

THE VOICE BEHIND MUSIC STREAMING: AN AUDIO DOCUMENTARY OF
BLUE COLLAR MUSICIANS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of
Texas State University
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

Shannon Claire Williams

San Marcos, Texas
December 2014

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Abstract

This paper includes the script of an audio documentary. The subject of this project focuses on the experience of independent musicians who engage in the music market in the Austin area after the digital disruption. Some of their challenges include navigating the saturated Austin music industry and finding connections with fans. This documentary demonstrates, through personal account, the new music industry. The intent is to evaluate through human experience the changes to input cost and consumption cost in the music market.

Introduction

Recording the current state of the music industry is a bit like creating an anthology of conversations with my peers. I have slowly surrounded myself with people in the industry in Austin, and have been let behind closed doors and backstage. I developed an interest for the industry in high school reading Pitchfork Music and acting as the Arts and Entertainment editor of *The Horizon*, my high school newspaper.

While working on this project an Internet debate developed between streaming giant Spotify, and the equally weighty country-pop star Taylor Swift. Even as a Grammy winning artist whose first week of sales with *Red*, an album released in 2012, achieved the highest grossing first week sales of any female artist, the streaming services did not cut the desired quota. Swift and her label, *Big Machine*, removed all her albums from the streaming service, claiming the value of the album was not being earned on the streaming service. How do we, as a society, place a value on our favorite songs when they can be accessed for free digitally? According to NoiseTrade founder Derek Webb, the music

industry is no longer “the album selling business” but instead the “tribe building business.”

Founded in 1923, Nielsen measures a variety of entertainment, all of which are changing in the global environment. The company’s measurements include radio airplays, online streaming and music consumer behavior. This data is compiled from about 40,000 retail stores globally, and has a history of partnering with Billboard, an influential cross-genre music brand. The two companies reached a new agreement in fall of 2014 to reflect new music trends. The old reliability of music sales did not simply turn digital, and data analysts must reinvent their methods to represent current trends.

I believe that there are unquantifiable measures of appreciating music, so here I delve into the human aspects of this creative market.

Overview of Creating Documentary

In order to create this documentary, I conducted new interviews tailored for the intent of the project. After doing some research about connections within the Austin community, I sought to interview people with a variety of perspectives, but with valuable connections to different parts of the Austin music scene. I chose to focus primarily on the artist perspective rather on a festival organizer, manager or producer. For this project, my primary interest is the perception of the industry to a musician.



Photo by Shannon Williams

Image of fans outside at Historic Scoot Inn

SXSW 2014

The Voice Behind Music Streaming

Part 1 “Digital Disruption”

00:00 Brandon Henderson and Erica Tice prepared to host together on an episode of *The local show*. It’s a staple of the college station, KTSW 89.9 in San Marcos.

00:10 Live Copy

An intro plays with BH leading into the Local Show. “Yo what’sup it’s the Fern and you’re listening to the Local Show only on KTSW San Marcos.”

00:20 Local Show on KTSW 89.9 Introduction

BH: Excellent. So we are very excited because we do have a live in-studio tonight!

ET: Ta-da!

BH: We are going to go for a whole two hours, it’s going to be amazing, but yeah. Umm, well we should probably tell them what we heard so we can get this party started!

ET: Sure! Well we just heard from the Old 97’s. That was there song No Baby I which came off their *Erica Tice’s voice fades out.*

00:35 Brandon Henderson Interview

BH: Especially working as a specialty show host, I’m, I used to work as the Americana show host. My focus was country folk and blues. And that’s where I said, all my time, all my passion, were in this Americana genre.

00:50 Erica Tice, Local Show Interview

SW: How did you prepare for the show today?

ET: For today, I went through my music library and just perused through my library for what I wanted, and earlier on in the week I did a lot of research on The Madisons. I checked out their Facebook page and then I went to their website, which is an interesting website to look at.

01:13 Brandon Henderson Interview [*cue music bed from The Madisons*]

BH: They are a, actually you would probably call them indie-american because while they do have a very kind of Americana roots, there is very much kind of a punk energy. They also have a violin player and a trumpet player, which makes it obviously very very different. They are just an amazing live band and they're really cool people.

BH: I was looking at stuff that was popular within the genre because of things like the Americana music association, I was looking at just people who were looking at people who were getting buzz here just around here in the central Texas area. I was thinking about music in a popularity sense or sometimes in a critical sense more than like, what I like.

01:55 Allison Johnson Interview

AJ: My name is Allison Johnson, I am the music director at KTSW for the second year. I have pretty broad standards when it comes to what gets added on KTSW. We definitely have a format. We absolutely have a certain kind of music that we like but we don't restrict ourselves to like, "indie rock," which I hate that term. I don't really like genre labels in general because I don't really think that you can describe music by labeling it with a word. I ...as far as what gets added it sounds dumb to say does it sound good? But

something has to sound good. Something has to sound like it was made for an audience and you know, that, that can be anything.

02:40 Brandon Henderson Interview

BH: But like any artist that has sparked my interest in the past year, the last one that grabbed hold of me probably was the Madisons.

SW: Are your parents into music? What made you interested in music?

BH: It just sort of clicked one day while I was still in high school going, I really need to listen to better music.

[Fade in with The Madisons in KTSW studio.]

BH: And that just sort of took me on a journey of learning about more indie music, which really was not something that we did in our small town.

03:10 Local Show on KTSW 89.9

ET: We're back! You're tuned in to the local show here on KTSW eighty-nine-nine with Brandon and Erica.

BH: Yes! And we've got in the studio, we have in the studio the Madisons! So guys, how are ya'll doing?

Madisons: Pretty good!

BH: Awesome. So ya, so how did you guys get started because you have, this is a very eclectic group. If anyone's never seen The Madisons before there's a banjoist, a standup bass but we also have a lovely violin player.... *[fade out]*.

BH: It's like a lot of your songs deal with leaving the small town area. Do you think there's something heroic in that or is it something that you know about so well?

DS: It's definitely something that I know about so well. I don't know if I had grown up in a different situation if I would have been a fan so much of these stories. I can't say for sure.

BH: I don't know about Snyder Texas but I know that where I'm from it's like, there is literally nothing else around so if you don't go to a big city you're not going to experience anything.

DS: Where are you from?

BH: I'm from Rock Port, South Texas!

DS: Oh, ok well I know some people from Rock Port, but and I'm sure I'm dating myself but it's different now, with the "interwebs!"

BH: The Netscapes!

DS: It wasn't always like that, you had to drive, you had to call people on their house phones.

[Laughing from the group]

04:25 Brandon Henderson Interview

BH: Indie music wasn't popular. Even people as big as Modest Mouse or Spoon or The New Pornographers or Broken Social Scene, like I really did not know anything about these people. And, none of my friends did so I just sort of started listening to different music and I started really really liking it a lot. I lucked out actually really really well I used to work at a summer camp and one of the summer camp directors there, he was the music editor I think it was for the newspaper at American University in Washington D.C. He already knew way more about music than I still know about today kind of thing. He

just burned me CDs, I mean he gave me all of his Spoon CDs that he burned them for me. That's how it all started too, I just started asking college kids, that I knew, I was like, "hey which Wilco album should I buy? And they're just like, "go get Yankee Hotel Foxtrot." It just grew from there.

05:05 Allison Johnson Interview

AJ: You could even argue that kids that spend more time on the internet listen to more music because it's about discovery. If you only are listening to music while you're in the car think about how narrow that is. I mean, because especially with commercial radio you're hearing most of the time the same songs every hour or every two hours at least. So you're not getting that broad range of things, I mean you're hearing the same songs all the time, that's why it's called "Top Forty." You don't have a lot of choices. Not to say that that's a bad thing, I mean, people enjoy that. But, if you're utilizing the resources that you have on the internet to find music, I mean there's so many different avenues you could go down. You could get lost in a YouTube chain of videos, related videos for hours at a time. You could follow a soundcloud link to another Soundcloud link to another guy who made a remix of so and so's thing. So I think there's definitely a correlation between these niche genres, random genres, that are just created out of thin air and the rise of the internet.

06:20 Brandon Henderson Interview

SW: How often do you think that people in your age group download music illegally?

BH: A lot. I do it, and I guess I'm not really ashamed. People are really weird when they do talk about whether or not they do download music, and I do the same thing. It's like, oh ya, I only download the popular artists. Like I downloaded a bunch of Tom Waits a couple of months ago and it's awesome, he's one of my new favorite artists now because of it. But I've also gone the other route and probably did it to bands that probably still needed the money. You've been on like, obviously the big ones, PirateBay. It tells you seeders and leechers and like how many times it's done. There might be twenty people that are seeding and then another five to six people that are leeching it so that means that there's about, at least twenty six people at that moment in time that have this album. And that's like in one day in one given hour, usually if I torrent something I'm going to delete it almost right afterwards if not let it run for a little bit. And that takes an hour, so that's twenty-five people per hour per day, that's a lot of people downloading for an indie artist. And I think, you know, in the end because these are independent artists that, you know, struggle in a lot of ways, you only have to pay what, I don't know about Sarah Jaffe anymore but maybe twenty, twenty five bucks to go see her. Which isn't you know a crazy amount of money, and it's usually in a smaller place, it'll be like at an Emo's or a La Rosa when it was still open kind of place she would go. So they are these very small places, so a lot of her sales is the album sales, the shows and the merch. So ya, I do think it really does hurt.



Photos by Shannon Williams

Image of “Local Show” hosts and guests

KTSW 89.9 October 2014

The Voice Behind Music Streaming

Part 2 “Trading for Noise”

00:00 Derek Webb Interview

DW: And all of a sudden, I thought okay. We basically just demystified this thing. Like, rather than playing in all the wrong cities for nobody, and not knowing who’s going to show up and having no control over any of that, if I’ve got information, meaningful connections with my fans, then I can make a living.

00:15 Narrator

SW: This is about Derek Webb, and about when he realized where he needed to go when the industry. Webb is a vocalist, guitarist, writer and most recently- the co-founder of NoiseTrade.

00:30 Derek Webb Interview

DW: We are basically a tribe-building platform. We help artists and authors give away content for free in exchange for data from which they can make a living. So very essentially that’s what we do.

00:50 Narrator

SW: Out of high school, Webb made thoughtful folk music inspired by the Indigo Girls with his band, Caedmon’s Call. Not long after, Warner Brothers offered them a deal. They wrote music with some spiritual content so Warner Brothers decided to market

them as a Christian band. Later began Webb's solo career as a musician. Our story starts with his third studio release going it alone.

01:15 Derek Webb Interview

DW: Whenever somebody releases a product or a book or an album usually you get that first big infusion of energy and you sell kind of to the people who are waiting, who know about it, who know about you, they buy it up in the first six or eight months and then unless you've got some real tricks up your sleeve that's usually when you think about making the next album. So my, I think it was my third record the label was talking to me about moving on to the next record. But for that particular record I just had a little more ambition than usual.

01:50 Narrator

SW: He pushed back at the record company, saying he thought more people could be reached with this release. In return he got a hard line from the record company.

02:00 Derek Webb Interview

DW: Unless you can find a way to promote the record that doesn't cost us any money then we need to move on.

02:05 Narrator

SW: Here's the part where Webb shows us the role he loves as an "agitator." He went away, and came back to propose something that, at least in 2006 was unheard of.

02:15 Derek Webb Interview

DW: I wanted them to let me give the record away for free for three months online and get emails and zip codes.

[There is typing noise in the background.]

02:23 Narrator

SW: Webb proposed free digital distribution for *Mockingbird*, and gave away eighty-five thousand copies online.

02:30 Derek Webb Interview

DW: I got an email and zip-code for every one. That's a lot of people for a guy like me. Being a blue-collar artist, and you know never having a huge fan base, that's a lot of records.

02:40 Narrator

SW: But Webb's question was, where were all these people, these newfound fans? After dissecting the data he found that he had never played a show in 2 of the 5 cities with the most downloads. The two cities- New York and Los Angeles.

02:55 Derek Webb Interview

DW: I mean, I'm like a niche, niche, niche, niche, folk singer. I don't have any business going to you know competitive markets like New York and Los Angeles but the numbers don't lie. And so we thought, well, let's take this data out for a spin and see if it's really

worth what we think it's worth. If this is really an economic model or if we just managed to give away a bunch of records for free, because that's not really revolutionary.

03:15 Narrator

SW: He booked a flight and a show in the smallest room at the Knitting Room in Los Angeles for ninety-percent of the door and zero guarantee.

03:25 Derek Webb Interview

DW: So it was all on me to get people in the door and if I flew all the way to California and nobody shows up, it's all on me.

03:30 Narrator

SW: Webb went back to the data and emailed only those people within fifteen miles of the venue.

[cue typing noise]

03:39 Derek Webb Interview

DW:...said hey, we hope you love the record, umm, I'm coming to town I'm playing a show, it's really close by it's going to be \$10 at the door, we hope you can come out.

03:46 Narrator

SW: This is about two weeks before the show.

03:50 Derek Webb Interview

DW: A couple of days before the show we emailed them again, hey, you know just a reminder, you know, come out and see the show. We didn't know what was going to happen. And there's a line, all the way down Hollywood boulevard to get into the knitting factory and my buddy and I as we were walking up we were thinking well, apparently somebody really cool is playing in the big room tonight, maybe when we're done with my show we can sneak into that show we get up to the, to the door and it turns out all those people were there to see my show.

04:10 Narrator

SW: Webb and his band sold out the hundred-person room at capacity, and left 200 more waiting to get in. After they finished the show inside, they hopped outside the venue and played a second show for the two hundred people who didn't get in.

04:25 Derek Webb Interview

DW: The knitting factory was looking at me like, who the hell are you? And I basically told them like, I'm nobody. And that's why this matters. That's why this is important, what just happened tonight.

[Music from Derek Webb's mockingbird plays in the background and continues behind the credits.]

04:30 Derek Webb Interview

DW: And um, they booked me to come back the next night to play the next bigger size room for a guarantee 6 months later and we sold that room out 6 months later. Same thing

happened in New York at the Bitter Inn. The exact same scenario. And then the next year when my new record came out it was the biggest pre-sale I had ever done, in my career. I think I pre-sold fifteen or twenty-thousand records that year. It totally changed my career. And that was the point where I was like, ok. I have so many friends who do what I do, who are blue collar musicians, I know would be more than willing to give away a little music for free in exchange for music with which they would be able to make a living. And so I had a few friends go in with me and two years later we brought NoiseTrade to market.

05:32 Narrator

SW: Derek Webb lives and works in Nashville Tennessee, where he spends his time managing and running NoiseTrade.

Photo by Shannon Williams

Image of Please Please Me

KTSW's Other Side Drive 2014





Photo by Shannon Williams

Image of Austin Skyline

SXSW 2014

The Voice Behind Music Streaming

Part 3 “Noise in the Disrupted Market”

00:00 Narrator

[Cue music from Drew Davis, piano.]

Austin is, it's GROWING.

The city saw almost two hundred new residents every day last year, and 2014's SXSW was bigger than ever. According to Austin Music People, SXSW raked in \$190 million in economic impact in 2013. The city that's known as the Live Music Capital of the world attracts artists in every stage of their career.



Photo by Shannon Williams

Image of Saint Rich at Merge Showcase
SXSW 2014

00:27

[Construction noises begin slowly, then begin to grow. A murmur of a voice begins quietly, and then grows into more voices. By the end of the statement, there is a rush of construction voice.]

And just like the construction of a high-rise condo- there's a lot of noise that comes with more people.

[The noise peaks. Almost shouting.]

The problem isn't scarcity. *[All noise*

stops and is replaced with white noise.]

00:47 Derek Webb Interview

DW: There's definitely a lot of noise online, that's what we created when culture kind of chose one path over the other when the digital disruption was happening in music a little over a decade ago.

Because in the new music market the problem isn't scarcity, that's what it used to be was that records were so hard to find and artists were so hard to find because there were so many of them who couldn't get through the gate. Now the problem is ubiquity. There's music everywhere, it's just impossible to be found. There's music everywhere.

That's kind of what we chose and one of the implications of it that we might not have thought about it was that there were great things about having gatekeepers and most people don't think about it like this but there were, because if not for gatekeepers, if not for people who's job it was to stand between audiences and artists and the technology with which they could record their music or distribute their music.

01:10 Narrator

SW: This is not the first time I've heard this story. It's a familiar ring, in fact one of my interviewees declined to be interviewed because of negative feelings surrounding the industry. This was someone that's been involved well, for long enough to be considered an expert. Part of his job most recently involved reviewing crowd funding campaigns. He said he would no longer continue a platform he had used to cast these projects out beyond the wall of noise.

Instead of being interviewed, he left me with a long email account of why he could not participate. I want his identity to remain anonymous, but I think it's important to share his words. He said:

ANONYMOUS: I've watched the music crowd funding space peak and then, in my humble opinion, tank over the last two years. The vast majority of music campaigns on Kickstarter and Indiegogo these days are unrealistic and unsupported, and so very many artists have never followed through, can't even begin to tell you. They raise thousands of dollars and then... nada. The heady days of Amanda Palmer are long over. PledgeMusic is essentially an old-school record label passing the hat to cut their own costs.

02:36 *[Construction noise fades up. Noise fades down when speaker starts again].*

02:40 Narrator

SW: Because the Internet has made it easier to record and distribute, it can be harder for talented people to stand out beyond the wall of noise. Some seeking recognition may turn to the spotlight of Austin's most famous festival, South by South West.



Photo by Shannon Williams

Image of Wye Oak

SXSW 2014

[Music Plays from Emily Wolfe, Lion Heart.]

In Austin's world famous South By Southwest Music festival, artists face even more competition. In the words of Austin based Octopus Project's Toto Miranda, "it's like Austin becomes the Internet."

03:04 Toto Miranda Interview

TM: It's like the Internet arrives and becomes a physical place and it's Austin. There's so much going on and so many people trying to do their thing and get your attention.

03:16 Narrator

SW: Following last year's SXSW riot, and the SXSW accident, the city has stated that it will be limiting the number of permits for special events this year. Even so, it's hard to imagine a SXSW without numerous unofficial showcases.

With so many showing up to the party, it's an opportunity for artists to showcase their talent to a wide audience, but the concentration of talent can be challenging and overwhelming to overcome.

03:42 Emily Wolfe Interview

EW: Last year we didn't get into Southby like as an official band so we just played a bunch of unofficial stuff and it was just like, really taxing on your emotions. You're like, oh my god I'm going to have to worry about how I can get my keyboard from Second

Street to Sixth Street without a car. It's like, how do I put this guitar on my bike. Or like, how do I put this bass amp on my bike. That was really stressful. I know that a lot of bands go through that, and it's just awful.

04:03 Narrator

SW: Emily Wolfe made her SXSW official debut last year, playing one show at 5:00am in the morning. This kind of concentration begs the question of who is witnessing the entertainment.

Still, with a bit of a budget artists can penetrate through the noise. With help from PR and management, Wolfe landed a gig at Austin City Limits Festival this year, and had a spot opening at a late night after-show for Tegan and Sara.

Although these companies can be helpful, not all are. Ohio based musician, Drew Davis told the story of a tour booking fiasco. When I spoke with Davis she was hot off a tour through Germany, which had been booked by an agency that specializes in booking tours for independent musicians.

04:45 Drew Davis Interview

DD: We did 30 shows in 23 days, and the company was horrible. They were so horrible. it was a lot of false advertising.

4:54 Narrator

SW: In the agreement the company booked the tour, and handled the PR and advertising.

5:00 Drew Davis Interview

That was so exciting for me after doing all my booking for a year to have somebody who is going to set everything up so you don't have to do everything. But the pay was completely ridiculous and the shows were sometimes really ridiculous, like I played in a mall next to a McDonald's.

05:30 Narrator

SW: Organizations in Austin that seek to alleviate some of the hardships of playing gigs include Austin Music People, also known as AMP, and the Austin Music Foundation.

05:41 Drew Davis Interview

DD: Every time I've played a show through them I've been paid, which is really cool because that's an ongoing battle for musicians is properly getting compensated for what we do.

05:55 Narrator

SW: Austin based Emily Wolfe has enjoyed some success after studying music in Austin at St. Edwards University. She still wonders if she will be able to work in the field in which she got her degree. Her song, *White Collar Whisky* addresses these concerns.

[The Emily Wolfe song White Collar Whiskey plays in the background.]

06:10 Emily Wolfe Interview

EW: White Collar Whisky is about a super difficult time. Basically what was happening was that, well I still have a day job because I'm not at that point where I can pay rent on a musician's paycheck if there is any such thing anymore. I was really frustrated that I couldn't get past this whole industry music bubble. I'm a receptionist, so I sit at a desk all day waiting for a phone to ring. I wanted so badly to have just somebody call my office and say hey, you can do whatever you want. Buy Jess a new drum set, buy Jeff a new bass. Go on tour, you know. It was just so frustrating that I couldn't do that. I had no time to write, and so I just wrote the lyrics at my desk about the people I worked with.

07:45 Narrator

She recently placed an old album on NoiseTrade, a company that was co-founded by Derek Webb and works to help artists find new fans. Webb believes that now the market has an issue with ubiquity.

07:55 Derek Webb Interview

DW: You know, for instance Johnny Cash would have been probably a totally unknown, mediocre gospel singer. If he had had the tools that we have today, that might have been as far as he went. But because there was a gate keeper that was Sam Phillips that was standing in the doorway of some studio and was saying you're not playing in here until you get great. You need to figure yourself out, and become great, and then you can come in here and record your music. And he was pushed by that gatekeeper and he became great and then he was Johnny Cash.

08:30 Narrator

SW: Independent musicians will have to walk a different line in the digital age. While recording may not be a barrier to success, finding the right people to hear those recordings can be.

Conclusion

Out are the days of eighteen-dollar CDs in a downtown Waterloo Record Store, and in are the days of free online content. The market is driven by a much wider variety, where people can connect with artists by more unique methods. Recording costs are down, which means that many more can enter the market. It seems a win-win for the consumer of music and the artist. The challenge now is to break through an invisible wall of noise and to make a lasting impression with a music fan. Self-distributing and publishing musicians must find unique ways to convert engagement to sales. In a saturated market such as Austin, only the extremely talented may be hardy enough to weather the digital disruption.

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