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## A Response to Robin James's "Indie Rock's Undead: Re-Animating Keith Harris's 'Did New York Kill Indie Rock?'"

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My immediate reaction to Robin James's generous reading of my 2012 paper "Did New York Kill Indie Rock?" was one of intense relief. If I'm a little leery of re-reading something I wrote a dozen years ago, I'm downright apprehensive of looking over someone else's shoulder while they scrutinize such a piece. So I was happy to see that James could use some of my ideas as a springboard for "Indie Rock's Undead: Re-Animating Keith Harris's 'Did New York Kill Indie Rock?'" which traces what has happened with "indie"—as sound and as signifier—in the decade-plus since. A lot, it turns out.

I'll turn to James's analysis in a bit, but to begin I'd like to note how her discussion of postmillennial indie narratives from writers Zachary Lipez and Chris DeVille, who see in the aughts a gentrification of a more unruly indie past, has helped me contextualize my own piece post hoc. For both Lipez and DeVille, as it had been for me, the story of indie rock is generally one of decline, from an edgy past to a blunt present. While I may only have been half-conscious of it at the time, in retrospect it's clear I was writing within the long and often silly tradition of "the death of rock" narratives.

The "death of rock" is a story that itself refuses to die. In 1996, critic Robert Christgau estimated that the music world was already experiencing its fifth purported "death of rock" moment. (The other four, he said, occurred in 1959, 1968 (!), the late 1970s, and 1990.) Rock has died many times more in the intervening 28 years. Critical autopsies usually focus on one of two causes of death: death from above (rock is smothered by "society"—conformity, genteel norms, commercial demands) and death from below (some new genre—disco, hip hop, dance music—has displaced rock from its perch of cultural significance).

It's the former we're concerned with here. As you can see, this tradition pre-dates the rise of "indie rock" by decades. Something has always already been lost in rock, and musicians must forever return to the source to renew their inspiration. (This impurity may come from commerce, but it might also come from the wrong kind of artistic expression—classical affectations, an emphasis on virtuosity, studio refinement.) In each case, there's a taming of the spirit that supposedly made rock so vital to begin with.

The difference this time is the introduction of the term "dad rock" into the discourse, as James indicates in her discussion of Jay Caspian King's piece on listening to Olivia

Rodrigo with his daughter. When we talk about indie rock being “suburbanized” or “gentrified,” there’s a welcome (or at least equal opportunity) switch from previous discussions of the death of rock; when past critics have often claimed that rock had been domesticated, there was an implied, or even flatly stated, feminization. (This trend may live on in the discussion of “Antonoffication,” which, while focusing on a male producer, frets over how he has made indie sounds acceptable to female audiences.)

Not coincidentally, golden ages often coincide with a rock-is-dead eulogist’s young adulthood—or maybe even their childhood, the implication being that they missed out on a special moment that ended before they could experience it. With that in mind, I suppose some biography is in order. In 2012, when I wrote “Did New York Kill Indie Rock?” I had recently moved back to Minneapolis from Brooklyn, had recently turned 40, and believed my career as a music journalist was behind me. I was also attending the EMP Pop Conference in New York. The paper is permeated with a “goodbye to all that” sensibility, and strikes me as much a gesture as an argument.

Within five years, I’d be back to practicing local music journalism in the Twin Cities. In this role, I’ve also gained some firsthand knowledge of how indie rock bands, which still exist, make spaces for themselves. I’ve come to understand how a media focus on “New York” distorted my awareness of what was still happening in smaller scenes, and my current job has introduced me to the broader problems they face.

## THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE MUSIC SCENE

So, did New York kill indie rock? In retrospect, Brooklyn was essentially a scene, not *exactly* like those that preceded it, because New York is not exactly like other U.S. cities, but still susceptible to some basic scene rules. The biggest of those is that when a scene seems at its most triumphant, that’s when it begins its decline. And that, of course, is the moment when I wrote my paper.

Without being too rigid about it, we can sketch a basic four-part structure to the history of a scene, which repeats itself with significant variations. First, there’s a fertile enough musical environment for a few prominent bands to emerge. Then, something sparks interest in those bands from people outside of the area by industry and media. This prominence attracts outside musicians to come to the scene. And finally, the scene is declared “over.”

But this small cycle happens within the context of a more advanced economic cycle. “New York” is never just New York, and as James points out, New York operates well as a synecdoche here, as a stand-in for the neoliberalist stage of capital. The consolidation of indie rock in New York was simply the latest stage of a process that had begun almost at the inception of the genre. Before “New York” killed indie rock, individual scenes had been strip-mined by the alt-rock signings of the previous decade.

It’s important to note that scenes are media creations. One reason New York is perceived as a cultural center, after all, is that it is a media center. What would be “local” news in a smaller city is universalized as “national” news. What happened at the turn of the century is that the internet, which many predicted would break down the centralization of media, actually *recentered* media in New York. Regional arts reporting, like all journalism, suffered

in the aughts because the dissemination of information online placed every news source in competition with every other—i.e., everyone competed with New York.

So while there certainly were small scenes in cities and towns across the country, fewer of them were being identified. Why then, did we see the proliferation of regional scenes in the following decade? Asheville, North Carolina’s Wednesday was the big story of 2023. Prominent indie bands of the past, such as Sleater-Kinney and Superchunk, returned. Philadelphia, long considered NYC’s poorer cultural cousin, became “the next Brooklyn.” But where once bands moved to a scene to find like-minded peers or to glom on to already existing media attention, now economics were driving them away from New York. As Dan Deluca wrote in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2019:

[W]hat it’s really about is real estate. Lots of local luminaries grew up here—Kurt Vile is from Lansdowne, (Sandy) Alex G hails from Havertown. But many leading lights found sanctuary, or at least cheap rent, in the most affordable, centrally located major city on the East Coast.

Pacific Northwest native Michelle Zauner of Japanese Breakfast went to Bryn Mawr College and stayed. Sheer Mag reconnected in Philly after meeting at college in New York state. Twin sisters Katie and Allison Crutchfield moved from Alabama to Brooklyn, then found their way to West Philly.

Musical historiography is shaped less by “what happens” than by what we’re paying attention to. My argument that New York had drained regional scenes of indie musicians was overstated. All that time, people were still forming bands whose aesthetic owed something to the critically celebrated rock music of the ’90s, and many of those people were women or non-binary. This came to light once the economic factors that attracted indie musicians to New York drove them away.

Another thing I realize in retrospect is that I was slippery if not sloppy in discussing what constitutes “indie rock.” “Indie” has a strict industry meaning—music that’s not released by a major label. (The independence of these labels is often overstated: Already in the ’90s, independent labels had distribution deals that made their independence a fiction.) But “indie” doubles as a sensibility, and sensibilities are hard to pin down. Like all genres, “indie rock” wasn’t a clear boundary but a contested site of meaning.

Tellingly, though, the “rock” was dropped from the “indie” descriptor sometime in the aughts in many discussions of the genre. In part this was because “indie” was no longer strictly harnessed to the sound of noisy guitars of the ’90s or even the tawdry synths of the early ’00s. There were indie bands and there was indie pop. The word diverged from its initial meaning entirely and was connected to a certain set of sounds. When Taylor Swift can release an “indie” album, as 2020’s *Folklore* was described, that word had clearly been stripped of whatever initial oppositional meaning it once had.

#### FROM “INDEPENDENCE” BACK TO DIY

As James writes, “A music industry geared towards the mass production of commodities is very different from one geared toward the licensing of content.” While it’s true that

“selling out saved indie rock,” to quote the title of a 2013 Jessica Hopper BuzzFeed piece that James discusses, this brush with capital merely postponed a later reckoning. As sync rights and other reliable sources of income have dried up, most musicians in 2024 have nothing marketable left to sell out.

In almost all cases, a single artist’s music is no longer a marketable commodity. Instead, the commodity is now “music,” a mass of collected sounds that you can access for a fee. In this scenario, “independence” is no longer a virtue for an artist to celebrate. Musicians are independent in the way that gig workers are independent: to sell their labor by the piece for decreasing compensation without any of the protections or guarantees that the labor force amassed in earlier years.

Though “indie” still has a vestigial life among the young bands I speak to, the term I consistently hear them use is “DIY.” That this abbreviation, often identified with early punk scenes, should resurface at this particular moment is telling. Unlike “indie,” which stresses a supposed separation from the processes of capital, DIY stresses the labor involved in creating music.

And it makes sense that such a tag would appeal to musicians who seem more conscious than ever of the work of being in a band. Once, the preferred move was for musicians to obscure the labor of self-promotion, or outsource it to industry professionals that the artists had the luxury of claiming to despise. The “music business” was supposedly something that happened outside the process of artistic creation. Now a musician is, by necessity, a marketer, a promoter, a booker. And with the rise of social media, the demands of self-publicization have grown. Women and femme musicians in particular have shouldered this burden.

I don’t want to generalize from my own observations from a single urban area, based on my own particular tastes. But my perception is that more indie bands are made up of female or nonbinary musicians than ever before—certainly more than there were in indie’s ‘90s heyday, back when a slight increase in female indie musicians brought about “year of the woman” and “women in rock” headlines. As James puts it, “Indie rock’s market position in 2023 is roughly analogous to that of popular feminism’s ideal subject: a traditionally devalued resource capable, with the exercise of sufficient private responsibility, of resilient profitability.” So maybe it should be expected that once indie’s cultural capital has been expended, its musical style would be left to those it once excluded.

To return to my initial question, which now seems more rhetorical than ever, did New York kill indie rock? In the sense that James addresses, sort of. “As a private, personalized experience, indie rock is resiliently rebounding from the earlier reports of its death,” James writes. The economic processes that “New York” represents certainly reshaped the meaning of “indie.”

But in a more material sense, “indie rock” lives on—if we define “indie rock” as the work of underground bands without the support of major labels performing original rock music within a certain tradition. If anything, I’m left to wonder at the remarkable persistence of the rock band as an artistic project. The guitar-bass-drums combo, with a keyboard or now some other electronic supplement, has prevailed for more than 60 years, making it as hardy a form of residual culture as exists in the U.S. Whether it exists in opposition to mainstream culture—and whether it ever did—are questions for another time. ■