

Saving Underground Culture Through Bandcamp: The Case of Tokyo's Ochiai Soup

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Abstract

Among the most affected categories by the COVID-19 pandemic, the performing arts have been severely hit, especially live events. Considering the clubs that operate mostly thanks to live music, many of them have been forced to close or operate with limited capacity, putting their survival at risk, especially for those related to the underground culture. However, thanks to the internet and technological advancement, we can have examples of clubs that have survived such a challenging time, providing inspiration to go through times of resilience. By analysing the case study of Ochiai Soup, a Tokyo live club in close contact with the Japanese noise and experimental music scene, the paper highlights in comparison with other campaigns carried on by other clubs how the merging of new music-sharing platforms like Bandcamp can be beneficial to carry on a successful fundraising campaign, providing us with a clear example of how underground culture can rely on the internet and the technology to assure its survival and continue to be in touch with its audience by enforcing its own identity.

Keywords: Music Venues, Underground Culture, Fundraising Campaigns, Crowdfunding, Music-Sharing Platforms

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Introduction

The study took inspiration from an ongoing research project about noise music, an experimental music genre that uses noise within a musical context to challenge the distinction made in conventional musical practices between musical and non-musical sound (Priest, 2013:132), and how it can be a tool for social and cultural engagement within a specific context. Focusing on the Japanese noise musical scene, the research is aiming to point out how such a subcultural scene shapes its connection with culture and audience by considering noise a general phenomenon rooted in the relational conditions of contemporary culture (Hainge, 2013:14) and highlighting how “noise can serve to startle, threaten and annoy; and is often associated with feelings of stress and frustration; however, it may also contribute to feelings of belonging, community and nostalgia” (Thompson, 2017:10). Hence, it would have unavoidable to underline how the link with a subcultural community may be reinforced during the hard times of the COVID-19 pandemic where communities have been forced to stop attending places of aggregation to demonstrate their cultural belonging, a situation that has seriously endangered the existence of certain cultural places that thrive on events in close contact with the public such as cinemas, theatres, and pubs. Many of them have been forced to abruptly stop their events or operate with limited capacity, and smaller venues related to the underground culture faced the most serious danger due to the shortage of funds caused by the sanitary emergency. However, thanks to the internet and technological advancement, it is also true that other clubs have been able to survive in such a challenging time, providing inspiration to go through times of resilience, and even other clubs forced to close are making their efforts to collect the necessary funds to reopen their business. By bringing on comparisons with different means for survival, this paper focuses on Ochiai Soup, a Tokyo live club in close contact with the Japanese noise and experimental music scene, to think about how music-sharing platforms like Bandcamp and their politics aimed to make the value of independent and underground scenes can be beneficial to carry on a successful fundraising campaign, providing us with a clear example of how underground culture can rely on the internet and the technology to assure its survival also through the confirmation and the enforcement of its independent and underground identity.

Means of Online Survival with “closed doors”

To better understand how cultural hubs relied on specific means of support, it is important to consider how the sense of community can be defined by recognising elements such as membership, influence, reinforcement, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986:16), all aspects that play a fundamental role in developing subcultures made by individuals neglected by societal standards to develop a sense of identity that “tends to be presented as an independent organism functioning outside the larger social, political and economic contexts” (Hebdige, 1979:76). Thus, the advancements of the internet and technology has got to fit in better to ensure that the sense of belonging felt by individuals went hand in hand with the possibility to fund entrepreneurial ventures including artistic and creative projects (Agrawal, Catalini & Goldfarb, 2015), making possible to create different ways in which venues made use of the internet to keep in touch with the audience to survive, carrying on different campaigns or events to raise funds.

1) Online Crowdfunding

One means that can be naturally mentioned about online fundraising is the classic crowdfunding campaign which aims to raise funds from many people through the internet

(Calic, 2018:112). This means had been used by The Crobar, a London pub and music venue which became iconic through the years for rock and metal scenes and after nineteen years, it was forced to leave its physical location in Soho due to issues that came right after the pandemic (Richards, 2020). The necessity to find a new location in Central London (Crobar, 2020) led to open a still ongoing crowdfunding campaign to collect funds through donations along with raffle prizes and sponsorship from rock-related zines like Kerrang! to provide fans with original creations, including comic strips featuring musicians Dave Grohl and Ville Valo, in exchange for receiving donations from them (Carter, 2021), resulting in the collection of more than £100,000 available to open the venue in a new location (Metal Hammer, 2021).



Figure 1: The Crobar’s Crowdfunder fundraising campaign

2) Moving Events Online

Another means to survive had been also the decision to transpose online live events to elude the forced restrictions that prevented venues to have a physical audience. Moving to Japan, a well-fit example came from Club Goodman, a music venue based in Chiyoda, in Tokyo, that at the brink of the pandemic organised live events with the possibility to be both followed live and in the days following the live events by saving the performances and sponsoring them through social media. Despite initial fears that the venue cannot survive and was forced to shut (Natalie.mu, 2020), choices like publishing small videos on the Instagram profile to promote live events like the one with the experimental musician Keiji Haino by including the reminder to find the complete event on the YouTube channel had been very helpful to keep the place alive even after the most critical phase of the pandemic.



Figure 2: Club Goodman’s Instagram page promoting Keiji Haino’s online concert

3) Selling Exclusive Material on Music-Sharing Platform

One last means to survive is collecting funds by selling music online, means which had been employed by Ochiai Soup, a small venue based in Shinjuku, in Tokyo, known for hosting mostly experimental music artists’ live events. To raise the necessary funds, the club is still offering fans and regulars a way to help its existence by releasing exclusive material through the music-sharing platform Bandcamp, known to be specifically designed for independent and non-mainstream music even after the take-over by big gaming company Epic Games (Sisario, 2022). In fact, the employment of Bandcamp is not a unicum neither among independent music scenes nor in Japan itself so another Tokyo live club and music shop focused on experimental music, Ftarri, was already committed to selling its music through the same platform working both as a live venue and a label to sell the artists’ albums. However, in the case of Ochiai Soup it had been an initiative created accordingly with other artists who accepted to take part in this campaign to help the preservation of a venue linked with the underground subculture. The catalogue includes more than 50 releases realised by many local and international experimental acts, including Toshiji Mikawa from noise bands Hijokaidan and Incapacitants, and the material is sold on a “name your price” basis with which fans decide how much to pay for the release (Japan Vibe, 2021).



Figure 3: Ochiai Soup’s catalogue published on the Bandcamp webpage

Reinforcing Independent Identity with Community Support

Having considered these specific fundraising campaigns, it can be highlighted how the employment of Bandcamp to make a music catalogue available online helped not only the survival of Ochiai Soup but also to emphasize and enforce its link with a specific subculture audience. Surely compared to other music streaming services like Spotify, Bandcamp is itself designed to specifically help independent artists rather than major artists, and considering how the platform is well-known among artists and audiences for this purpose, it can be said that Ochiai Soup relies a lot on using the name and the reputation of Bandcamp to enforce its independent identity and to brand itself as a club linked with the underground also among the non-Japanese audience since there are also non-Japanese artists included in the catalogue like Lasse Marhaug and EVOL. In this sense, this choice can be compared with the one made by The Crobar which enforces its image of a UK rock and metal cultural landmark by closing its name to a zine, Kerrang!, which is as well a landmark for rock and metal fans. Even the commercial gain is strictly linked to the reputation of helping independent music scenes by creating close social contact between the artists and the audience thanks to the policy that let the audience pay as they want for the releases, and by also creating resonance with initiatives that specifically helped artists during the pandemic. In fact, in 2020 Bandcamp announced it to waive its share of revenue and donate all sales to artists for 24 hours on March 20 (Aswad, 2020), repeating the initiative in the following months (Galil, 2020) and began calling these days "Bandcamp Fridays" (Diamond, 2020), extending the initiative for the following year after raising more than \$40million for its musicians (Turman, 2020).

Conclusion

All these case studies decided to highlight their own identity and their link with a specific subculture by undertaking different actions that share the same intent to create closeness with the community during the pandemic. At the same time, it can be argued how compared to The Crobar and Club Goodman, the decision of Ochiai Soup to rely on Bandcamp may be a choice that enforced the independent and underground aspect of the club by the simple decision to rely on an independent landmark regardless of the fundraising campaign itself. In fact, relying on a platform that is acknowledged to help independent music scenes played a key role not only to preserve the underground identity of Ochiai Soup but also to gain commercial thanks to its reputation and its policies, seeing an acknowledgement of the Japanese underground culture that came also outside the national boundaries. To conclude,

the paper would affirm that the preservation of underground cultural scenes plays a fundamental role even in terms of commercial gain, letting us learn that the structure of successful fundraising for a non-mainstream club should be based also on emphasizing its role and identity among its community.

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