys (DJs) exploded and brought with them a new style of music (Hebdige, 2004; Keyes, 1996). The Bronx was an era in which Moore (2004) explains established a culture of authenticity relative to rap music. Although certainly the more widely known, salsa and hip-hop are not the only music scenes that incubated in The Bronx. It is the case that beginning in 2001 and remaining today, the Bronx has a vibrant independent underground music scene, one that deserves academic attention.

The current paper uses case study as a strategy to understand the dynamics within a single setting (Eisenhardt, 1989), which here is the hyperlocal music scene in the Throgs Neck section of The Bronx. The goal follows the contention by George and Bennett (2005) that such an approach provides a “detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events” (p. 5). More specifically, the case study is an inductive approach that tells the story of a scene that is very different from the historical salsa and hip-hop music scenes. As most case studies typically do, the current one combines archives and observations (Eisenhardt, 1989). Data was collected through content analysis of historical documents such as newspaper and magazine articles, Web sites, social media and documentaries. Since no behavior is manipulated (i.e., Baxter & Jack, date), the case study is developed so that connections can be made between the underground music scene and theory as well as the interconnection between the historic Bronx music scenes. The main takeaways of the paper revolve around detailing the importance of how a

previously hidden music scene has impacted the lives of artists and fans as well as the physical space of Throgs Neck.

Background on Music Scenes

Any study of music scenes must begin with the musical genre. A genre, according to Miller (1984), is a set of substantive features that creates a particular effect in a given situation. Although Stam (2017) explains that defining any genre is problematic, the point of the term is to illustrate important “family resemblances” among content. Following this logic, Lena (2012) argues that music can best be described using the idea of genres. As she further states, musical genres are systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together as a distinctive story of music. Indeed, while looking at all the different styles of music, Lena and Peterson (2008) explain that there are 4 distinct genres: avant-garde are small, informal genres that have no leaders and typically unravel in months to a year; scene-based is when a community of artists, fans and supporting businesspeople develop around a spatial area; industry-based genres are organized through music companies and corporations; and, finally, traditionalist genres serve to perpetuate and maintain the heritage of certain musical types.

The scholarship on music scenes descends from the work on subcultures and youth culture of the 1970s, specifically the way that people come together to create identities and communities in opposition to mass culture (MacLeod, 2020). Within the way that individuals forge larger groups around music, exists 3-types of scenes as described by Peterson and Bennett (2004). The first scene is clustered around a specific geographic focus, the second is when local scenes are drawn together around a distinctive form of music and the final scene is virtual, which is when people overcome physical distances through computer mediated technology. What cuts through each scene is the organization of space and the importance of technology? Musical scenes shape the geographical space in which they occur. No matter if they arise online or in low rent parts of a city (i.e., Lloyd, 2006), the way that participants collect physically defines the area. In addition, advanced technology, be it the electrical guitar, the Internet, or digital sampling, to name a few, often plays a role in the development and maintenance of a scene (Peterson & Bennett, 2004). The role of technology cannot be overstated as participants must balance new technologies with the requirements of the musical style (Bürkner & Lange, 2017). Over the decades, academics have described many famous examples of music scenes such as Austin, Liverpool, Kansas City, Harlem, Kentucky, Chicago, London, Leeds and Kent (Lena & Peterson; 2008; Miller & Schofield (2016).

The upshot is that scenes have resulted in intense fandoms. Fandom is a common feature in industrial societies and emerges from the mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment of certain performers, narratives or genres (Fiske, 1992, p. 30). Most important to the creation of fandom through

music scenes is that participants and space develop simultaneously together. Indeed, Giddens (1984) notes this connection between experience, identity, and space, arguing it is of the utmost importance when considering the lived experience. Individuals develop meaning beyond the economic value or consumer culture. There is a cumulative subcultural capital in being part of the scene (see Davis, 2006; Moore, 2005). More to the point is that the meaning derived within the scene intertwines with participants' personal development, which inevitably plays out through fashion, hairstyle, career path, political orientations and perceptions (Bennett, 2013). Bennett (2016) points to the biographical impact of scenes by explaining how, for instance, punk rock fans have a continued attachment to both the music and lifestyle years after leaving the actual scene. For this reason, Bennett and Rogers (2016) contend that more research needs to be done in the broad-ranging array of music spaces; by doing so, academics can explain the importance of how music scenes span both the public and private spheres of music consumption.

Evolution of the Throgs Neck Underground Music Scene

Throgs Neck, also known as Throggs Neck, is the southeastern portion of the Bronx as well as the least-commented on section in the borough (Dolan, 1984). Founded in 1643, Throgs Neck is 2 square miles bound by the East River, the Long Island Sound, Westchester Creek and the Bruckner Expressway. Like every area of the Bronx, Throgs Neck was subject to social, political and economic unrest. During the 1970, Bronx neighborhoods, such as Throgs Neck, lost significant proportions of housing and associated community structure due to many of the policies adopted by city administrators (Wallace & Wallace, 2000). On top of a decimated housing market, from 1989 to 2011, the inflation-adjusted medium household income declined by 23% (Torres, 2015). The impact was felt far and wide as Throgs Neck began to see a steep increase in opioid and heroin use, abandoned buildings, homelessness and transient behavior (Katz, 2017). With the streets often unsafe for teens and young adults, many locals began to dream of a safe haven from the neighborhood (De Los Santos, 2006). Their desires were heard by several enterprising individuals. What emerged from the work of a few was a music scene that would grow to become not only a place where teens and young adults could go without harm but a place that would make an indelible mark on the area and participants.

The Throgs Neck music scene was originally dubbed The Bronx Underground and can be credited to three founders: Anita Colby, Dave Rose and Adam Fachler (Bindley, 2008). Concerts officially began in 2001 and were hosted in the basement of the First Lutheran Church, or FLC. Shows were once a month, alcohol and drug free events involving teenagers and young adults. The concerts served as a safe environment, a place to escape the streets of The Bronx. As Colby explains, "It was the central meeting point and really

feeling that sense of family and being included" (Guarneri & Keith, 2018). The scene included a diverse set of musical genres, which catered to the diversity of attendees. Bands ranged from emo/alternative (Athena's Fury) to punk (The Flaming Tsunamis) to hardcore (Turns to Fall, The Silver Medal, Empire). Although the musicians were hired to play FLC, they received very little credit (Rock, 2016); instead they opted to get involved because of their passion for music and the scene. These performers were truly independent, having never signed to a major label. This means that they were in total control of their media - albums, social media, websites, interviews, merchandising, music videos and management. In fact, the most appropriate way of describing these musicians is as musical entrepreneurs, a moniker that can be applied to many local music scenes. As Flachler explains,

"We had no idea this was going to be anything. We were doing this to make money. We weren't doing this to make records. We weren't doing this to film DVDs. We were doing it just 'cause we were kids and we had nowhere to play' " (Guarneri & Keith, 2018).

This is not to say that all of the musicians remained local phenomena. Patent Pending, a pop punk band that played FLC often, signed with a major label, released several EPs and played the Billboard Music Awards as well as MTV's Video Music Awards. In 2015, after 14 years, a series of unfortunate events forced the end live shows at FLC. Soon after, the scene moved the majority of their performances to Jinny Ryan's, a Throgs Neck bar. The scene as it exists now is a testament to what was started in the early 2000s. Many of the musicians that are active today are those that began their career over 20 years ago. For example, The Bryan Durieux Project is a musical act that combines R&B with alternative rock and funk and began performing the Throgs Neck in the late 2000s. Baychester Blues, a band that epitomizes the scene, plays progressive rock with a funk/blues influence in the tight-knit Throgs Neck scene. Finally, Conversing with Oceans is a band that involves a Throgs Neck stalwart, Alex Bondarev. Bondarev has been performing in Throgs Neck since the very beginning, which makes him one of the longest tenured musicians within the scene. Bondarev has had multiple bands, all of which have centered around indie-rock and the combination of electronic and classical instruments. When asked about the Throgs Neck scene, Bondarev summed up its trajectory by stating:

"The major difference between The Bronx Underground, and the underground now, is that the original underground wasn't about a band. It was about the Bronx Underground, kids of all ages. Now, all the kids who grew up on it are doing their own thing. It is not of all ages anymore, it's more mid to late twenties to early thirties who come to shows." (Bondarev, 2016)

Although the particulars have shifted a bit, the Throgs Neck music scene is thriving. Over the decades, a sturdy pattern of consumption and modes of

production in relation to the music scene have developed. Musicians continue to record albums, perform live and make videos. Obviously, the introduction and growth of Web 2.0 has transformed music in general and all scenes in particular. What started with MySpace as its primary platform has blossomed to encompass a multitude of distribution channels, which has led to the endurance of the Throgs Neck scene. More importantly, the emergence and maintenance of this unregulated market has played a crucial role in social and individual development. The Throgs Neck scene is more than an expression of style and genre but an embedded way of life (i.e., Martin-Iverson, 2012) – the scene has played, and still plays, an important part in the development of the identity, community and physical space.

Understanding the Throgs Neck Music Scene

The first take-away from the current case study revolves around the difference between the Throgs Neck and the historic hip-hop and salsa scenes. Although they all share the common fact that none of the scenes were planned, i.e., they emerged through a complex network of forces, the main difference here is that the music and stylings of the Throgs Neck scene are not commercialized. True, some of the musicians from Throgs Neck did outgrow the area, sign to major labels and eventually generate significant revenue, but for the most part, all of the scene and musicians have remained independent and underground. This is not to say that the art is less impactful in any way, just that there is a difference in how salsa and hip-hop have become commodities. Although there is an assumption that commercialization is due only to marketdriven forces, the underlying act of meaning making still plays an important role (Ziek & Pantic, 2019). In other words, the economic process relative to how scenes are co-opted is principally developed around how large swaths of people are attracted to symbolism of the music, lifestyle and politics (i.e., Keyes, 2004; Krims & Krims 2000). This attraction must translate into a sustainable industrialized space where products and services can exist to serve and satisfy the needs of the participants, which simply did not happen with the Throgs Neck scene. There are both pros and cons to commercialization. On one hand, the downside is that the youthful rebellion relative to the hip-hop and salsa scenes became what Moore (2005) calls “subcultural capital”, which has enormous economic and social value beyond the original borders especially when absorbed into the consumer culture. On other hand, the Throgs Neck scene remains what Moore (2004) describes as a “culture of authenticity”, which is disconnected to the corrupting influences of commerce and so allows musicians to continue to hold onto the expression of artistic sincerity and freedom.

The second take-away has to do with the multi-faceted nature of the Throgs Neck scene. Since there is no consensus on the style of music that makes-up the scene, the term underground is most appropriate from a theoretical sense. The Throgs Neck music scene is, and always was, multifaceted, which as Huq (2003) explains is when no one style dominates. The importance of a

multifaceted scene is that it enables the participants, both musicians and listeners, to grow and develop together. Obviously, this is nothing new; according to Bennett (2013), since music is highly personal and intertwined with biographical development, significance is not tied directly to youth. Instead, as he further explains, fans and musicians often change over time in the sense of fashion, hairstyles, career paths, political orientations and perceptions of the world. An illustration of this point can be seen with Hall's (1992) contention that identities in the postmodern world are not unified around a coherent self but are constantly shifting. Davis (2006) further describes these changes by arguing that there is a dialectical relationship between aging identity and a music scene. Although she focuses on punk, it can easily be replaced with Throgs Neck, since in both scenes there is a long-term involvement by all the participants regardless of the changes to an aging population. To this end, the Throgs Necks scene adapted well beyond a simple venue changes to a maturing tangle of social, economic and personal values relative to the participants.

Conclusion

Scenes develop in large part because of the physical landscape in general and the close proximity of the participants specifically (Keeffe, 2009). The reason is that there is a connection between the lived experience, identity and space (Giddens, 1984). Indeed, Throgs Neck is a prime example of the role space plays in the construction of everything relative to the scene.

There is a definitive relationship between the space, i.e. Throgs Neck, and the distinctiveness of the scene. Martin-Iverson (2012) alludes to this give and take when describing how for 'scenesters', the space is more than a place that allows for the expression of style or somewhere to listen to music. Given that participants spent long hours in Throgs Neck, there should be no surprise it was influential in the ways that they come to understand and define themselves. Since "identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us" (Burr, 1995, p. 51), class, gender and race do not happen in a vacuum but in space and place (Creswell, 2015). To this end, for the past 20 years, the Throgs Neck music scene has been a powerful resource on which individuals draw when constructing and performing identity.

This case study shows the importance music scenes play within a community – they are, as MacLeod (2020) explain, not a thing but a perspective – a way of looking at relationships, space and identity. The Throgs Neck scene is a contextualization of the impact music has on the urban landscape. The participants of the Throgs Neck scene have undoubtedly transformed both physical and emotional states of being. Although there has been research on music scenes, especially those that exist in urban areas, often the focus is on scenes that attract famous musicians and number participants in the millions such as Liverpool or Austin. Research though should not overlook scenes that are vibrant but do not attract grand gestures and overtures from famous

participants and, of course, the media. Within the Northeastern United States alone there are multiple scenes from New Brunswick and Asbury Park to Pittsburg (Bibly & Ziegler, 2012; MacLeod, 2020) that have just as much impact as their larger counterparts, they too are changing the lives of countless individuals.

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