



The Future of Detroit's Music Industry: A Descriptive Study of Industry Professional Views

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The purpose of the present study was to describe and provide insight on Detroit's music industry, with the practical goal to inform the current state of music in Detroit and draw conclusive suggestions for bringing music back to a forefront of Detroit. The study drew on a sample of convenience ($N = 4$) by researcher networking and past work in the Detroit music industry. Eight themes were identified in a content analysis of interview responses. The study revealed a deep and common vision shared among diverse industry professionals—to bring national recognition back to Detroit. Everyone wants Detroit's music industry to make a comeback, however, they realize it is a slow process to achieve that goal.

Keywords: music industry, interview responses, music scenes, implications and future directions

Introduction

Detroit has been experiencing wide changes economically, from thriving to disastrous. The Detroit News (MacDonald, 2016) reported that the city's population dropped to a record low since 1850, causing it to lose its title as one of 20 largest cities in the U.S. by population. Although the total population has reached a low point, the annual population decrease has been considerably smaller in recent years compared to the annual population loss during the 2000s, now 3,107 residents from 24,000, respectively.

Despite the population loss, investments and improvements have helped Detroit grow. Over a billion dollars was invested in the Detroit riverfront, which leads to increased activity downtown (Welch, 2013).

More than 3 million people visit the Detroit riverfront annually, with 90% saying they wouldn't have visited if it weren't for improvements and over three-quarters of respondents saying the riverfront was their primary destination in coming downtown (Crain's Detroit Business). (Welch, 2013)

The city is currently in a period of slowly being rebuilt from its foundation. Detroit is being recognized for its "comeback story" in economic and urban development (Leon, 2013). Detroit's bankruptcy allowed for some financial stability, leading to a business renaissance in the downtown area. Recognized most in its comeback story are retail, sports, and young professionals in serving to reinvigorate the downtown area (Leon, 2013). However, evidence of Detroit's comeback fails to recognize the part music has and may yet play in the city's vivacity.

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The Role of Music in Detroit

Historically, Detroit's music industry has played a key role in the city's vitality and its presence in the national music scene. Playing a major role in Detroit are Motown and the impact of its diverse musical community in cultivating new artists and genres of music.

Motown

Motown was Detroit's first major recording company (Collins, 2013). In its prime, "75 percent of the record company's releases charted, compared to the industry average of 10 percent."

Berry Gordy Jr. created Motown in 1959. After working at Ford Motor Company, Gordy organized his record label in a way similar to the Ford assembly line, which may attribute to the label's success (Kloosterman, 2005). Created from nothing, Motown turned into an enterprise, and brought the city an admirable reputation and vitality that was one of a kind.

Diverse Musical Artists and Genres

Since Motown's most prominent days, Detroit has produced renowned rap artists who continue to host a range of music concerts and festivals (Baum, 2017). Rap artist Eminem, who began his career in Detroit, brought attention to the city through his renowned success. Although his record label, Shady Records, is not located in Detroit, he continually tries to invest in up and coming rap artists from the Detroit area (Snively, 2004). Kid Rock and The White Stripes, both Detroit natives, have also been known to work with local artists, bringing them national attention.

Further yet, Detroit is internationally recognized as the birthplace of electronic music (Vecchiola, 2011). Strategies of ethnographic research have revealed the role African American based electronic music played in the urban crisis of the 1990s and 2000s. Vecchiola (2011) highlights how one genre was able to bring international tourists to the city that has less than two percent of overseas travelers to the US visit. Detroit's electronic music festival, Movement, attracts over 500,000 people to the city on Memorial Day weekend, annually (Snively, 2004). Embracing the newly found diversity of Detroit's music has been a positive change for the city.

Music Scenes

A root source of a city's music industry is having a strong music scene. There are three ways music scenes have been defined: by culture and place, by genre, and by physical attributes.

First, music scenes are viewed in relation to culture and place. Music scenes are "that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization" (Shelemay, 2011, p. 362). This view of music scene has the benefits of identifying with a city's unique diversity, and facilitating diverse music scenes.

As opposed to cultural and genre-specific music scenes, Johansson and Bell (2016) define music scenes by attributes of physical environment, relative location, size of place, and particularly its music industry infrastructure. Physical environment describes the climate or typical weather in that location. For example, the overcast weather in Seattle can inspire artists in a certain way. Relative location would be any relevant geographical feature, such as New Orleans being a port, became a place where people of all different backgrounds connected. Size of place identifies the difference between larger cities with bigger economies or smaller urban settings where a genre might grow out of one area. Infrastructure can include such entities as recording studios,

artists, producers, and musical training centers (Gibson, 2005). This view provides a clearer set of details when comparing music scenes and what they are comprised of.

Recording studios represent a smaller facet of the infrastructure of a music scene. Though regarded as creative and intimate spaces, some recognized internationally for their previous productions, recording is being decentralized and more accessible to the larger population to accomplish in the comfort of the artist's home (Gibson, 2005). The need for recording studios is therefore dwindling. Such shifts in infrastructure are important to recognize for their impact on stakeholders and effects in remodeling the industry.

Recent research suggests that specific genres present in a city's music scene can be influential in many facets of a city's infrastructure. Cities with vibrant music scenes do not only consist of talented musicians, but an "institutional fabric that supports and sustains the creation of music", which Kloosterman (2005) suggests when commenting on Nashville's successful music industry. Detroit encompasses various musical genres in its music scene, but there is no research on how these specifically impact the city's infrastructure.

Transition to Larger Markets

Researchers have noted inner city transitions from "music scenes" that are genre specific to "music clusters" that are more diversified and include a larger market (Florida, Mellander, & Stolarick, 2010). Since 1970, researchers have seen a shift from many smaller concentrations of musicians and centers of music industry to only three in which most musical activity takes place nationally: New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville (Florida et al., 2010).

One reason for this shift may be due to the increased focus on performance and experiences rather than recorded music (Florida et al., 2010). Florida et al. (2010) used a vague number of variables to study the role of scale and scope economies in the music industry and recognize the correlation of creative industries' effect on an economy, which they suggest should be further researched. Scale and scope economies refer to the population and income of an area, and the presence of related industries, historical relevance, and facilities, respectively. This study's findings suggest that music industries do well in larger cities due to the increased chance of collaboration and higher volume of audiences for live performances. Detroit's population decrease mentioned early represents a scale-related factor that may be affecting the music industry.

Kloosterman (2005) uses an economic viewpoint on the relationship between a city's socio-economic status and its music industry. Nashville markets itself as "Music City USA", which, through economic analysis, has shown to develop and sustain the economy of the surrounding area (Raines & Brown, 2007). There has not been any extensive economic study of Detroit's music industry on the local economy, which could be useful in understanding the current state of the industry and its benefits to the cities success overall.

Implications and Future Directions

Based on a review of the literature, Detroit's presence in the national industry has declined, although its local music scene is still active. A further question is whether the city's music industry is heading back in a direction to rejoin the list of national musical centers. Research of music communities points out music's role in creative collaborations across disciplinary boundaries (Shelemay, 2011). Furthermore, current research suggests that specific genres present in a city's music scene can be influential in many facets of a city's infrastructure. This reveals a question of what kinds of creative collaboration would be beneficial to the city and which genres would be the most influential for Detroit's industry and the city in general.

In spite of these developments, relatively little attention is cast on the role music plays, or how music itself can come back as a hallmark industry in Detroit. There is little research done on how the music industry in Detroit has played a part in the city's revitalization, how the city's music industry itself has been affected by this downturn, or what implications there are for the industry in the future. Research in other cities, such as Nashville, suggests that should the music industry continue to grow in Detroit, many other industries may prosper as well.

The purpose of the present study was to describe and provide insight on Detroit's music industry. The practical goal was to inform industry leaders of the current state of music in Detroit and draw conclusive suggestions for bringing music back to a forefront of Detroit.

Method

The study drew on a sample of convenience by researcher networking and past work in the Detroit music industry. Participants were limited to active professionals in the music industry, who were invited and consented to participate in the study through phone or email communication.

A descriptive research design was chosen for the study due to its exploratory nature. Data were collected through private interviews held at a convenient location for the subjects and interviewer to meet, or by phone when personal contact was not possible within the span of the study. Interview data were compiled by a combination of transcribed recordings and field notes. Participants were asked to waive anonymity for their replies to carry the weight of their position in reporting findings of the study. Interview questions included:

- (1) What are your current and previous roles in Detroit's music industry?
- (2) In your opinion, what is the current state or focus of the industry in the city? (With regards to genre, performances, production, etc.)
- (3) As a follow up, what currently is going on in the industry that is boosting Detroit's overall success?
- (4) Where do you see the industry going in the future?
- (5) What would you ideally like to see happen with Detroit's music industry in the future?
- (6) As music helped Detroit overall in the past, how could it be beneficial to the city in the future?

Interview data were analyzed for common themes regarding issues and areas where improvement is needed in Detroit's music industry currently as well as practical ideas for the industry in the future.

Results

Eight subjects were invited to participate in this study. Four subjects consented, resulting in a 50% participation rate. Three have networks in Detroit's local industry, three are musicians—one each in the styles of jazz, rock, and rap—and one is a brother of a musician, although not a musician himself, but runs a music-industry related business in hip-hop and rap. Among the participants was a five-time Detroit Music Award winner, a voting member for the Grammy awards, and a founder of various local jazz and blues festivals. The participants varied in age from millennial to baby-boomer.

All participants were entrepreneurs, risk takers, grew up in the Detroit area, and still live there. Three have had previous professional experience in successful touring and recording bands, one has more connections outside of Detroit than in the city, two have experiences in managing artists or organizing festivals and shows in the Detroit area, two have founded non-profit foundations with ties to the music industry, and one commonly attends shows as press to write reviews.

Eight themes were identified in a content analysis of interview responses. I labeled the first theme as Detroit's Significant Music History. Interview content related to the first theme includes:

The current older generation of musicians has ties back to past generations, but it still is able to connect with the new generation of musicians coming up.

Think about the history of music in Detroit before talking about current state, history from Motown days and all the great artists that have come in and out of this city.

You talk to people from around the world and they recognize Motown.

The second theme is Larger National or International Industry. Interview content related to the second theme includes:

Look at Eminem, an international superstar. Also, Bob Seeger, Ted Nugent. These guys that have made it out here on a national level and they have provided such.

When people make it out of here, they bring attention back to the city. That helps shine a spotlight on the town and lets people see the grit and the strength of this community.

There was a point in time that all the major labels had a satellite office here. Now, it is more just New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville - just a few of the major hubs.

So many musicians that are from Detroit that are on the road touring with major artists that you just don't hear about because they are just a guitar player or bass player, so they will not get the recognition that a main artist would get.

The arena scene, the major national acts that are touring, will not go anywhere. If anything, it will probably get bigger since there are new venues for them to play at.

The third identified theme relates to Genres Recognized. Interview content related to the third theme includes:

Like most cities, there are multiple scenes existing at once. You could divide that by genre so you have a bunch of different genres going on at once. The techno and house music scene is pretty strong.

Unlike some other cities where there is a particular style that dominates, the beauty of this area is there is a lot of great musicians in a lot of different genres. You have rock musicians, metal, funk, blues, R&B, jazz, rap.

Hip-hop from Detroit has a unique style, people who pay attention to hip hop can identify Detroit rappers because they have their own kind of style to how they rap.

The fourth identified theme relates to Comparison to Other Cities. Interview content related to the fourth theme includes:

If you look at a city like Chicago, they are farther ahead than us in that industry in terms of having those things (e.g. label, public relations, marketing). They are not New York or Los Angeles, but they are making that progress. Detroit has that same potential.

Just like when the grunge scene exploded in Seattle and they got all that attention because Nirvana broke, so all the labels wanted to go there and see what was up so then they picked up. Sound Garden took off, Mud Honey took off, Tad, Pearl Jam... All these bands took off because one band got the attention.

I definitely want their still to be grimey, sketchy venues in Detroit that are kind of scary in some ways. That is what it's about. It's real. It's hard because that happened to New York, where those places got pushed out to Brooklyn and now even Brooklyn is becoming a different place.

Fifth is Tight-Knit Community. Interview content related to the fifth theme includes:

More artists that make it from here and bring artists up, like Eminem what he did with Royce da 5'9" and Yelawolf, or Kid Rock with Uncle Kracker. MI guys made it and then brought them up. People from the city helping people from the city, like a brotherhood.

There is a small closed network in Detroit music industry, for example the Detroit Music Awards include a small group and only take votes from inside the organization instead of letting fans vote.

In Detroit, you go to shows, they could be different genres or venues, but you end up seeing a lot of the same people, so you very quickly become friendly or familiar with people even if you don't know their name.

The thing about local art and music is that it generally thrives when there isn't a ton of commercial control or influence.

Having a tight knit community also has a bad side because there are not as many new people paying for tickets or buying merchandise.

Other comments related to Positive Developments. Interview content related to the sixth theme includes:

I'd say over all it is pretty healthy and it is pretty cool because there is a lot of collaboration and cross-pollination. In the local scene, there is a lot of support for each other, so people are going to each other's shows and promoting those shows.

Detroit has ... potential. What we have been seeing in the city from where we were a decade ago, is a huge change, but it takes a decade or more to change a city.

Something like Assemble Sound is really cool. They support artists in the creating process and facilitate a lot of collaboration. They also get song placements in commercials and stuff like that, which is something that doesn't happen as often as it should.

I think there are going to be some improvements with Motown doing their huge renovation. They are reopening a recording studio, maybe school? I'm hoping that adds up to a resurgence of music in Detroit.

Problems or Areas for Improvement is the seventh theme, with representative interview content that includes:

It seems like we just don't get enough respect. That's the big joke that Detroit never gets respect anyway, but unfortunately we really deserve the respect especially when it comes to the musical side of things. Detroit has influenced the world when it comes to music and it still continues to influence the world.

Somewhere like Detroit, it's not a very walkable city. There is not great or any public transportation in some areas, which makes it a lot harder to get people to shows, especially in the winter.

Most of the musicians I talk to don't seem to be very satisfied with the pay scale for live music. Which is understandable because there are a lot of substitutes for live bands now with DJing becoming a big thing and with alternative options places have for live entertainment or music.

It's hard to make it in the city, because there is not enough media attention in the city locally for local musicians to get a break unless they focus on national placements.

We need more young people in the audience interested in jazz.

The local music scene is going to have to find ways to continue to thrive in a changing Detroit environment where more commercial interests are going to be trying to influence it.

Finally is a theme of Business Ideas. Interview content related to the eighth theme includes:

You have to have a formal label that has the power of PR and marketing. ... It could be born and bread here. ... if someone were to be aggressively laying the foundation for this economy of music now, from the business of music perspective, then in a decade from now you may be able to see a shift towards that.

If you are trying to get management or get on a label or get placements on things, we need more people to facilitate that, so that's like managers, record labels, scouts for music from ad agencies.

The two biggest industries from what I know are cars and advertising in Detroit. If you could use more Detroit-based musicians in your advertising campaigns that would be awesome. It would keep some of that money in the city instead of paying royalties to people in other places.

It is a very difficult state of the industry and I think that's why there is more money to be made in publishing and performance than the sales of music. At least with MP3's people were still making a little bit of money, but now with streaming it has completely killed that. It is more in the performance, which is probably why ticket prices are so high now, because that is the only way the artist makes money.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to describe and provide insight on Detroit's music industry. The practical goal was to make informed suggestions for bringing music back to a forefront in Detroit.

Participant Profiles

With an initial goal of attracting eight participants, the study was limited to four by other invitee's time conflicts, out-of-state travel, and failure to respond. Other limitations included a lack of foundational network in the Detroit area, which could have potentially increased the number of invitees, and I as the researcher conduct the study from about two hours away from Detroit. Closer proximity to the city would have made it easier to physically seek out subjects in Detroit's music industry. A larger pool of participants may have revealed larger, general themes in Detroit's music industry, but the subjects who participated create a foundation for future research and represent a variety of profiles in the industry.

Characteristics of participants reveal certain commonalities of professionals in the Detroit music industry. All were previously or are currently involved in with an organization dedicated to music. Participants do not limit their work to one specific part of the industry, such as strictly being a performer, but involve themselves in many different facets of the industry. Most participants recognized the diversity of musical genres in the city, while only one focused specifically on their genre of expertise without commenting on other genres present in the city. Differences between participants include varying perspectives depending on their experience in various roles in the industry, such as a fan, business person, performer, recording artist, etc.

Interview Themes

Eight themes were identified in interview comments. The first theme concerns the significance of Detroit's music history, which identifies with previous research (Gibson, 2005) that recognizes how historical significance can draw musicians to a certain area, for example, through historic recording studios. The significance of the Motown era in Detroit was mentioned by all the participants. Motown is a part of the city's identity and sits at the core of the music industry in Detroit. Participants spoke of it as something that should never be forgotten and use it as in inspiration for all the artists that work in Detroit presently or in the future.

The second theme related to the larger national or international music industry also corroborates previous findings pointing out the reduction of major hubs in the music industry in the United States to only three (Florida et al., 2010). As noted in the literature, this shift is also partly due to a new focus on musical centers where multiple genres are present, rather than areas specifically dedicated to one genre. The fourth theme noted participants' comparisons with other cities. It is evident that they recognize this shift to three main musical hubs and also mentioned how Seattle gained attention through focus on a specific genre. However, the third theme reveals how the city has embraced new genres since its previous focus on Motown music. The music industry in Detroit is adapting to this shift by embracing a diverse representation of musical genres such as rap, rock, techno, and jazz, but there are still gaps in the industry's progress.

Several components of a music scene, as defined by the literature (Johansson & Bell, 2016), came to light in the interviews. This exposed both positive and negative qualities of Detroit's music industry currently as depicted with the sixth and seventh interview themes. There was little mention of physical environment, but one participant did point out the difficulty to attend shows in the winter due to severe weather in Michigan. Tying into the city's infrastructure, a lack of public transportation was also noted as a hindrance to show attendance. Detroit's population decrease mentioned in the literature (MacDonald, 2016) revealed an issue of size of place.

Less people in the city leads to lower attendance at shows, which was mentioned by participants. In addition, one participant mentioned the need for more young people to attend live performances, specifically in jazz, although they did not offer ideas for implementing that change.

Various facets of the music industry infrastructure as defined in the literature (Gibson, 2005) were mentioned. However, participants failed to comment on musical training centers. There was no mention of how local universities or other music programs are beneficial to the industry. Most of the participants did recognize the need for a major label in the city, as well as more management and opportunities for artists to grow.

Participants' business ideas connected to previous literature in describing creative collaborations across disciplinary boundaries (Shelamay, 2011). Advertising and cars are the two big industries in Detroit currently, so one participant suggested getting more musicians from the city involved in these industries. If there is a greater presence of Detroit musicians in advertising, this could bring a positive light to the city's music industry. Other business ideas pertained to building up the real estate in the city, which was previously mentioned in the literature (Welch, 2013). Participants mentioned this need for investment in the city, which they hope will lead to more record labels and performance opportunities for musicians. One participant noted the shift from making profit from the sale of music to profits from live performances. It was noted in the interviews that Detroit's music industry is not able to compensate musicians properly for live performances.

Not mentioned in relation to previous literature were any benefits in the relative location of Detroit, and international tourism. However, international recognition was noted for Motown, as well as continued interest of national tours coming to the city. Are we failing to recognize potential for the music industry in regards to Detroit's relative location? It sits on a river with an international border, which could be beneficial, although it was not mentioned in the interviews.

Conclusions

The present study reveals a deep and common vision shared among diverse participants: to bring national recognition back to Detroit. Everyone wants Detroit's music industry to get better, while also acknowledging it as a slow process. There are a few changes that need to happen in order to ignite this change.

First, a person or a group of people within or outside of Detroit needs to take the lead in this process of reinvigorating the city's music industry. Presently, there is little recognition of who is leading the industry forward in the city. Roles needed that were implied in the study include entrepreneurial leaders, marketing and public relations professionals, and collaborative individuals. Recommendations for new leaders were balanced by suggestions to work with current Detroit natives with intentions to be genuine to the city without changing its values and strengths. Although it is typically the first thought, this leadership does not have to come from outside of Detroit. If proper support is given to leaders within the city then this change will be possible.

Detroit is filled with a diverse group of talented musicians, but they are not being supported properly. The city is lacking opportunity for growth for its musicians. Drawing a larger label with a reputable name to Detroit, or building up one of the city's current labels, would be a good start to addressing this issue. It would provide musicians an opportunity to create their platform without having to go elsewhere. Additionally, a larger label would draw more attention for performance opportunities and interest in the area. However, in order to seek out more performance opportunities or support a label, leadership must first develop these opportunities.

Promoting a new focus on performance in the city is important due to the changing environment of the music industry in general. Most musicians will not be making money from selling their music due to the increased

popularity of streaming music. Ticket sales from live performances would then be more profitable for musicians, which is why creating performance opportunities is so important.

Suggestions for future research include doing an in-depth economic analysis of Detroit's music industry, as well as studying how the music industry plays a part in the larger economy. Another suggestion may be to study how Detroit's relative location could be beneficial for its music industry. In a larger sense, it may be beneficial to do a comparative analysis of the music industry within various major cities, such as New York, Detroit, Nashville, etc.

This study recognized the common vision shared by Detroit music industry personnel. The city as a whole is being reinvigorated with new business ventures, creating a fresh outlook for the city. With the right visionary leadership in place and a persistence in reviving the magic that previously set the foundation for the city's music industry, Detroit's music industry is poised to be an important component of the city's comeback story.

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