

NIGHTLIGHT: TRADITION AND CHANGE IN A LOCAL MUSIC SCENE

Aaron Smithers

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Approved by:

Glenn Hinson

Patricia Sawin

Michael Palm

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ABSTRACT

Aaron Smithers: *Nightlight: Tradition and Change in a Local Music Scene*
(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson)

This thesis considers how tradition—as a dynamic process—is crucial to the development, maintenance, and dissolution of the complex networks of relations that make up local music communities. Using the concept of “scene” as a frame, this ethnographic project engages with participants in a contemporary music scene shaped by a tradition of experimentation that embraces discontinuity and celebrates change. This tradition is learned and communicated through performance and social interaction between participants connected through the Nightlight—a music venue in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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CHAPTER 1: Nightlight

Introduction

It is easy to miss the pedestrian alleyway located (hidden?) within the small strip of four businesses—the bar, Industry, now out of business (but it has had many names over the years); the offices for the catering arm of Mama Dip’s Restaurant; and Tienda Don Jose, a small grocery store catering to Chapel Hill’s growing Latinx population. The squat, cinderblock one-story assemblage looks thrown together on the south side of Rosemary Street. Surrounding it are an analogous collection of disparate properties: a university parking lot to the east; an African American church to the west; the restaurant Mama Dip’s to the north; and a brand new three-story building with half million-dollar condominiums immediately across the street. The condominiums tower over all the other architecture, especially the nearby houses of Chapel Hill’s quickly gentrifying and transmogrifying historically African American neighborhood, Northside. The block is almost a microcosm of Chapel Hill—institutions catering to the mostly white university population interacting with the traditionally African American neighborhood, and now with emergent Latino communities. The observant may notice bicycles chained to “No Parking” and speed limit signs, as well as Xeroxed fliers stapled to the telephone pole with names like Cantwell Gomez & Jordan, Boner Machine, Rotten Milk vs. BubbleGum Shitface, deejay Mothers Brothers, Planecrash, American Band, Feral Pony, Curtains of Night, Pykrete, and Haunted House. Looking up, a small painted sign hangs over the empty doorframe of the alleyway reading “Skylight Exchange” above and “Nightlight” below, complete with pink lightning bolts.

Walking down that dimly lit alley away from Chapel Hill’s burgeoning metropolitan progress with walls on either side but the sky overhead—over plywood planks laid on the

concrete to bridge large puddles from a recent rain, between narrow concrete walls painted red with bits of black scrawled graffiti, stealing voyeuristic glimpses of the lone line-cook through the windows of the commercial kitchen at Northside District (néé Fuse) into a lingering cloud of cigarette smoke from people standing outside the entrance—can indeed be a disorienting experience. Passing through the metal door and into the space itself perpetuates confusion, for the space's purpose is not immediately apparent. Books and records stand everywhere in haphazard piles; a small stage rests in the corner; and a lunch counter and booths occupy the center space.

The room is square roughly 2500 square feet, accommodating a bar with at least ten stools down the left side where patrons can order from a menu of eclectic sandwiches and coffee during the day and selected beers at night. Ninety degrees to the right are two rows of used music for sale, primarily a wide selection of vinyl LPs sorted first by genre and then alphabetically. The bins hold a few thousand records, and many more sit in boxes beneath them. The three walls not occupied by the bar/kitchen hold bookshelves full of used books—thousands of books that nicely dampen reflected sounds. Booths and tables occupy the open center space, while across from the door, in front of a wall of books, sits the 5-foot-by-8-foot carpeted stage. Two large, grey PA speakers flank the stage; two more—smaller and black—hang from the low ceiling; to stage right is a broken-down upright piano, trapped by a tangled web of speaker/monitor/microphone/power cables and assorted sound reinforcement equipment. The ceiling feels low at ten feet. Though there are no windows, natural light enters through the six skylights that give the space its daytime name.

Between 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., the space transforms into Nightlight. Staff—most often one of the owners with occasional help from early patrons and performers—rearrange booths, benches and tables to line the walls, opening a large, empty space in front of the small stage. The bartender unlocks the beer coolers, sets up a separate cash register, dims the lights, and turns up the music on the stereo. Looking around, the performers, audience, and

employees are mostly white, university-educated, members of Chapel Hill bohemia; while most are in their twenties, ages vary from teenagers—Nightlight is one of few all-ages venues in Chapel Hill—to people in their forties.

Performances occur about four nights per week and represent a variety of genres, but well more than half of the performances each month feature an array of non-traditional rock and electronic music styles, including a mixture of noise music, dance music, improvisational music, and avant-garde and underground rock music of obscure genres performed by artists with a huge range of technical abilities. Much music heard and performed at Nightlight eschews traditional rock song structure; songs are loose, timbres are harsh, rhythm is free to wander, volumes range from ear splitting to virtually silent. While the classic four-piece rock ensemble instrumentation of drums, electric guitar, bass, and vocals is still common, connecting the venue to a history of locally produced rock music scenes, performers are very likely to include or to foreground a variety of electronics, sound generators, effects pedals, mixing boards, contact microphones, synthesizers, computers, homemade instruments, improvised percussion, violins, saxophones, samplers, the human body, pieces of metal, and the voice—literally anything anyone thinks of. Local artists usually comprise about half of the performances; and on most nights Nightlight attempts to combine touring bands with local ones to maximize the potential audience. Sundays often feature an open mic, and local Deejays host two or more dance parties each month.

This is a description of Nightlight in 2006. The space officially opened as a business on February 28, 2003, offering “Chapel Hill’s finest freaky punk rock,” represented by the post-punk sounds of bands des_ark, Cantwell Gomez & Jordan, and Coldsides (Trodden 2003). On that night, a particular grouping of musicians and fans within the Chapel Hill music scene reclaimed the physical space at 405½ W. Rosemary St., adding another institution to the local infrastructure for the consumption, and also production, of music culture in Chapel Hill. RE-claimed because, while the majority of the clientele is likely unaware of its past, the space has a

multi-decade history of use as a performance venue: acting as the one of the earliest and longest lasting locations of the now nationally known Cat's Cradle; serving in the mid-1980s as the club Rhythm Alley; hosting occasional shows in the 1990s organized by local participants in the underground music scene under arrangement with the owners of its next incarnation as Skylight Exchange, and featuring jam sessions, open mics, poetry readings, theatrical performances, and film and video screenings (Bogas 2004, 10). Also RE-claimed because Nightlight as an entity originally operated within the space already occupied by a separate business entity, the aforementioned Skylight Exchange, which was a combination of used book/record store and café/deli. The space Nightlight inhabits occupies a special niche in Chapel Hill music, not only physically as one of many venues dedicated to live music performance, but also idealistically as a community of self-proclaimed and mostly self-sustaining artists, musicians, fans, and sympathizers.

From experience as a radio deejay, audio engineer, fan, performer, and promoter of music in my former home of Austin, Texas, I was aware of the "Chapel Hill Scene" as fertile ground for producing and maintaining excellent and exciting music. After relocating to North Carolina, I attended many performances in the Triangle and in Greensboro featuring a variety of musical styles, including rock of many subgenres, experimental, country, old time, jazz, and classical. My regular activities involved reading the local newspapers, listening to the college radio stations WXYC and WXDU, examining fliers displayed around town advertising future and past performances, and observing not only performing bands, but also their audiences at different venues. These activities served both as a form of entertainment and as an education about the assortment of cultural offerings in my local community. Over time I constructed a mental map of Triangle music, a complex three-dimensional family tree of local music histories. The space currently occupied by Nightlight became a focus of interest because of its role as an important cultural institution for local music production for over 40 years, surviving threats from development, shifting trends and tastes, and the rapid change that comes with being situated in

a college town. Curious how that history related to the current use of the space and the wide variety of cultural activities that it supports, and interested in the role that tradition plays in contemporary musical styles and practices, I wondered how to apply the tools of folklore and ethnography to the protean music communities in the Triangle, and specifically to the Nightlight.

This project is a culmination of four years of active participation in Nightlight culture from 2003 to 2007—as a researcher, song collector, audience member, performer, and volunteer. I have collected recordings from thirty-five different performances, and attended and performed at many more. I have helped with sound, donated a microphone, very briefly collected money at the door, promoted shows on WXYC radio, and collected oral histories from fourteen consultants who ranged in age from 21 to 42 at the time of the interview and who represent a variety of roles in the community. My consultants are fans and casual audience members; employees and owners past and present; a music journalist; radio deejays; university students, wage earners, and white-collar professionals; and musicians, both veteran and neophyte performers. Some of them are also colleagues and collaborators. My social relationships with these consultants and my personal activity at Nightlight might raise concerns about my ability to objectively conduct critical ethnographic research; however, I would argue that the depth of my relationships and artistic investment enable a closeness to the material and a perspective that allows me to begin to make sense of something as unstable as a music scene.

Reading critical analyses of rock music and rock culture produced by scholars of other humanities-based disciplines, I felt that research on these forms of contemporary expressive culture lacked engaged interaction with and in communities, a cornerstone of Folklore research. Committed to reading culture in context and not people as text, Folklore can offer much to the understanding of contemporary musical styles and culture on a level not typically addressed in musicology, cultural studies, anthropology, or related disciplines; at the same time, Folklore draws on the collective knowledge of these disciplines' valuable perspectives. This thesis attempts such an interdisciplinary approach. By including the voices and ideas of my

consultants, I hope to craft a document that presents Nightlight and participants in these music scenes with clarity and respect.

Local music communities can be theorized using Dan Ben-Amos's definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups," (Ben-Amos 1972). Artistic communication implies "selections, formations, expectations, and evaluations that require time to pass, standards to be shared, styles of creation and interpretation to shape into processes that are at least cumbersomely named traditions" (Glassie 1995, 401). By looking at these processes in a music scene, its complex history and potential future comes into view. In the Triangle in particular—a center of politics, industry, and higher education whose demographics are constantly shifting—the music also shifts over time. Listeners and performers negotiate the aesthetic value of sound and performance according to taste; communities and social cliques consider certain bands and styles more popular at different times; the music industry coopts practices once perceived to be transgressive or subversive into the mainstream; individuals come and go and vary their levels of participation; revivalists rearticulate old practices in new contexts; and new practices emerge. Under scrutiny, scenes may elude distinct, recognizable boundaries, but their fluctuations result from processes of tradition connected to the expressive behaviors of specific communities and groups.

According to Raymond Williams "tradition can be quickly shown to be radically selective," and is the "intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification" (1977, 115). Indeed, in Chapel Hill alone, one may discuss the art scene, the music scene, the Chapel Hill scene, the indie rock scene, the hip-hop scene, the electronic/dance music scene, the noise scene, the frat-rock scene, and on and on ad infinitum, historicizing any of these in past, present, or future. According to Will Straw, "*Scene* designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them" (2004, 412). Recognizing these "particular clusters" are essentially

“small groups,” the boundaries are found in tradition.

While tradition is commonly understood as a body of inherited traits, “an inert, historicized segment of a social structure,” music scenes show tradition “as an actively shaping force” (Williams 1977, 115). Even in underground or radical communities whose practices are often oppositional to dominant culture and avoid multi-generational continuity, tradition, as a “wholly symbolic construction, . . . an interpretive process that embodies both continuity and discontinuity” (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 273), remains an active influence on whatever emerges. According to Glassie, “Tradition is the creation of the future out of the past. A continuous process situated in the nothingness of the present” (1995, 395). An ethnography of a particular music scene emerging out of the Nightlight creates an opportunity to explore the role of tradition across seemingly disconnected communities and practices over time. Actively engaging with the participants in Nightlight’s most visible music scene reveals the ways that tradition—as a dynamic process—is crucial to the development, maintenance, and dissolution of the complex networks of relations that make up local music communities.

Music Scenes

Rather than frame this investigation by the physical space and the musical performances and interactions inside that space, I will use the concept of music “scenes” to explore activity at Nightlight. A musical “scene” is “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” (Straw 1997, 504). In media descriptions and social conversation, genre and the central location of activity define the characteristics and set the boundaries of particular scenes. A “cultural space,” however, transcends specific geographical locations, and “musical practices” resist static generic restraint. The Nightlight scene can only be understood as part of the “Chapel Hill Scene.” At the same time, a music scene emerging around noise or experimental music, for example, can only be understood in its relation to other musical styles found at Nightlight, other spaces in Chapel

Hill, other towns, and in the media. Because different scenes can all exist and thrive simultaneously, interaction between individuals, bands, and scenes initiates “change and cross-fertilization.” As a result, scenes are in a constant state of redefinition according to the contexts—in this case clubs and performance spaces—in which their forms of communication are articulated.

Historians, journalists, and researchers often organize the circulation of cultural commodities like music as a life cycle, during which their value varies in relationship to the cultural terrain (Azerrad 2001; Frith 1981; Kruse 1993; Straw 1997). In scenes, participants often create a narrative of this lifecycle, locating their own identity by sharing the perceived shifts in value of certain styles, individuals, and institutions relative to the passing of time. The international music media and industry regularly recognize the “Triangle”—composed of Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh, North Carolina—for developing and maintaining active and influential music scenes: the Piedmont blues of Blind Boy Fuller and the Durham tobacco warehouses, the folk revival of the Hollow Rock String Band and the Red Clay Ramblers, the melodic power-pop of the dB’s, and the 1990s “indie” rock of Superchunk, Polvo, and Archers of Loaf concurrent with the alt.country of Whiskeytown and the Backsliders, to name only a few examples.

Nightlight demonstrates the importance of local spaces to musical activity—spaces where individuals perform the properties of local music practice and, through this process, construct particular identities. At the same time, concentrating on activity at Nightlight—activity dependent on the participation of individuals from geographic locations outside the Triangle—also demonstrates the significance of interlocal relationships and the influence of global musical culture on “local” scene production (Straw 1997, 504). A scene recognized by a particular regional sound was an important point of reference in discussions of independent music of the 1980s and 1990s, when distance from sites of mainstream music production was an important defining feature (Pareles 1994). In recent years, however, alternative and independent structures of production and consumption—so vital to the definition and maintenance of

independent rock music—have been institutionalized to the extent that they are now part of the dominant music culture against which they continue to identify themselves (Fred 1994; Kruse 2003). These networks, of record labels, distributors, media, venues, and individuals, allow for the greater availability of “non-mainstream” music for specialized audiences geographically distanced from its production, increasing the interlocal interaction of music scenes and the social relationships between participants, and reducing the importance of connection to a particular local music history as a source of identification (Straw 1997). College radio stations, so important to local rock music (Kruse 2003; Lazorchak 2004), can now be heard anywhere in the world over the Internet, and musician websites and free-access, artist-controlled sites like Soundcloud and bandcamp make music of countless performers—professional, amateur, living, dead, and imaginary—available to anyone with a computer.

This process does not mean that the story of “local” rock stopped in the year 2000. Musicalized experience still produces differential identities, and local scenes are still the cultural space where these identities are negotiated. Within these geographically and stylistically broad scenes are countless smaller scenes, constructed around associations with specific subgenres, locations, personal relationships, and relation to the larger international music culture (Shank 1994). Kruse (2005) and Shank (1994) use the concept of “scene” to describe larger, regional, social and economic networks of musical practice, encompassing a wide variety of individuals, bands, clubs, record stores, and media outlets. They focus on Athens, Georgia; Champaign, Illinois; and Austin, Texas, providing valuable histories of local rock scenes in the 1980s and 1990s. I believe that their research and concepts can be applied just as effectively to a contemporary miniature or “micro-scene” like that at Nightlight, following trajectories currently organized around electronic, dance, noise, punk, experimental rock, vernacular music traditions, local art, community support, and an international network of individuals committed to similar goals and ideas. So strongly has Nightlight become associated with these non-traditional rock apparatuses that the local media have described it as,

Chapel Hill's noise bastion . . . : The post-meridian extension of the Skylight Exchange, a by-day used book and record store and cafe, Nightlight has been hosting noiseniks for three years now, serving as a Petri dish for the development of a thriving regional noise circuit and a hitching post for artists touring the country. (Currin 2006a)

A local music website run by long-time local music activist and fan, Ross Grady, described a performance on his weekly calendar with the following:

Two bands of fucked-up fried-out freaks in weird costumes with keyboards & noisemakers and high-concepts and I swear to god I dunno how Nightlight got onto this circuit in the first place but I have to say: you can live here for years, and see all kinds of bands, both local & out-of-town, and after a while you start to think we've got all the bases covered. Well: we're not even close. There is weird shit out there in the bowels of America that's 40 zillion times weirder than the weirdest the Triangle has to offer (and yes, that includes last night's show at Nightlight), and the only joint in town that even comes close to opening a window into that world is Nightlight. Attend, if you can handle the dismay at learning what you've been missing. (Grady 2004)

Representing what I identify as an “underground” scene in Chapel Hill, practices at Nightlight inform two directions of research about the way scenes work in contemporary local music practice, both referenced in the above description. First, underground scenes, like those articulated through and around Nightlight, are increasingly dependent on interlocal relationships outside the particular town or region of their origin; and second, at the same time, music practice in underground scenes is still largely dependent on links to local, regional musical heritage and processes of traditionalization.

Indie vs. Underground

To clarify this designation, I should explain my choice of the descriptive term “underground” rather than “independent” (as chosen by Kruse 1993), “alternative,” or even simply “rock and roll” (as used by Shank 1994). While individuals and media use these terms interchangeably in conversation, description, and promotion, demonstrating their malleable meanings always under construction by various agents with diverse objectives (Hibbett 2005, 58), I believe “underground” is most representative of the musical practices at Nightlight and institutions like it.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, “alternative” became the term used to describe the “terrain

of musical activity” that resulted from local infrastructures for a variety of musical activities developed in and through punk scenes (Straw 1997, 496). “Alternative,” however, and even more generally “Rock’n’roll,” have both been used extensively in mainstream popular music production, distribution, and consumption and, as a result, have accrued a set of cultural associations that define “independent” and “underground” music as opposites (Kruse 2003).

“Independent” music, in its most basic definition, denotes music not produced on a major label. Azerrad emphasizes this distinction in his chronicle of influential rock bands and artists of the 1980s—Sonic Youth, Meat Puppets, Mission of Burma, Black Flag, Butthole Surfers, and more. In *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, Azerrad restricts stories in his book “solely to bands on independent labels,” whose “stories trail off when and if a band signed to a major label” (Azerrad 2001, 5). Kruse chooses the term “independent,” and shortens it more specifically to “indie” music, an abbreviation commonly used to describe the “pop” and “rock” styles on which her research focuses, as opposed to the wide variety of musical genres released on independent labels (Kruse 2003, 8). “Indie” rock is also the term used to describe popular Triangle rock of the 1990s, best represented still by the post-punk, pop-rock of Superchunk and the record label they own and operate, Merge Records (Pareles 1994, Lazorchak 2002, Kruse 2003).

“Indie” is not, however, only defined by economic orientation. “Indie” also implies aesthetic qualities of the music, redefined constantly by those who use the term socially in clubs, on college radio, at local record stores, in record collections, and when downloaded to digital devices. “Indie” also implies political orientation, often linked to a working-class perspective associated with the DIY (Do It Yourself) philosophy as a basis for artistic integrity, a legacy from American punk (Kruse 2003, Hibbett 2005, Faris 2004). This definition still avoids accurate description of practices at Nightlight and in other “miniature scenes” around the world that produce “independent” music sites that are not always connected to the “indie” network but circulate instead in a more marginal set of alliances that is defined as “underground.”

Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991 is the subtitle to Azerrad’s

book. Like Kruse, Azerrad uses the term “indie” to describe a particular genre of poppy rock from the 1980s and 90s, although with a more punk/hardcore/post punk orientation. However, Azerrad uses “indie” to modify “underground,” suggesting that the opposition implied by “indie” against “mainstream” is not strong enough. Many of the band narratives in Azerrad’s book, and those of scene participants in Kruse’s and Shank’s work, chronicle the moments when groups are experimenting, defining a sound, recording their first records, playing their first shows, and interacting with audiences in small venues on intimate levels. The stories recount the development of artists, labels, and styles. Music practice at this level is too fluid for the other descriptive terms, especially now, when even “indie” rock has numerous established and successful networks and institutions for its production and distribution, and when the term has come to connote a particular sonic structure of guitar driven rock (Kruse 1993).

Although “independent” implies freedom, “independent”—and even “underground”—music “are positioned in relation to mainstream production and consumption” (Kruse 2003, 30) and marginal styles are constantly being coopted into the mainstream (Frith 1981, Grossberg 1986). Kruse writes, “Indie music has therefore been continually engaged in an economic and ideological struggle in which its ‘outsider’ status is re-examined, re-defined, and re-articulated to sets of musical practices” (Kruse 2003, 149). Underground music, as defined here, can be portrayed in an analogous struggle with indie music. If the indie “scenes” of the 1990s were defined by musical practice connected to regionalism and a local “sound” (Kruse 1993, Pareles 1994, Lazorchak 2002), then contemporary underground scenes—like that identified at Nightlight—react against that tendency to categorize music production in a locality to particular genres and styles and other recognized scene formations. The contemporary underground scene will also continue to react against itself. Certain networks, practices, and sounds will prove more relevant in the historical and cultural contexts where the scene emerges through social interaction. When these formations become stable enough, the underground scene becomes associated with something more specific—a place, as with CBGBs or Gillman Street

or the Kitchen—or a genre—rock, punk, or avant-garde. In the narrative of Chapel Hill, the underground of the first decades of the 2000s shifted alliances away from 90s indie rock and the institutions that rose to success from that scene, towards new practices, many of a more experimental and often noisy nature. Much of this music can be found at Nightlight.

Understanding how tradition impacts activities at Nightlight requires constructing a history of underground music making in the Triangle, while also chronicling of the spaces inhabited and the musical practices developed in these particular physical and historical contexts. In Austin, Barry Shank observed, “As individual musicians come to terms with the institutional and discursive structures that constrain and enable their performances, they map out a relation to this history—a relation described as a continuance of a powerful tradition or conversely, as a throwing off of this tradition’s burden” (Shank 1994, 20). I would argue that this holds true not just for musicians, but for *all* scene participants, both casual and committed, all of whom negotiate their identities in relation to their perception of this history. I would also add the revival or invention of tradition as other potential paradigms for connection. The cycles of emergence and cooptation of music scenes in the Triangle reveal all of these models at work as compelling influences, with usually more than one operating at a time. Chapter 3 connects these cyclical narratives into a consistent history of local music from the 1930s to the present at Nightlight, paying special attention to the 1990s.

First, however, Chapter 2 offers the first of two descriptive narratives detailing particular events at Nightlight in an attempt to contextualize the information for readers unfamiliar with the music and the culture of local rock scenes. Descriptions detail happenings at Nightlight events and recount my own movements through these scenes—as casual listener, regular spectator, and ethnographer. While concerned about excessive reflexivity in contemporary ethnographic writing, I see my experiences as representative of activity in music scenes; and to exclude them from the discussion would be irresponsible. Chapter 2 describes a typical show early in Nightlight’s history in November of 2003 with a local band supporting two bands on tour from the

New York area. Chapter 3 locates Nightlight within a local history of underground music. Chapter 4 describes an event that grew out the Nightlight music scene dedicated to exploring improvisational and experimental music and featuring a rotating cast of performers local to the Triangle. Chapter 5 considers the ways that Nightlight supports a scene where the process of tradition is driven by experimentation of any kind—not bound by genre, commerce, or stylistic convention—and by community support for personal expression. Finally, the conclusion in Chapter 6 reinforces the importance of tradition to the study of contemporary lived experience.

CHAPTER 2: ROCK SHOW

November 22, 2003

It is early on a Saturday, just before 10 p.m. A man in his early twenties loiters casually on the bench across from the door. Wearing worn blue jeans and a grey coat over a black hooded jacket, he sits staring blankly, looking generally bored. We do not know one another and acknowledge our non-relationship with friendly nods expressing amicable indifference. I am genuinely excited about tonight's show. Still unfamiliar with much of the local music scene, I do know tonight's two opening local bands, Cantwell Gomez & Jordan and des_ark. I consider their music some of the best in the Triangle and have seen each of them a couple of times since I caught their performances at Nightlight's opening night nine months ago. Also on the bill are Parts & Labor—a Brooklyn trio whose first 7" record of keyboard-driven, bass-heavy, distorted, anthemic, instrumental, noise-rock received a great deal of play at WXYC, and whose first CD, *Groundswell*, was also proving popular—and Tyondai Braxton—the son of composer, improviser, and instrumentalist Anthony Braxton, a musician and theorist active in both jazz and the American avant-garde. I erroneously assume the younger Braxton to be a saxophonist, and I know nothing about him.

Entering the club, Cantwell Gomez & Jordan—with Dave Cantwell on the drums; Anne Gomez on bass, saxophone, and vocals; and David Jordan on guitar and vocals—are setting up their equipment on and around the small stage. Isaac, one of the owners, is behind the bar. I pay the five dollar cover and order a Pabst Blue Ribbon, which he promptly pulls out of the cooler in front of him. We talk briefly; he is one of the few people I know outside of colleagues from school. The conversation revolves around music and the quality of recent shows at Nightlight. He has work to do and I go sit in a booth by myself and observe the other fifteen or

so people talking quietly in small groups.

Time passes; the crowd grows; I drink my beer and let my gaze wander. I recognize a few faces. The crowd is almost exclusively white, between the ages of 20 and 35 years old. I had previously assumed most were affiliated with UNC as students, employees, or part of the service industry; Isaac explained, however, that well over half of the performers and audience members had likely graduated from college and were working in a wide variety of fields. On this night, performers and audience all wear “street clothes,” but personal styles vary slightly. Some of the small crowd that I often see dancing enthusiastically to electronic music or know as deejays wear tight-fitting, brightly colored, thrift store clothes, mixed and matched from previous decades. I notice three people with looser, flowing, hippie-styled clothes, long hair and sandals. Most young men and a few women wear jeans or, like me, dark pants and plain t-shirts, worn tennis shoes, and light jackets. A few men and women dress in more presentable clothes: button-down shirts tucked into slacks, skirts or dresses, and stylish leather shoes. While the music performed at Nightlight has roots in punk, metal, electronic, dance, country, and jazz, there are very few participants who visually represent themselves as part of any of these particular “spectacular subcultures” (Hebdige 1979). Slowly I have come to identify particular individuals with particular musical styles, but only through performance, and not through their clothing.

Amidst the mingling, I recognize Kelly, Reid, and Ryan. The previous spring and summer, I would often attend a show and speak to no one. Since then, though, Kelly—a coworker with similar music interests and a Triangle resident of ten years—has introduced me to a number of her friends and acquaintances; I am currently working on a documentary with Ryan, and I know Reid from volunteering at WXYC. Although I am only slightly conscious of a change in my perception, these acquaintances and relationships are slowly making an evening at Nightlight feel like a social activity as well as a source of entertainment. We move outside into the alleyway, where groups of people often congregate on a bench and smoke cigarettes or

lean against the walls on either side of the alley and talk. Apparently des_ark is no longer playing. The news is disappointing but has little effect on the present moment or the evening as a whole.

Cantwell Gomez & Jordan start off the night. With a round head, buzzed hair, and wire-rim glasses, drummer Dave Cantwell smiles and seems full of good humor. And he hits his drums harder than anyone I have seen in town, pounding the rhythmic backbone of the music. Anne Gomez is thin with shoulder length blonde hair featuring a dark streak on the right side. Her right hand flails the bass strings, making it difficult to connect the jerky motions of her long fingers to the dissonant melodic lines and progressive scales she plays in tandem with a fairly static Dave Jordan. The shortest of the three, quiet and intense behind his glasses, Jordan plays the complicated guitar lines seemingly without effort, using a small array of effects pedals—including one homemade unit housed in a metal film reel case—to distort the tone and scramble the timbre of the sounds coming from his guitar cabinet. The music is fast and loud and rhythmically jumpy; tempos change on a dime, and so does the volume. They are skilled instrumentalists . . . or at least, I think, they must practice fairly regularly.

Gomez's bursts of saxophone and vocals, shouted in a nasal monotone that is mostly indecipherable to me, add layers of texture and emotion to the already frantic music. The addition of the saxophone—along with the meandering, dissonant melodies—reinforces the elements of jazz that I hear in their performance and calls to mind the music of New York no-wave bands from the 1980s like James Chance and the Contortions, and Essential Logic. The music is aggressive, spastic, and cerebral, but also very playful. Even without a microphone, Cantwell acts as spokesperson, introducing the band and interacting with the audience through clever stage banter. He introduces songs with titles that sound like casual, free-associated nonsense—like “Digital Sea Moss” and “Circus of Despair”—but are announced with certainty. As the set progresses, the band plays tighter and the intensity in the room grows stronger. Halfway through the set, the cryptic song names somehow begin to make sense to me. As if a

song called “Sans-a-belt” could only be the mix of dissonant skronk, crashing cymbals, shouts, and heavy post-punk riffs that follow its pronouncement.

During the performance, the crowd has doubled to about 25 people, but the space is still not crowded. Small groups fill most of the booths and people occupy the barstools. Around twelve people stand in a scattered arrangement on the concrete floor in front of the band, directly facing them. No one dances, but a few persons bounce up and down, nodding their heads exuberantly; most of the audience stand with arms crossed and display minimal, but appreciative, body motion. They nod their heads and watch intently, occasionally tapping their feet or shifting their weight back and forth from foot to foot with the rhythm. The sudden tempo changes and off-kilter melodic lines cause many listeners to physically stutter, requiring them to relocate the beat only to be thrown off again. As a result, the crowd never moves as a whole. From the back of the room, heads and bodies move through my line of sight to the band, obscuring and revealing bits of the stage as my own body makes slight moves with the music. The audience expresses appreciation at the conclusion of each song with claps and a few yelps. Cantwell Gomez & Jordan conclude the set with a cover song I do not recognize, and Cantwell offers a final thank you before they quickly begin to tear down their equipment. The bartender puts on music over the stereo and members of the audience turn to talk to people nearby or shuffle their way to the bar or out the front door.

After a short interlude, sounds of a voice testing a microphone entice the small crowd outside back into the warm room. A young man wearing a sweater, jeans, and brightly colored shoes—like the clothes of many people in the audience—sits cross-legged in the middle of the drum riser/stage, a microphone in hand. A short rack of electronic samplers and an array of pedals, looping stations, and modulators lies in front of him. Rocking back and forth, Braxton manipulates their controls with his feet and hands to record, and then to play/loop the sounds. Repeatedly sampling and modifying the vocal utterances, he layers and loops the sounds upon themselves to compose intricate and surprisingly unpredictable music. Singing and beatboxing,

he creates droning pulses that swell into electronic choruses of shamanic chanting that fill the room, interrupted only by occasional snatches of conversation shouted over the music. The well-behaved audience members sit or stand motionless but for languid head nodding. People clap when appropriate and occasionally shift positions or go to the bar, restroom, or the alleyway. After 30 minutes, the waves of sound recede and Braxton offers a quiet “Thank you” before disconnecting his equipment.

Time edges past midnight and nearly forty people now occupy the space. The convivial atmosphere, heightened by alcohol and the quality of the performances, is reflected in the volume of the crowd in the room. Once quiet and reserved conversations among small groups are now loud, boisterous, and open as people move around and socialize. Parts and Labor finish preparing their equipment and I move forward to stand to the right of the stage so I can see how the keyboard/guitarist Dan Friel, a tall man with wild red hair, plays his instruments. Looking at the large tube amp and 6 x 10” speaker cabinet into which bass player B. J. Warshaw is plugging his instrument cable, I imagine the potential volumes it might reach. The man standing near me must imagine the same, because he takes small, neon-orange, foam earplugs from his pants pocket and inserts them in his ear cavities. Cursing my forgetfulness, I scurry off to retrieve some toilet paper to ball up in my own ears as a poor substitute.

Working my way back to the stage past the bar, heavily distorted waves of keyboard tones push against me. A crack of the snare drum cues the bass to add a steady stream of eighth notes. The drummer, Joel Saladino, hits so hard that the kit threatens to push off the small riser, even with two cinderblocks set in front of the kick drum to hold it in place. Warshaw and the Saladino are so steady and repetitive that they sound like a locked groove of a LP. Calmly nodding his head up and down with the beat, Warshaw repeatedly strums one single note until the anticipation of a change or break in the music becomes an afterthought and everyone seems to settle into the hyper-groove of the music. The sound is relentless. Overtones from the fuzz bass and crashing cymbals combine with the harmonic arpeggios that

Friel, headbanging furiously, plays on the Casio keyboard, causing a trebly haze of white noise to hang overhead. Using an effects pedal, Friel shifts the source sound signal up or down an octave, adding ecstatic melodic oscillations that aggressively punch through the mind-melting drone of the rhythm section. Occasionally the furious tempo and confrontational noise recede to open up the sound for the more experimental and less rigidly structured interludes heard on the group's records; the energy in the room, however, insures these moments are brief. While there is still no wildy gesticulatory dancing, fists occasionally pump the air, heads bob enthusiastically, and the audience applauds with spirit. The show ends and I turn around to see a room of flushed and smiling faces through smoke hanging in the air.

Leaving, I wander past the booth where Braxton and Parts & Labor have arranged their merchandise for sale: a couple of 7" records, full length CDs by both Parts and Labor and Braxton; and Parts and Labor's and Tyondai Braxton's new split CD, *Rise, Rise, Rise*, which they are touring to support. Reid and I both purchase a CD and head for the door with Kelly. A few people wish us good night as we walk into the refreshingly cool autumn air outside.

CHAPTER 3: LOCATING NIGHTLIGHT

The narrative above describes a typical evening of musical performances at Nightlight in the fall of 2003: a mostly white, young, educated audience; a mix of touring and local bands; a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere for social interaction and alcohol consumption. Open for only nine months, Nightlight had already established itself as a home for music and musicians on the fringes of the larger Triangle music scene and the touring networks of the national independent music industry. Smaller than other venues and operating within the established Skylight Exchange, Nightlight provided a regular space for the dance parties, new bands, and experimental performances that were too much of a risk for businesses like Go! Room 4, Cat's Cradle, and the Local 506 to host on any regular basis. This was not the first time that 405½ W. Rosemary had acted as a gathering space for participants in Chapel Hill's counter-culture centered on musical practice; nor was it the only space territorialized by the underground of the Triangle music scene throughout its long history.

Obscurity and impermanence define the underground, so constructing a narrative chronology depends on piecing together accounts from a variety of sources, including academic histories, independent media covering the music, the passionate critiques and discographies compiled by record collectors, and, importantly, the personal narratives shared by scene participants in oral and written texts. These narratives typically focus on one genre, historical moment, or group, rarely considering the relations between the object of attention and disparate music scenes and histories. The totality of musical culture in the Triangle is beyond the scope of this paper, but its complex history collectively composes a heritage for local identity in the current underground scene at Nightlight. Participation in a local underground scene requires engaging with these histories as much as interacting with the contemporary scenes in the

process of constructing a local identity through musical practice (Mitchell 1997, 1).

While few scene participants are aware of the wide range of previous local activity, the sounds and idioms of these periods reverberate through history like ripples in a pool—each period a new stone reacting against and contributing to the turbulence of previous splashes, and all contributing to the collective memory of musical heritage interacting with contemporary musical practice. Extant documentation and representation of earlier scenes demonstrates their individual significance simply by the fact that the networks that developed were strong enough to produce lasting artifacts. Recordings, writings, photographs, and memories include early scenes as “part of a larger discourse in which certain moments and certain places were understood as particularly meaningful” (Kruse 2003, 17). Present-day scene participants appropriate, adapt, romanticize, and/or ignore practices associated with the past according to their own relation to and knowledge of these histories.

A history of 20th-century underground music in the Triangle could start with the Piedmont blues of the 1930s, move through R & B and early rock and roll of the 1950s, and step into the garage rock, psychedelia, and soul of the 1960s. The folk revival of the late sixties and seventies, as well as 1970s heavy rock and early new wave, require special attention; so do the punk rock, new wave, and power pop of the 1980s, all of which were instrumental in the development of the Triangle’s internationally recognized indie rock scene of the 1990s. Much has been written both locally and nationally about the CH-Scene of the 1990s, which also included development of the Triangle’s alt.country contingent (Carlson 2000; Kobel 1993; Kruse 2003; Lazorchak 2002; Menconi 1997; Millikin 2003; O’Hara 2000; Pareles 1994).

Gavin O’Hara’s “Running with the Devil” in the local weekly, *The Independent*, neatly summarizes the previous decade of indie rock music in the Triangle (2000). Looking to replicate the financial success and mainstream popularity of the Seattle’s “grunge” scene—represented by bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Mudhoney, and others—A&R executives selected a number of regional rock scenes, including Chapel Hill, as potential candidates (Alden

1992, 12; Kobel 1993; O'Hara 2000; Pareles 1994, 1). The local scene reacted less than kindly to this attention. Popular artists like Superchunk and Archers of Loaf rejected major label deals; Superchunk, for instance, chose instead to release its initial records on the successful independent label, Matador (Bogas 2005). Superchunk then parlayed their own "indie" successes to support local releases on their own Merge label (Lazorchak 2003). Local zines from the 1990s, notably *Stay Free!*, are filled with vitriolic critiques of the corporate music industry and of local artists that writers saw as being coopted or becoming products of that industry. Bands like Polvo, Picasso Trigger, and Archers of Loaf toured nationally and received play on college radio, but most other local rock acts received little national attention. The ones that did—like the Squirrel Nut Zippers, the Connells, Ben Folds Five, and Whiskeytown—were too stylistically diverse to distill into one genre like "grunge" (although all were arguably playing roots-oriented rock). In the late 1990s, the sound-du-jour of the Triangle shifted somewhat from indie rock to alt.country and bands like the aforementioned Whiskeytown and the Backsliders rose from the local scene to national prominence. Soon thereafter, however, these left town or broke up, like so many before them. And so the Chapel Hill scene was again left alone to its own devices, fractured from its encounter with the corporate music industry (O'Hara 2000). Coverage in the national media, however, largely ignored the less melodic, electronic, and more experimental music scenes that flourished locally at the same time as the rise of indie rock and alt.country.

The narrative of Chapel Hill independent rock often ends at this point, and like other discussions of cooptation, "focus[es] on the techniques by which rock and roll has been exploited and transformed by the economic system and the various 'ideological state apparatuses,' especially the mass media" (Grossberg 1984, 254). Other scene histories are similar. Shank, for instance, concludes his account of the Austin rock and roll scene by documenting its splintering into smaller, "insider" scenes, a result of industrial economic forces that encourage musical differentiation by genre and demographic differentiation by consumers'

age, class, race, and gender (Shank 1994, 240). He further suggests that the basis of music evaluation in Austin had shifted from the “aesthetic of performance that acknowledged the power of musicalized experience in the production of adolescent identities,” to the abstraction of that experience from a commoditization of musical practice in the form of a recording, reflecting a shift in the “interpretive structures that shape identity formation” (Shank 1994, 251).

The Chapel Hill scene of the 1990s followed Shank’s trajectory, significantly changing music practice in Chapel Hill. Active scene participants moved away; new ones came. Formerly upstart labels like Merge became nationally known with an international roster. Countless bands formed and dissolved. Well into the 2000s, discussions of the state of the Chapel Hill scene, generally described as “weakened,” remained a regular feature on listservs like alt.music.chapel.hill; nostalgia for the Chapel Hill of the 1990s is still quite pervasive (O’Hara 2000). Such assertions pose the rock music popularized and valorized in the 1990s as representing some kind of ideal. In a 2005 radio interview, for instance, longtime Local 506 owner, Glenn Boothe, spoke about that stagnation that defined the post-1990s Chapel Hill rock scene:

Unfortunately the sound that’s being created now was en vogue in 1993, and it’s not necessarily the hip sound now. There’s not as much new blood coming into the scene. I think the scene needs new faces coming out to the shows. I think a lot of bands are just preaching to the converted because the same people come to see them all the time. (Warenick 2005)

The “sound” that Boothe is describing refers to the guitar-driven indie rock that grew out of the underground of the early 1990s. The “scene” that he invokes, in turn, is the localized faction of “indie music” that became increasingly connected to a corporatized independent music industry over that decade. This perspective, however, ignores underground scenes that are constantly shifting with “new blood” as new residents move to the Triangle and current residents respond to changing cultural trends. In the indie rock scene of the early 2000s—well established through a process of traditionalization and, while remaining marginalized, absorbed into the dominant culture—the sound “was en vogue in 1993.” In local underground scenes, however, musicians

forged new styles of performance created in artistic response to the genrefication of a regional indie rock sound.

To resume the story of Chapel Hill rock where O'Hara leaves off, we must acknowledge how the process of cooptation is integral to scene production. Cooptation leads to change, as Grossberg noted about rock and roll:

Cooptation is the mode by which rock and roll produces itself anew, rejecting moments of its past and present in order to all the more potently inscribe its own boundary. . . . Rather than a cycle of authentic and coopted music, rock and roll exists as a fractured unity within which differences of authenticity and cooptation are defined in the construction of affective alliances and networks of affiliation. These alliances are always multiple and contradictory. (Grossberg 1984, 255)

Some current scene participants, like former WXDU Durham music director, and active Nightlight audience member, Kelly Kress, identify this process as necessary to current music practice in Chapel Hill.

The music scene is going to exist regardless of whether *Rolling Stone* is writing articles about it. . . . In terms of the 'heyday' [of Chapel Hill music], I guess there were a lot of bands that got popular just for being from here, like the Archers of Loaf . . . but creatively, I would disagree with saying that that was the heyday. The things going on now are different, but there is still a lot to do and a lot to see, and I think that's always going to be the case here. . . . I think there's a legacy here. . . There is so much stability with the radio stations and the clubs. . . . People come here, they might not know anything; . . . they might turn on the radio one day and find 'XYC and hear something, and maybe it's local and they'll realize they can go out and see it. And they'll go see it and all of a sudden two years later they're one of the people playing in bands and booking clubs or something. (Kress 2005)

Kress acknowledges that cooptation—in the form of attention from the national press and the corporate music industry—does not diminish creativity, but instead leads to changes that inspire new relationships, new participation, and new traditions within local rock and roll culture.

Kress's astute observation recognizes not only the continuing importance of institutions like college radio and local venues in this process, but also the way that individuals' relationships to scenes change over time.

Underground scenes resist the tendency to be narrated into lifecycles because of their tendency toward stylistic experimentation and constant reorientation in relation to other music

practices. Nonetheless, the processes of differentiation that identify a scene, underground or otherwise, demand that it be located in a historical context, making a rise and fall, or a recognition and cooptation, inevitable, at least for those who are invested in the scene. At Nightlight, current musicians and fans work to reconcile the influence of the underground scenes of the past—scenes that legitimized Chapel Hill in popular culture as a viable site of music production—with their own current activities, carving out their own spaces in order to challenge the notion that the scene has stagnated. Turning toward more extreme genres of rock and roll, dance- and beat-oriented music, experimental music, avant-garde performance, and improvisation as alternatives to the 1990s regional indie rock sound, these individuals came together within a scene at Nightlight, connected through traditions that emerged in aesthetic opposition to what indie rock had become.

“Rock music is dead,” acerbically and jokingly notes Ryan Martin, musician, Hot Releases record label founder, and co-owner of Nightlight from 2004 through 2006. He continues:

All the rock music I listen to was made years and years ago. There’s not a lot of new interesting rock music and it is not as potent as it once was. Right now you have bands who are carrying on the form of rebellious music that happened a long time ago, but it’s not so vital somehow. I hope that people are wanting to see, in place of a rock show, something that’s more of a performance, parties where people can dance and interact. (Martin 2007)

Martin’s emphatic statement is important, even if not entirely reflected in booking practices and performances at Nightlight. There are still many rock shows at Nightlight, but these often follow a different format than those at a more standard rock venue like the Local 506. Deejays often perform between sets and after the performance. Bands seldom know the order in which they will perform before they begin. There are very limited (if any) sound checks. Some bands refuse their share of the door money, instead offering their portion to a touring band or back to Nightlight to cover expenses. Such an environment encourages socialization between performers and audience before and after the show, increasing a sense of community and

strengthening identities of the participants. It can also negatively affect the success of Nightlight as a business. As Mike Nutt, former Nightlight employee, suggests:

Community is something that's really important to me...I still am hesitant to say that it was something I was looking for in a music venue, but once I did happen upon it, I think that was one of the reasons why it felt comfortable to me and right to me. Because it was like, Nightlight is more successful as a community center than a business. (Nutt 2007)

Nutt is quick to include, however that while he and others feel comfortable in the “low pressure” community of Nightlight, “it has a self-selecting community that excludes people for various reasons” (Nutt 2007). Exclusivity and constructed boundaries seem to be precisely what Nightlight idealistically seeks to avoid. Nonetheless, these contradictions are implied in the business's own rhetoric.

According to Nightlight's website, its goal is “to host as many styles and tastes of music as there are fans—maybe more. In particular, Nightlight hopes to provide a forum for new music and ideas not getting the attention they deserve” (Nightlight). As a locally produced rock and roll apparatus, which “constantly reinscribes a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Grossberg 1986, 57), Nightlight separates itself from the local music community by defining itself as a representative of newness and difference. Further, it pointedly proclaims the significance of these qualities. Many rock and roll fans, in contrast, demand consistency in their music, and do not look for “anything off-beat or weird” (Parker 2005). Mike Nutt observes:

If Nightlight invites or caters to these people who have these social quirks and there's this room full of people who have all these strange, social quirks, you walk in there and you're probably gonna be like, “Who the fuck are these people and why are they so weird?” You are kind of disoriented; the music's all crazy. You go there once and you have this kind of weird experience—people are looking for the same thing that I'm looking for when I go to Nightlight, which is to feel comfortable in a place. If they aren't feeling the signals that make them feel comfortable, then they're not coming back. I think that it just kind of fills this niche. I don't think it's for everybody. It's not for everybody in Chapel Hill; it's not for every touring band. (Nutt 2006)

Other active Nightlight regulars agree that the space and scene drive many people away. Martin even goes so far as to suggest that less than twenty people attend Nightlight on a regular (weekly or more often) basis, and that even they are particular about what types of

shows they attend: local, noise, improv, punk, dance, folk, or other variety (Martin 2007). While this core group may be the most active participants at Nightlight, many other people make up the Triangle's rock community and have attended many events at Nightlight or have performed there on occasion. Perhaps they do not consider themselves part of a scene, but their occasional attendance, decisions not to attend when the music is too "weird," and ideas formed through local media, interpersonal communication, and online resources like trianglerock.com, all contribute to the constant negotiation of the cultural space that is the Nightlight scene and underground music in the Triangle.

A variety of music practices tend to coexist and interact in scenes (Kruse 2003, Straw 2004); this is certainly the case at Nightlight where rock, noise, improvisation, and dance music nights (from techno, to 80s, to post-punk, to world music) coexist with old-time country jam sessions, traditional Irish music, hip-hop, high-school garage bands, singer-songwriters, open-mic nights, movie nights, trivia nights, puppet performances, theater, drag fashion shows, and more. Much like the way that folklore has too often been defined as "what folklorists study," it can appear that the Nightlight scene can only be described by the variety of performances at the space. The only requirement seems to be that the performances "can't really happen at a different venue in town. I mean if it can't happen at Nightlight, where else could it possibly happen? I guess Chaz's [Bull City Records] is a possibility now, but it is pretty rock oriented" (Harper 2006). Again and again discussions about Nightlight posit rock and roll as oppositional to the kind of performances typical at the venue. At the same time, however, participants also uphold the place as the only venue where can currently witness an authentic "real rock show, even though the music isn't really rock and roll like all the old Chapel Hill indie shit; it is noise and crazy shit" (Arzano 2007).

Diversity in programming and tastes are characteristics of underground music in Chapel Hill, as currently articulated through the Nightlight. As a micro-scene became identifiable with the space, music styles and practices mostly identified with the experimental, electronic, dance,

improvisational and noise genres came to be the most visible. As a contemporary underground scene, Nightlight has from the start been dependent on interlocal interaction with musicians and artists outside of Chapel Hill. The first shows that many interviewees remember attending were by DAT Politics, an experimental electronic dance group from France, and Wolf Eyes, a brutally pummeling noise group from Minnesota who have risen to international renown. At the same time, participants in the Nightlight scene are dedicated to nurturing and being nurtured by a *local* musical tradition of experimentation and avant-garde performance, as long as it can be distanced from the indie-rock legacy. To understand how a scene developed at the Nightlight, we must dig deeper into narratives of cooptation and resistance in 1990s indie rock. It is activity during this era, when some participants in the Nightlight scene first began participating in local music through different clusters of underground rock, improvisational, experimental, and electronic communities, that fed directly into formations at Nightlight.

The CH-Scene

O'Hara's narrative of Chapel Hill music in the 1990s summarized above admittedly oversimplifies a highly productive period of creativity. Yet the swirl of activity generated by Triangle bands during this period proves impossible to chronicle in perfect detail. For every band that recorded a record, five recorded a seven-inch or cassette, and for every one of those recorded bands, five others formed, performed twice, and broke up without ever getting near a tape deck. The event/record that provides a starting place for the narrative of this era of Chapel Hill rock, and that acts as a bridge between Raleigh hardcore and college rock of the 1980s and the indie rock of the 1990s, actually appeared in 1987.

Mac McCaughan, along with Wayne Taylor and members of other Triangle bands—Egg Egg, Angels of Epistemology, and Black Girls—created Palindrome Productions to collectively release an ambitious and elaborate box set of five seven-inch vinyl records called *Evil I Do Not (to Nod I Live)*. Two of the featured bands—Slushpuppies and Wwax—played punk influenced by the Raleigh hardcore scene. Raleigh's Egg, largely a continuation of Stillborn Christians,

also played loud, heavy rock music, although with an even more experimental and arty edge. In contrast, Blackgirls played classical, art, rock music full of atonal melodies and dissonant compositions. Angels of Epistemology, in turn, incorporated ethnic instruments and rhythms to create progressive and obtuse college rock. Most of these bands broke up in the early 90s or before, but the young McCaughan did not stop. Together with his bandmate, Laura Ballance, he founded Merge Records in 1989 while still attending Columbia University in New York City. Ballance ran the label out of her bedroom in Chapel Hill, soliciting volunteers to assist with mailings (Currin 2004). In McCaughan's eyes, the *Evil I do Not* set was critical to the founding of Merge:

That was a watershed because we had all local bands and we also managed to get the attention of the local press putting out this box set and having these shows at the Cat's Cradle [in Chapel Hill] and the Brewery [in Raleigh], both of which were pretty big successes. Of course, fairly soon after that nearly all of the bands stopped being bands. The Black Girls continued, and Angels Of Epistemology were around for a little while longer. But still, that was just an amazing time, and to me it was the predecessor to Merge. So to me that was a true watershed, and it's easier to point to it than, say, a particular Superchunk or Polvo show. I don't think at the time I was thinking, "Oh, we've got to start a bigger label after this box set now," because it was a one-off thing. And then Merge was a couple of years later, in '89. But when it came time to do Merge, by then Laura and I knew it wasn't that hard to get a record made. I mean, you just sent it off and the records come back—there wasn't any mystery anymore after that, which was good. (Mills 2004)

McCaughan's words echo those of musician and producer Mitch Easter remembering the inspiration for the first Sneakers recordings when Don Dixon and Arrogance demystified the record-making process for him in the early 1970s (Sorg 2007). The first Merge releases were cassettes of Bricks and Wwax, followed by seven inches of local bands Angels of Epistemology (released posthumously in 1990), Finger, Breadwinner (from Virginia), and Ballance and McCaughan's own band Superchunk. Superchunk released their first two cds, *Superchunk* (1990) and *No Pocky for Kitty* (1991) on the independent Matador records, while continuing to release seven-inch records of popular local bands on Merge like Polvo and Erectus Monotone.

Polvo, along with Superchunk and Archers of Loaf, remain one of the best-known local rock bands to fans outside of the Triangle. Formed during this initial surge of indie rock activity,

kick started by the success of Superchunk (but with its own roots in Raleigh hardcore and Chapel Hill rock), members of Polvo met in a Spanish class at UNC in 1990 and soon began recording their debut release, a double seven-inch, for the Kitchen Puff label. Often compared to popular, and noisier, independent rock bands of the 1980s like Sonic Youth and Dinosaur Jr., Polvo's take on indie rock skews away from straight pop textures and structure. Instead they utilize alternate tunings, dissonance, unconventional rhythms, noisy timbres, and often Eastern-influenced melodies (Alden 1992). Like Superchunk, Polvo recorded their early experiments, including tracks for their first full-length CD, the critically praised *Cor-Crane Secret* released on Merge, at Jerry Kee's studios (Wurster 2002). Although Polvo quickly received increased attention along with independent rock music in Chapel Hill in general, in the early 1990s they were just another local band playing music with friends.

Formed out of informal jam sessions in 1989, Erectus Monotone also made their first record with with engineer and musician Jerry Kee at Duck-Kee Studios, a home studio that Kee has run in at least eight different locations around the Triangle for two decades and the studio where Superchunk recorded their first singles in 1989 (O'Hara 2000; Wurster 2002). Erectus Monotone released a few more 7" records on Merge before breaking up in 1993, soon after the release of their first CD, *Close-Up*. Despite dissolving the band, the members of Erectus Monotone remained involved in local music, going on to play in Ashley Stove and other bands.

While Polvo and Erectus Monotone reached levels of notoriety and success in the local music scene that most underground bands never achieve, their histories are consistent with other bands from the period. The band members knew each other socially, saw each other perform in other bands, and decided to form a new band together. Anne Gomez and Chuck Johnson remember similar experiences when they began to play with their first Triangle bands, the Blue Green Gods and Spatula respectively, around the same time. Gomez moved to Durham in 1987 to attend law school. A DJ at WXDU, Gomez became friends with local musicians and fans with similar tastes; she began playing bass because "a lot of the people I

knew were in bands.” Her experience is similar to Chris Eubank four years prior:

It was not WXDU when I was there at first. It was an AM station, WDUK, but I knew some of the people who were DJ’s there, and so that plays a role. And I became a DJ there when WXDU started in ’83. I was exposed to some stuff that was going on through that means. I met some folk and started a group with them in ’83, and so I got a chance to go see some shows and be a part of some shows then and in ’84. (Lazorchak 2002)

Others bands, like Spatula with guitarist Chuck Johnson and drummer Matt Gocke, formed out of shared living situations. According to Johnson, Spatula was, a duo for a long time, and we had just been living together and towards the end of college and out of college and played music together and I guess it would have been around 1993 when we started to play in front of people We were both interested in music, and all of our friends were playing music. You know how it happens; you get invited to play with people and form friendships that way. (Johnson 2007)

The extensive crossover between band members and the tendency of musicians to perform in multiple bands or collaborate on short projects reflects the fluid social networks of underground scenes. These collaborations often lead to musical and stylistic variation that, if considered worthwhile or enjoyable by the participants, might lead to the formation of a new band or at least new friendships and new opportunities for performances. At the same time, the dissolution of relationships, either resulting from personal differences and musical differences, or physical separation when members move away to pursue careers, people get married and have children, or simply can’t coordinate their schedules, regularly contributes to the end of a band. Musician Robert Biggers remembers recognizing this trend early in his career, “One of the indie-rock lessons for me, with being a fan of them was like ‘Oh they’re not a band anymore.’ And it’s like, ‘What?’ And like, ‘oh, that’s what happens to a lot of these bands; they only last for two or three years at the most’” (Biggers 2007).

Musical partnerships in underground scenes that are based on personal rather than professional relationships tend to create bands with short histories; most are never even acknowledged outside of a small circle of friends. By the early 1990s, however, the combined availability of inexpensive recording technology (like four-track recorders), the punk-derived

appreciation of a lo-fi recording aesthetic, and a supportive community of local fans, encouraged bands to record and release their music. The most common format was seven-inch vinyl records, the short format fitting the short-lived bands (Currin 2002; Lazorchak 2002). Duck-Kee Studios was not the only option for local bands to record. Bryon Settle—a member of the band Lud—co-owned Yellow House Studios, and a young Caleb Southern created Kraptone studios, recording bands during the day at the Cat’s Cradle where he worked as a sound engineer at night (Wurster 2002). WXYC and WXDU, staffed by fans of local music and countless local musicians, provided mass media support for distribution of North Carolina rock recordings. Radio, although localized by broadcast range, created a much larger audience than possible through record sales, which were limited by pressing and distribution expenses.

The *Evil Do Not I* and the punk and hardcore focused *No Core* compilations demonstrated to bands in this generation the local appeal and success of recordings. According to McCaughan, the first Merge releases were “kind of like a dare to ourselves. Here we were in this band, ya know? It was a band but it wasn't a real band. It was more for fun, and—for us—it was funny to commemorate the short existence of that band by putting out a record” (Currin 2004). Tim Ross, a WXYC DJ, publisher of music magazine *Tuba Frenzy*, and drummer for local rock band Joby’s Opinion, described the “record releasing blitz” from 1990 to summer 1992, as “a wave” leading up to the Big Record Stardom Convention at the Cat’s Cradle in August of 1992 (Ross 1996). During this swell of activity and interest in local rock music, numerous bands—Picasso Trigger, Zen Frisbee, Vanilla Trainwreck, Scuppernong, Anubis Leisure Society, Minerva Strain, The Blue Green Gods, Bicycle Face, Lud, Finger, Pure, Small, Mind Sirens, Bicentennial Quarters, and Archers of Loaf, and others—formed, while a host of local record labels—including Jettison, Moist/Baited Breath, D-Tox, Squealer, and Jesus Christ—supported the growing music scene.

Representing a completely different Triangle musical family than Merge, Jettison Records, founded by Todd Goss in the late 1980s, produced a stunning catalog of the North

Carolina musical underground. Jettison's first release, a 1991 seven-inch by the band Blue Chair called *La Muerte De Los Huevos*, demonstrated a musical focus toward more experimental and dissonant rock music than Merge, a direction the label pursued until it folded in 1996 (Ross 1996). Blue Chair included not only Chris Eubank, formerly of punk band the Ugly Americans, but also drummer Ian Davis and guitarist Trent Hill. These three continued to play together in a variety of contexts for many years to come in groups whose music leans even further in the direction of experimental rock than Blue Chair, incorporating free improvisation into performances and composing with sound as texture instead of melody. Goss's own band, Blue Green Gods, was another group through which numerous musicians (including Anne Gomez) moved through during its career. At the time, Gomez was a law student at Duke University; she learned to play the bass and joined Blue Green Gods, her first of many bands, in the late 1980s.

Moist Records/Baited Breath put out their first seven-inch of Greensboro band Bicycle Face in 1991, followed by a seven-inch by Metal Flake Mother and the first CD by Southern Culture on the Skids. Kelly Cox—a former employee of the Chapel Hill independent record store, Poindexter Records—and his partner, Andrew Peterson, worked furiously promoting their label, booking shows and setting up events like the “Big Record Stardom Convention,” which showcased 49 local bands over three days in August 1992 (Gavin 2000). Cox also booked numerous touring indie bands as well as local acts at a basement club called Smokin' Joe's, located at 157 E. Rosemary in Chapel Hill. The shows at Smokin' Joe's came at a pivotal time when the Cat's Cradle had closed (from May 1993 to November 1993) while moving from Franklin St. to Carrboro. Dave Cantwell's band Analogue played their first show in Chapel Hill at Smokin' Joe's. Cantwell remembers the experience:

One of the first great heartbreaks of Analogue's existence was at our first show in Chapel Hill; it was at the club—well now it's Hell, but it used to be called . . . it had a stupid name. It was just a very unremarkable bar that had bands sometimes and we got a show there. It was called Smokin' Joe's. That's what it was called, and we got a show there and I don't even know how we got the show, because I didn't book it, you know. It was our first show in Chapel Hill and we found out a couple weeks before our show that that same night the new Cat's Cradle was opening, and the benefit for the new Cradle

was that night. And it was Superchunk, Polvo, Erectus Monotone, and something else, and we were like, “Oh Fuck!” And it wasn’t just because we were competing with that show, it was that we wanted to BE at that show. Those bands were the reason we moved here. So we played by ourselves. The other band, the headliner cancelled, broke up the night of the show. So we were the one band on the bill. . . . Instead of paying us, they gave us free pizza; you know, nobody came, so we ate the pizza. (Cantwell 2007)

Moist Records stretched themselves too thin, however, and soon after releasing What Peggy Wants’ *Death of a Sailor*, the owners “unceremoniously blew town” when the label went bankrupt (Carlson 2000).

Unlike Merge Records, a label created for the purpose of releasing records of the owners and their friends that unexpectedly found success in as an independent label within the music industry, the trajectory of Moist suggests an attempt to create a business to replicate the success of independent labels like Merge, Dischord, Matador, and Sub-pop, all of which grew out of community-supported and regionally focused scenes. Moist appeared to be intensely invested in the local scene, but also seemed driven by a desire to find the “next big thing” before the majors did, by defining a “Chapel Hill sound.” The early and critically acclaimed releases of Triangle bands on Merge, Jettison, Moist, D-tox, and numerous other labels led to national media attention. The potential of Chapel Hill music was heralded in *U. S. News and World Report* (1990), *Interview* (1992), *Spin* (1992), *Details* (1993), *Billboard* (1993), and *Entertainment Weekly* (1993); each asking if “the hottest new music [can] really be in genteel Chapel Hill,” adding that, “record company execs have been searching for another town to crown as the alternative rock capital of the U. S.” (Kobel 1993).

One method of celebrating and selling a regional rock scene in the early 1990s was the music festival. In 1991, the ASCAP supported “North Carolina Music Showcase,” a corporate organized attempt to market North Carolina music to the record industry. The showcase—which excluded Polvo, Metal Flake Mother, and Erectus Monotone—was met with scorn and derision by local music fans for ostracizing the newly popular indie rock emerging from the underground (Bogas 2006, 6). The following year, Moist organized the “Big Record Stardom

Convention,” focusing mostly on local acts and mostly indie rock. Even though this event also served as a showcase to market local talent to record labels and executives, it playfully and reflexively critiqued the commercial focus of the industry. As a marker of authenticity within underground punk and rock music communities, this antagonistic relationship with the corporate music industry continued to shape the direction of the Triangle music scene for many years to come. As certain bands and labels rose out of the underground when they achieved higher levels of economic and professional success, they sought to distance and differentiate themselves from a blatantly corporate model that might suggest “selling out.”

Between their first and second records, Superchunk received offers from major record labels (Currin 2004). Major labels had been recruiting bands from the ranks of the underground for years: The Replacements, Husker Du, REM, and Sonic Youth, all joined major labels in the late 1980s (Azerrad 2001). In 1991, Nirvana’s first major-label release, *Nevermind*, made \$50 million dollars for DCG (Geffen Records). As a result, major labels began looking to regional/local scenes, like Chapel Hill, to mine for talent (Kruse 2003, 46; Pareles 1994).

Superchunk decided to remain with Matador and subsequently released their third CD, a collection of singles, as the first Merge CD in 1992. Superchunk’s refusal to sign with a major label allowed them to avoid what they saw as industry cooptation; they attribute their survival to a fastidious work ethic and a total commitment to independent ideology. McCaughan explains that the choice also made good business sense for them and their label:

We had good options already, so to sign with a major label, I think they would have had to offer something pretty amazing. They weren't prepared to do that because it would have been something unheard of. It would have been a major-league ordeal or something to be better than what we already had. In terms of the long view and part of what we wanted to do, we wanted to have Merge and have Superchunk. It didn't just benefit Superchunk, it also benefited Merge. That really shaped this label into what it is now With Superchunk on the label, it made Merge a real label, something legitimate that was not just a hobby, ya know? We had a band that people had heard of, and we were putting out records. Being on the label ourselves also made Merge appealing to other bands that wanted to sign because it created us as this entity. It would have been hard for me to let someone be on the label if I chose not to be on the label. If we weren't on our own label, I think other bands would have questioned that. (Currin 2004)

Their choice openly demonstrated a commitment to the DIY ethics of punk rock and reinforced a socially constructed local standard for measuring the choices of bands in the future. The choice suggests a model for commercialization that allows for success while maintaining an oppositional stance toward mainstream culture; it combined what the musicians saw as uncorrupted authenticity and sincerity with a commitment to developing alternative structures of production and distribution, grounded in a deep allegiance to the local artistic community.

Shank describes a parallel practice in the Austin music scene:

While traditional sincerity demands the absence of outside influence or adulteration, one of the most significant messages of punk was that such are the conditions of commercialized cultural practice that no popular music is free from artifice. . . . Punks and post-punk musicians in Austin struggled to recuperate sincerity through a purification of the expressive impulse. The lessons of punk in Austin reinforced a utopian romantic urge for a cultural marketplace free of deceit, where a sincere expression, a pure representation, could arise from some essence of the performer untainted by the polluting structures of capitalism and then could be distributed through direct channels to a populace longing for it . . . the result was an insistence on the personal responsibility for and significance of the music one made, the music one listened to, the music one bought and sold. (Shank 1994, 147)

Even with their refusal of major label support, the success of both Superchunk and Merge Records established both entities in positions of authority and power. With their success and rising status, the once alternative Merge became a prominent institution North Carolina's creative economy, with Superchunk's indie-rock sound recognized as an extension of that institution. Emerging local underground scenes in the Triangle reacted against both by determining their own boundaries through alternative economic and social practices and through a preference for music that broke from a 1990s indie rock model.

Electronics and Improvisation

In 1999, musician Woody Sullender released the compilation CD *Zaum* on his newly minted Dead CEO record label; the project "documents the work of numerous artists working in different genres but who share common histories as well as the geographic space of Chapel

Hill. Selections run from improvised rock to electronic noise to jazz to audio ecology.” As a document of musical activity in the 1990s, the disc features an “eclectic community of musical experimenters including the audio detournement of the Wifflefist Collective, the diverse crew behind the Transmissions festivals, and the large group improvisations of The Micro-East Collective” (Dead CEO 1999). While media and industry attention remained focused on the Triangle indie-rock and alt.country scenes throughout the 1990s, the same processes of differentiation that led to the development of those scenes continued to push other groups toward new sounds and new alliances. As the Cat’s Cradle and bands like Superchunk and others described above became more deeply connected to an increasingly institutionalized independent music industry, alternative venues and musical practices emerged out of the underground. Punk, hardcore, and newly established bands continued to perform at house parties and alternative venues like V.F.W. halls, cultural centers, record stores, and bookshops. Experimentation in electronic music, avant-garde performance, dance, and improvisation became a focal point around which new clusters of underground activity developed. This shift could be heard on the radio, and was reflected on playlists at WXYC. Musician, DJ, and *Tuba City* zine publisher Tim Ross reflected on the tastes of the WXYC community shift away from indie-rock toward experimentation during this period as expected, writing that WXYC

has traditionally gone after types of music or bands that are underexposed or are the ‘new, exciting thing’ that we all just found out about and went crazy over. Before about six years ago, most of that was underground rock. And as a lot of that rock went mainstream or died out, a lot of that which is new and exciting has become noise, jazz, techno, or avant-garde stuff. I don’t think it should be seen as us trying to be obscure. (Ross 1997)

Writing about these same trends in the Triangle music scene in 1999, musician Ian Davis identified a variety of influences, including academic composers, modernist theorists, post-modern visual artists, beat-based dance music, experimental rock, and popular culture:

There is a group of local improvisational musicians whose roots are almost entirely planted in the 20th Century writing and compositions of Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis, Pierre Henry, Morton Gould, Wendy Carlos, Terry Riley, Christian

Fennesz, Milton Babbitt, Conrad Schnitzler, and Brian Eno. Their sometimes spare, sometimes enormous realm of sound is compelled by intellectual interests in Marshall McLuhan, Sigmund Freud, Andre Breton, Karl Marx, Jean-Luc Godard, Simone Signoret, Stan Brakhage, Allen Ginsburg, Noam Chomsky, and artists like Rauschenberg, Warhol, Pollock, Schwitters, Duchamp, Ray, and Arbus. There is a world of urban electronic influences too, from music developed for dance through improvisation with electronics, through getting up under the hood of synthesizers and effect boxes and tube amps and other gear scavenged from the world of rock. There is much television, film, video, radio, CDs, vinyl, tape, performance art, both a sense of their content but also a sense of their materials; the plastics, wires, metals, particles, and waves that form all of the stuff of which their music is made. It is a confluential form of improvisation that has more at its disposal than other art music and makes something of it all. (Davis 2000, 20)

Drawing from so many sources, approaches to music making varied wildly as some performers relied more heavily on electronics, others on avant-garde composition, others on extended performance techniques. Many remained active with underground rock music, and very different sounds and performance styles were borne out of these different communities of taste. These scenes consistently cross-pollinated with each other through multiple social networks, connected both by a shared commitment to support creativity that was not grounded in traditional commercial success, and by a growing interest in experimentation of any kind, as long as it was an expression of personal artistry. The diverse but interconnected scenes formed the roots of an experimental and noise music scene that coalesced at Nightlight in the first decade of the 2000s.

Many Triangle bands already created music that highlighted atonality and experimentation. Musician and radio DJ David Harper remembers noticing a difference between the music coming out of Chapel Hill and that originating in other parts of the country when he was in high school in Kinston in the late 1990s: “Something about being in this area brought out this very accessible atonality. Which is really, not so much talking about Superchunk, they were very pop-structured, but bands like Polvo and Archers of Loaf, the made very listenable atonal music” (Harper 2006). College radio stations like WXYC—whose DJ community in the early 1990s included members of local bands Polvo, Spatula, Squirrel Nut

Zipper, Joby's Opinion, Minerva Strain, and many more—championed eclectic musical tastes; by programming genres like free jazz, experimental rock, and electronic music, they helped foster a community of listeners interested in and open to styles and approaches outside of standard rock and roll. Chris Eubank attributes the Triangle's open-minded attitude to the influx of transplants as a result of the universities, "Well, there's a lot of college folks around here, and a lot of folks who I think are just open to new experiences. They may already be fairly cosmopolitan cause they moved here from a big city, or California or something like that. This is a rapidly growing area" (Eubank 2000).

The trajectory of Chuck Johnson's own mid-1990s Chapel Hill based band Spatula, a guitar-and-drums duo that played instrumental music, demonstrates the shift toward experimentation by certain participants in the local music scene. Already non-traditional as an instrumental duo rather than standard four-piece rock band, Spatula leaned away from more traditional indie rock as their career progressed. Drummer Matt Goeke remembers "Chuck was always kind of pushing the bounds; he would play this beautiful guitar lick, and I would want him to repeat it, but he would move on to something else" (Toenes 2007). When cellist Chris Eubank joined the band, Spatula began to incorporate improvisation more intentionally into their compositions and performances. But Spatula was not alone in their experimentation, Johnson remembers.

Early on, I was interested in ethnic musics, drone and things like that and I think all of that sort of worked its way in there. As far as local bands, I think we had the most affinity with Polvo and Anne's [Gomez] early bands like the Blue Green Gods, and early versions of Mind Sirens and things like that. Even before that, there were people like Randy Pelosi and Ian Davis from Micro-East Collective and Chris Eubank, all who were, back in the late 80s early 90s, recording improvised music here. (Johnson 2007)

As Spatula's activity began to taper off, Johnson began performing and recording solo improvised guitar under the name "Ivanovich," releasing his own music and that of like-minded peers on his cassette label, Cirrus Oxide, and booking a monthly showcase of improvised music at the Lizard and Snake. Johnson remembers, "I booked a series—kind of like Recess, I

guess—there was more of a focus on improvised music. It was called ‘Shortwave’ and I did it at the Lizard and Snake. And it was the same thing, once a month.” For Johnson, all of this activity served as an opportunity to build a community:

I had this Ivanovich project and this cassette label and was trying to use Shortwave and the cassette label to bring together community people who were not part of the indie-rock scene but people I knew and who were doing interesting stuff in their bedrooms or whatever. (Johnson 2007)

These monthly performances not only encouraged experimentation by individual musicians, but also created opportunities for musicians from different bands who may not have known each other well to play together. Dave Cantwell remembers performing:

With Chuck and this guy Guillermo, who used to play in Tractor hips, at the Lizard and Snake when I was in Analogue. Chuck set up this improv night and I actually played with those guys. Pretty sure I played another one too, with a buddy of mine who had a guitar, he was getting his MFA in guitar, jazz guitar performance or something, and so I played with him too at the Lizard and Snake around that same time, so we’re talking 1996-1997 I guess. (Cantwell 2007)

During an interview in 2005, Johnson noted that at the time he created Shortwave, “there was already sort of a built-in audience for that kind of music, probably like it is now maybe, 20-30 people.” But as the series became more established, it started to “get beyond a local thing.” Johnson and others began inviting musicians from outside of the Triangle to perform.

Chapel Hill began to appear on the circuit for improvisers. People who booked for the Knitting Factory—like I set up a show for Joe Morris, the guitar player, and Tim Byrne, and those were part of the Shortwave series. So that kind of helped expose new people and inspire local people to do more improvising. (Johnson 2007)

As a result of this activity, adventurous musicians and a receptive audience began to coalesce around improvised music. Dave Cantwell described the period as:

Kind of a heyday for improvised music, to come to this town and play. But there is also a lot of great improvisers that live here. And there is still sort of a tradition of that music around. I’ve been known to dabble in it myself, and I think a lot of rock musicians have too. You know? Kind of with the self-awareness that we don’t really know what we’re doing, but it seems like it might be fun and let’s see what happens. (Cantwell 2007)

Many of those local improvisers were loosely organized by Ian Davis into an ensemble called the Micro-East Collective. Inspired by the Micro Collective—a Mills College ensemble from Oakland, California—the Micro-East took “as its basis the structured improvisations of John Cage, Morton Feldman, John Zorn, and other aleatoric (chancebased) and game theory composers of latter 20th Century art and conceptual music” (Davis 2000, 21). The Micro-East Collective released seven albums of mostly live recordings. Two of these recordings, *Cells* (2001) and *20000307 Peter Kowald Conducts Micro-East Collective @ Cat's Cradle* (2000), were created in collaboration with touring musicians brought to the Triangle by a non-profit organization called the Alliance for Improvised Music (AIM).

Founded by Walt Davis (no relation to Ian Davis) in the late 1990s, AIM was dedicated to “increasing local awareness of improvised music, through presenting performances, running an e-mail list” and a website. The organization was active until 2005, when Davis relocated to New Zealand; its impact on local music was significant. Dave Cantwell remembers, “Walt Davis brought a lot of world-class improvised music to this town. One important thing about Walt was that he is not a musician. He was just a rabid consumer and fan of improvised music. So he could put all his spare time to, instead of playing, contacting these people and setting up these shows” (Cantwell 2007). According to Johnson, “Walt was really creative about finding venues, so we played all kinds of places.” Cantwell remembered,

Sometimes they would be in weird places. Like I went to many AIM shows in people’s houses. And sometimes it was like this kind of rich, NPR, liberal type person’s house, and so they had a nice piano and so they were donating their parlor for this show. A lot of them were also at Ian Davis’s house. He had a lot of shows in his garage. Ian was a drummer, is a drummer, who plays and champions that kind of music. (Cantwell 2007)

Whether from material necessity or from the general obscurity of the music, AIM’s mission reflected a community-based approach to cultural presentation that depended on shared labor and resources that aligned with the politics and values of independent and underground music scenes. AIM reflects on this approach on their website:

After reading our tale of woeful poverty, you might be wondering what we can do. Our primary job is education, promotion, and organization. We'll find the venue, any equipment you might need, and places for you to sleep (and usually dinner). We'll send out a press release, write a preview for our members, put up flyers and we do additional promotion through the website. We have strong connections to the local radio stations, which include two adventurous college stations as well as two "mainstream" jazz stations. We've had reasonable success so far with the local media, including previews and reviews in both the free weeklies and the major daily newspaper. (AIM 2003)

This statement connects with multiple points in Chris Eubank's description of touring with punk bands in the 1980s:

If it was a punk rock group—if it was active politically, or playing one of the styles within the broad range of stuff that was considered to be punk at the time, which was really pretty inclusive—then there were a lot of people who would help out, in terms of setting up shows, putting the band up—folks who did zines and would write about the groups and do interviews and stuff like that. It didn't seem to be terribly hard to book tours at the time. Cause, you know they weren't all at nightclubs. They were wherever. People who rent halls, or there would be shows at people's houses . . . stuff like that. (Eubank 2000)

Like underground rock music scenes of the 1980s, the improvised music scene depended on networks of committed individuals to host and feed musicians at private homes, to promote shows in local print media and through WXYC and WXDU, and most importantly to attend the performances. Musicians kept 100% of the door. While total ticket sales could be slim (due to relatively small audiences, because of the esoteric nature of the music, performances were opportunities for fans to acquire the often difficult-to-find recordings that touring musicians brought to sell in order to make the event financially worthwhile. According to Johnson,

With the improvised scene back then, it was not venue-centered—it was person-centered. It's probably still that way. Each city had a person that puts on shows and that person's name and number will get out there. And this was started in the 80s and 90s so before email was even a big part of the process. And then Walt stepped in, because one thing I was unable to do was guarantee people money. Then Walt came to the area and started AIM up and that was great, because he had resources that I didn't have. (Johnson 2007)

Even with Davis's experience, knowledge, and resources, however, the improvised music scene in the Triangle depended on connections to music scenes in other towns and cities that

extended far beyond the Triangle. These interlocal networks created performance opportunities for national touring musicians that would have otherwise been impossible; they also helped foster personal relationships between musicians and audiences in smaller towns and cities, potentially creating more opportunities for local and regional artists. AIM points to these interlocal networks as a community value directly connected to its creative vision:

So the upshot of all this is that we are primarily interested in musicians who are also looking to build an audience through independent, "grass roots" means. There are a string of similar presenting organizations spread around the Southeast and a driving tour of these cities is very possible which can make the trip worthwhile. Let us know what it will honestly take to get you here and we'll do everything possible to make that happen. (AIM 2003)

AIM's efforts at building community also included providing opportunities for local musicians to collaborate with visiting artists, through workshops and performances. Johnson remembers, "Walt Davis would help us out, when he would bring in big name improvisers and get the Micro-East involved. Which would be great for us, because it would basically turn into a workshop for us. I got to play and do workshops with Peter Kowald and Frank Gratkowski and that was huge for me" (Johnson 2007).

Even though the improvisational music scene described above was community centered, it was often serious and academic in approach and presentation. According to Johnson, "That was an improvised music scene, and the people coming to see it were mostly musicians, and it just had a different air about it, music for musicians" (Johnson 2007). In contrast, Raleigh's playfully experimental Wifflefist Collective grew out of a throw-everything-at-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks approach to sound and performance. Founded in 1992 by NC State University students Michael Pilmer and Skip Elsheimer, and soon joined by Ian Shannon and David Jordan (who would later go on to found the band Cantwell Gomez & Jordan), Wifflefist was a "mish-mash of music, avant-garde performance art, just about anything" (Edgers 1999). According to collective member Rich Misenheimer:

We all liked to make music where we could grab sound from various places, whether it was a synthesizer drum machine or sounds from film strips. We weren't terribly

interested in the music that was getting played on the radio, and the local scene at the time was very healthy, but it was very guitar based. We wanted to have a sense of humor, to look at the absurdity of our consumer culture and advertising. We all liked to throw that into a blender and spit it back out at people. (Edgers 1999)

Not entirely unlike the Micro-East Collective described above in its shifting and expansive membership, the Wifflefist vision drew from a broader artistic palette and included a number of different “bands” with different approaches to sound making and songcraft that encouraged an equally expansive sonic palette. Chris Eubank remembers the Wifflefist group Repetophile as “the most loosely organized of any of the things. Basically, it involved anybody who wanted to come make noise. If you had tape loops already, you could come with a turntable and some records and loop them. Essentially, do anything” (Eubank 2000). While the improvisational music scene centered around AIM tended toward avant-garde jazz and electro-acoustic improvisation, Wifflefist entities experimented with sampling and remixing audio and visual media products of popular culture through cut-up techniques and collage, thematic sound and image installations, elaborate theatrical performances (like a twisted version of Hee Haw mashed up with the Lawrence Welk Show that involved over 30 performers), and electronic dance tracks.

Wifflefist’s sonic diversity is documented on a few compilations and releases on the collective’s Wifflefist label. The CD compilation *Scattered and Smothered* (Wifflefist 1995) features the plunderphonics of Silica Gel, the turntablism of Laso Halo, the twisted rock of groups Orifice and Krapper Keeper, and the electro-acoustic improvisation of Polycarp. While Wifflefist took a different approach to experimentation than AIM and Micro-East, recordings like the *Scattered and Smothered* disc document significant crossover between the two groups. Micro-East’s Ian Davis, for instance, engineered tracks by Bicentennial Quarters, with whom Davis also performed; Bicentennial Quarters also included Davis’s bandmate Chris Eubank and Walker Martin, Chuck Johnson’s collaborator in the improvisational rock group Gloatdragon. Polycarp, in turn, included David Jordan, a regular Micro-East performer.

Toward the end of the 1990s, when the Wifflefist Collective began to dissipate as members went their separate ways, Keenan McDonald—a musician and graduate student in Communications at UNC-Chapel Hill—founded the Transmissions Festival. Organized and produced along with Julie Shapiro, Ethan Clauset and a number of other volunteers, Transmissions 001 occurred July 10-12, 1998, at the local sports bar Bub O'Malley's. Though hastily arranged after other venues fell through at the last minute, the festival ended up featuring improvised music and art mostly from the southeastern United States (Meyer 2001). Johnson remembers that "the festival changed a lot, and the first year was more of a space-rock or drone-rock scene," with bands like Virginia-based Pelt, Atlanta-based free jazz ensemble Gold Sparkle Band, Chicago's deconstructed rock band Storm and Stress, psychedelic space-rock band The Azusa Plane, and Chuck Johnson's Ivanovitch project. It also featured collaborations between musicians akin to the Shortwave series, like Greensboro's Eugene Chadborne improvising with a quartet of local musicians and short-lived collaborations like Chuck Johnson and then-graduate student in music composition marc faris (CD Transmissions 001). The inaugural festival also featured sound installations and short film and video screenings. Committed to exploring the relationship between art and contemporary technology, the organizers streamed all the performances over the internet using a single dial-up connection (Margasak 2001).

McDonald, along with Shapiro and Clauset, would go on to produce three more Transmission Festivals as co-organizers, two more in Chapel Hill, and a final event in 2001 in Chicago where the three had relocated. Each year featured performers that drifted further away from rock music performance and instrumentation and toward electronic experimentation using computers or other means of performance. While the main events in the festival's second and third years moved to the Cat's Cradle, the organizers continued to program events at non-traditional venues like record stores and even an optometrist's office. Subsequent performances also included more international artists, including Rafael Toral of Portugal,

Austrian performers Peter Rehberg and Christian Fennesz, and German composer Marcus Schmickler.

Transmissions quickly became recognized as “one of the most cutting-edge electronic and experimental music festivals in the country,” according to the *Chicago Reader* (Margasak 2001). Even with the active experimental underground music scenes described above, however, the uniqueness of the booking and performances did not necessarily translate to large audiences. Johnson remembers, “as far as the local involvement with the festival, anything like that, once you try to make it an international thing, it’s like some people are going to be put off or alienated by it. But it wasn’t there for the larger local community. She wanted to do a particular thing, and she did it. It was expensive—I think that was one gripe people had, and it was just music that not many local people were that into” (Johnson 2007). Although short lived and with a small footprint, Transmissions left a lasting mark by further establishing an international reputation for Chapel Hill as a welcoming space for adventurous and challenging music as well as the more standard indie rock.

Ethan Clauset returned to Chapel Hill in 2003 and has remained involved with underground music as a deejay, musician, and small business owner. He and his partner Charlie Hearon opened independent record store, All Day Records, in Carrboro in 2010; the two of them would go on to become owners of Nightlight in 2013. Outside of his role as an organizer of Transmissions, Clauset was connected to another cluster of Chapel Hill underground musical activity that directly led to the creation of Nightlight. With a growing interest in electronic dance music in the late 1990s, Clauset:

got a pair of Technics . . . and convinced Webslingers [an internet company where he worked] to buy a PA in exchange for promotion on flyers. He began rocking house parties and started the sample-based band Zuerichten. Usually as a sampler and turntablist, sometimes dabbling in textural guitar and keyboard.” (Howe 2010)

Zuerichten sometimes included Clauset’s coworker T. Mattison Hicks (Troy Hicks) and WXYC DJ and Nightlight co-founder Isaac Trogden.

At the same time that Clauset was playing with Zeurichten, he, Trogden, and some other WXYC DJs and Webslinger staff also created a monthly event called Lingual. The event presented itself as having

a focus on experimental electronics. DJ's and live performers will craft soundscapes utilizing turntables, computers, samplers, and drum machines. In addition, video artists will present live computer generated visuals and video art cut-ups. The purpose of the night is to create an immersive environment that engages the spectator on multiple levels and provides an outlet for freeform musical expression. We hope to expose participants to the more unconventional forms of electronic music, ranging from minimal techno to serene ambience to atmospheric dub. This event is *not* a rave or traditional club night. Come prepared to chill - blankets, pillows, etc. welcome. (Phillips 1999)

In a manner analogous to so many local bands, Lingual dissolved when organizers Clauset and video artist Giles Hendrix moved out of state. Soon after, in January 2001, Trogden, along with DJs Reynolds Richter, Darren Hunnicutt, and others, transitioned Lingual into a more dance-oriented event and crew called Dyssembler, self-described as: "a monthly showcase of new and interesting musics and art";" and "toytown's electro monthly returns the favor, bringing you more bounce than the mattress outlet at only a fraction of the cost!" (Trogden 2001). The crew of mostly WXYC-affiliated DJs programmed regular dance parties at Henry's Bistro, a bar next door to Skylight Exchange, and at other venues around the Triangle. Dyssembler also hosted touring DJs, live-hardware techno artists, and experimental electronic musicians like Extreme Animals, Kevin Blechdom, and Jay Haze.

While Dyssembler events occurred at least monthly at established bars like Henry's and at venues like Go! Room 4, Dyssembler-adjacent events were just as likely to occur at house parties, where they intersected with the underground rock and punk music scenes. House shows have always been vital for sustaining underground music by providing spaces for artists who struggle with booking in traditional venues and for those who prefer to perform in a community-oriented space with no age restrictions or other issues related to being in a nightclub that sells alcohol. Both of these factors played into musician and houseshow promoter Dave Laney's motivation for hosting performances. In a thread on listserv alt.music.chapel-hill about

an upcoming show at the “Spyhouse,” he argued that house shows were necessary because the predominant music culture in Chapel Hill proved inconsistent with the characteristics he and his friends/roommates most valued in a music scene:

I moved here four years ago and was driven insane by the surplus of bad bar rock and the deficiency of truly independent music (what, nowadays, most would call DIY punk, regardless of the more specific indy/punk/emo classifications). I did shows in the previous town I lived in and began to do them with the help of my roommates on columbia street. Since then we've done a ton of shows wherever we've lived or could have them. The turn out isn't always great, but the bands almost always have a good time, and they almost never make under \$30. Pretty decent considering we'd often do up to four touring bands and people in this town have a hard time giving money unless they get a stamp on their hand. (Laney 1998)

Flyers and show listings in the Punks on Paper Archive of North Carolina Punk and Hardcore document many different house venues in Durham and Chapel Hill during this period, as well as community spaces like the Salaam Cultural Center and St. Joseph's Cultural Center in Durham, the Hillsborough Road Co-op in Carrboro, and even the auditorium at Carrboro Elementary, which hosted a show by the Chicago band Shellac, along with local group Bicentennial Quarters and Greensboro's Sclix. Chapel Hill punk also briefly found a home at a short-lived art space called The Turning Point. Tucked behind a carwash at the border between Chapel Hill and Carrboro, Turning Point was opened by Brian Felstein, who did not intend it to be exclusively a music venue, but:

wanted a space where anyone could do anything they wanted as long as they didn't hurt anyone else. he mainly envisioned people doing creative things there. anyway, he was one of the most persistently idealistic people i have ever met. (Linn 1995)

Underground scenes are necessarily creative when it comes to finding spaces for creative activity, but the irregularity of performances, threat of law enforcement intervention, and dependence on committed individuals with limited resources means house show venues have short lifespans that limit opportunities for social interaction.

House shows can only reach a limited number of people. Advertising an address on a publicly distributed flier or posting on social media, after all, can attract unwanted attention from

the authorities. Consequently, house shows tend to be advertised through word of mouth and organized through close interpersonal social networks; as such, they provide spaces where an underground scene can feel especially cohesive, but also especially exclusive. Even musicians like Dave Cantwell, who performed at least twice with Cantwell Gomez & Jordan at a relatively well-known house show venue on Mallette Street in downtown Chapel Hill, commented, “it was so esoteric, for me, that even though I would have liked to have gone to a lot of shows there, I just didn’t know about it for whatever reason; I was out of the loop” (Cantwell 2007). Dave Laney recognizes these challenges, but also reflects on house shows’ importance for bands that play them and for their potential to create community:

so basically we just have to try to do the best we can with what we have. i know there are massive problems with house shows. i also know there are advantages which weigh them out. that's why bands still tour the country playing houses. and that's why people still get psyched about them. i tend to think it's going ok, and i'm pretty certain you do too. Your concerns and criticism is valid, though inescapable through the public/private social stigma, which is a problem with HOUSE SHOWS, not any specific house doing shows. it's just something we have to stomach and hope that someone who came to our last show will bring a friend to this one, and that friend another next show. we almost always get calls from greensboro and wilmington, so somehow stuff does tend to get around. (Laney 1998)

Precisely because house shows are intentionally out of the loop of established commercial networks and institutions, and because of the intimate and unique environment they offer, many participants in underground scenes remember their performances as especially significant. Born out of a spirit of collaboration, house shows represent a model for creative activity that values community support for personal artistry and experimentation over commercial gain.

Most house shows are one-time events, the result of some friends or friends of friends getting together to host a performance. Dave Cantwell points to the fleeting nature of these events when speaking of his band Analogue, which often performed at the venue the Lizard & Snake, but also played “various weird house parties and you know the kinds of places people play when they’re in bands that no one has heard of outside of the area” (Cantwell 2007). Many

of these “weird house parties” happened at houses lived in by musicians or others who were involved in music; some of these, in turn, became regular house show sites until people moved out or law enforcement permanently shut down the unauthorized venue. Even regular house show venues are often poorly documented; a few become part of oral history in a music scene.¹ Most of these house venues featured a particular genre of underground rock, folk, punk, hardcore, experimental music, or noise, depending on the residents. With connections to WXYC, the Mallette St. house venue seems to have presented performances across genres as well as regular dance parties.² Like so many alternative spaces, Mallette St. eventually succumbed to the changes in local real estate development, to the resident organizers moving away, and to pressures from the neighbors. A few months later, Trogden and Ford opened Nightlight.

The shuttering of such a reliable and centrally located space like Mallette St. created a void for the active music and dance scenes in Chapel Hill that depended on it. While neither Trogden or Ford were residents of Mallette St., Dave Cantwell draws a direct line from Mallette St.’s closure to Nightlight’s opening:

I think it’s fair to say that Nightlight fills the hole that was left when Mallette St. was shut down, because a lot of bands played there. I mean it closed down and Nightlight opened and I realized it was all the same people, and I was like, “well this must be because Mallette St. shut down.” (Cantwell 2007)

Certainly bands that might have played at Mallette St. or another house show venues found a welcome home at Nightlight, a space that offered some security from law enforcement and unfriendly landlords, but that felt more intimate than other clubs, bars, and dedicated

¹ A few well remembered house show venues in the Triangle include *Blind Boy* zine house, GSS House and the Thrashitorium, Ft. Awkward, Meadows of Dan, Cathedral II, Pine Haus, Chateau Moby Dick;

² Occasionally a house show venue might be known by its location; this was the case, for example, with Mallette St., which hosted basement shows and dance parties for much of the late 1990s until at least late 2002

performance venues. Cantwell acknowledged the difference later in our conversation, though he still struggled where to place Nightlight as a business.

It's kind of a grey area between a real hole-in-the-wall, house party, and a more structured place like the 506. Or even the Lizard and Snake. So that low level of formality really appeals to me. You know, the stage is just as high as a sidewalk curb. That has its own problems too, I mean if something goes wrong, it's up to you to solve that problem. If something does sound funny, it's on you, you have to deal with it. There is a demand for that kind of music, and that kind of venue, and I know it wasn't put there so people could spend money or make money, but it's there to satisfy that demand. That artistic demand. I would put it kind of on the fringe, but obviously a lot of people know about it and keep it up and running. It's not so esoteric that people that need to find out about it can't. With a place like a party house, there can be a kind of disconnect between people who should be there, want to be there, but just don't know about it because they don't have access to it. (Cantwell 2007)

Chuck Johnson also says that Nightlight elicits a feeling similar to house shows; and like Cantwell, he sees it as open to a broader group of the Triangle population: "Nightlight feels like you are in someone's—not someone's home, but more like a community center, where there is also going to be music happening" (Johnson 2007).

As a point of access to artistic activity created by individuals with a radical commitment to experimentation and a history of building community around these values, the gray area of Nightlight became a space with the potential to support a broad spectrum of creative expression. The stability of a licensed venue created increased awareness of performances as well as opportunities for members of different social networks and scenes to interact in new ways. A survey of performances from 2003-2007 demonstrates that many different music and art communities intersected at Nightlight (including the indie-rock scene), but it was most successful in bringing the experimental, electronic, and underground rock music scenes together in ways that had previously been unavailable. Reflecting on the formation of this particular music scene and its constituent parts with which the Nightlight became so deeply connected, Charlie St. Clair—a dancer, musician, and former Nightlight booking agent—wrote:

The club was there in part to help be a safe landing pad for events that wouldn't attract much of the established local club-going community from the old school that had been

steeped in love of the town's legends. Nightlight is still more apt than any other club in town to infuse the schedule with an emulsification of new and dissonant local acts (Clang Quartet; Cantwell, Gomez & Jordan; In the Year of the Pig; Plane Crash; Southern Man; Bla-Bla Wigout), overwhelming crowd favorites (Extreme Animals, Haunted House, Des Ark), touring underground variety (Costes, Jack Rose, Wolf Eyes, Animal Collective, Excepter, Jackie-O-Motherfucker, Novamen, Vialka, Cerberus Shoal, The Psychic Paramount, Usaisamonster, Z'EV, Bloodyminded, Johnny Corndawg, Charalambides, Ovo, Volcano the Bear, Castanets, Mouthus, So On), community dance jams (Dyssembler, Frequenc), crazed improv (Anything Walt Davis Organized, George Steeltie Ensemble, Frank Gratkowski, Boyzone), noise (No Future Fest, Rotten Milk, Kevin Shields, Buddy Ship), and the rest of the entire weirdo art community of the world that seems to pulse and swell through dank magnetic spots like Knoxville's Pilot Light or the defunct Grandma's House in Oakland, California. Equally likely were shows organized by the heads of new local labels like Trecky Records or Broken Fader Cartel, allies who provide support and deserve rewards, perhaps some kind of trophy fashioned from empty Pabst bottles. And, of course, perhaps one of the most important roles played by Nightlight was being a venue where new local bands (often younger) could come and play to an audience with open arms and little pressure. (St. Clair 2008)

Through the list above, we can trace roots of a Nightlight scene back to the Triangle's vibrant improvisational scene, the experimental music of Transmissions, local electronic dance crews, and the DIY underground rock network of house shows. Connected through overlapping social networks of individuals that valued experimentation, these different strains of the Triangle music scene convened at Nightlight and created a space to support artistry born of a comparable spirit.

As an example of the kinds of performances that grew out of a Nightlight music scene, Chapter 4 describes a semi-regular event at Nightlight called Recess, an improvisational and experimental music series with different performers each time that ran from 2003 until 2007. Chapter 5 will consider the ways that Nightlight supports a scene where the process of tradition is driven by experimentation of any kind—not bound by genre, commerce, or stylistic convention—and by community support for personal expression.

CHAPTER 4: RECESS

August 1, 2003

Recess IV tonight. I have not yet attended one of these “experimental/avant-garde” nights and tonight I really should go home, but since returning to town this summer I have been attending shows three or four times a week. Working at the radio station, I can get a deejay pass to one or two per week, limiting the financial strain, and I won’t be able to keep up once school starts again; so I will enjoy it while I can. Descriptions of Recess events in email promotions thus far intimidated me because of the high level of knowledge about musicians and experience with local music required to interpret the messages. For example, Isaac Trogden’s posting for tonight’s show reads:

#4 will freak you out more than ever w/: Randy Ward + Chuck Johnson / Dave Bjorkback, Sandra Covin, Jazz Brunch (cantwell, gomez, irving), Chris Eubank + Jason Bivins . \$5 - to recap, this is our monthly locals improv freak-the-fuck out. this month's lineup ties together member of Idyll Swords, Protean Spook, Torch Marauder, Rebel Carload Records, Cantwell, Gomez, MEC, & fucking Unstable Ensemble . . . ouch! attend, or suck forever. (Grady 2003)

When I first saw the description on the schedule, it mystified me. I knew Idyll Swords from my old college radio station days, vaguely remembered the Unstable Ensemble, and experienced Cantwell Gomez & Jordan at the first Nightlight show, but everything else drew a blank. Attempting to understand this description after living in the Triangle for a year confirms how very little I knew about the local music scene. A recent event, however, not only made this message clearer, but also inspired me to attend lest I miss out on a potentially transcendent musical experience.

Walking down the alley tonight, I think back to two weeks ago when I attended a party with Kelly Kress and a friend, Chris Toenes, a local music reporter. They promised music

performances and a special screening of an unfinished documentary film about the legendary rock and roll band Dead Moon. Having lamented to Kelly about the lack of “house shows” in the past, the possibility of seeing a concert at a home, accompanied by people in a social network of a community that supported performances at atypical venues excited me.

We drove fifteen minutes out of town and pulled up next to a house surrounded by large open fields. People wandered from the house where food was prepared down a small hill with a flatbed truck acting as a small stage. A large custom cabinet and a few instruments sat on the truck bed and Kelly informed me that a musician named Randy Ward, a member of the Family Dollar Pharaohs and Metal Flake Mother, two popular bands from the nineties, now performed as the one-man band Protean Spook. Sadly, the threat of rain prevented the bands from performing on the truck, but we sat in the field and waited for dark and the movie screening on the porch. As the sun began to set, a soft breeze blew across the field and cooled the air. An incredibly loud chorus of frogs from a pond at the bottom of the hill provided the music while two men, Randy Ward and Chuck Johnson, set up electronic equipment on card tables in the center of the open field and arranged four large monitor speakers in points around the field distanced about forty feet apart. Johnson performed with the band Spatula in the nineties and currently plays with Idyll Swords, Shark Quest, and numerous solo projects. Kelly introduced me to Crowmeat Bob—a saxophonist and guitar player—who informed us they would be performing a composition in quadraphonic sound.

In the growing twilight, the two men adjusted an assortment of electronic equipment—four-track tape machines, oscillators, effects pedals, microphones, small mixing boards, and a couple of homemade stringed instruments. With the sound of the frogs to my right, I was suddenly conscious of sounds also coming from my left toward the house, then behind me, then in front. Sounds of a street and music from another country, India possibly, swirled into the mix with gentle electronic pulses. Discerning the ambient sound of the environment from the constructed sounds of the musicians emitting from the speakers became increasingly difficult.

We sat transfixed for the next half of an hour as the stars emerged overhead, encircled in the organic and beautiful sound environment. I was stunned. The movie, *Unknown Passage: The Dead Moon Story* by Jason Summers and Kate Fix was equally amazing. I returned home that night with an incredible feeling. I knew an enormous wealth of local talent gurgled just beneath the surface of my awareness and I had seen but a portion of it that night. Looking back at the Recess email, my perspective had changed. Instead of intimidation, my newfound knowledge confirmed what I felt at that first show, that Nightlight could be an incredible resource to learn about and experience the local music scene.

Walking up the alley tonight, memories of this experience circle around my brain. The night starts slowly. By 10:30 only a few people have trickled in and once again I wander around alone and examine the used books in the “Folklore/Mythology” section. Finally, the show starts. Sets are short; fifteen to twenty minutes. First is a young woman, Sandra Covin, who performs as Farblondejet. She sits on the edge of the drum riser and plays a hypnotic short song of looping melodies reminiscent of early John Fahey with guitar and small amplifier. Dave Bjorkback follows her playing on a drum kit. Kelly informs me he also performs as The Torch Marauder, a blue faced superhero character who plays rock music accompanied by video recordings of himself on other instruments in an elaborate stage play. Solo on the drums tonight, he moves from heavy rock drumming to light jazz, steady rhythms emerging and disappearing. After a few minutes Bjorkback steps out in front of the kit and takes the microphone. Singing acapella, his vocal range is huge, from barely a whisper in a light falsetto to loud operatic tenor. The lyrics and style remind me of a seventies hard rock singer, but with short hair, dark t-shirt, and jeans, he does not look the part. It comes as no surprise he also performs with eighties metal revivalists Razzle.

Jazz Brunch comes up next. Drummer Scotty Irving also performs percussive noise music as Clang Quartet. I recently saw a brief documentary about him called *Armor of God*, produced by Jim Haverkamp and Brett Ingram. Using homemade instruments, Irving performs

cacophonous noise improvisation inspired by his devotion to Christianity. Tonight he plays a straight drum kit, as he did during his time with Greensboro band Geezer Lake, one of the heavier and experimental bands from the nineties rock scene. Cantwell plays the guitar tonight and Gomez plays only tenor saxophone. The improvisation slips into 4/4 rock on occasion, but is primarily composed of choppy, squealed feedback, honking, squeaky saxophone, and hard drumming. The sounds are a bit abrasive for my current mood, particularly following the first two performances, but the set is short and I do not lose interest.

Blood Vessels of the Eye, featuring two locally renowned improvisers, Ian Davis—drummer with numerous ensembles and founder of the Micro-East Collective and Umbrella Records—and Jason Bivins—guitarist with as many ensembles, including The Unstable Ensemble, also with Ian Davis—perform next. They regularly perform together in numerous groups and together as a duo. Davis uses a small jazz drum kit, augmenting the two cymbals, kick, and snare with assorted hand-held percussion. He does not hit the drums as much as brush them and push them. He bows the cymbals creating eerie tones. If there is a regular meter, it eludes me. Davis also uses a violin bow on his guitar. Using prepared guitar techniques—inserting objects between the strings and neck—the guitar lies flat in his lap as he manipulates the tone knob and taps the guitar pick up. The sounds bubble and whirl and squeak from his amplifier and the dialogue between the sounds of the two musicians is like an alien conversation. Sitting only a few feet apart, they rarely look at one another, completely immersed in their world of sound.

My attempts to record this evening's performances with my minidisk have been largely thwarted due to lack of preparedness. As a rule, I prefer to enjoy the show first and document second, but I especially wanted to record tonight's performance to demonstrate to other friends and acquaintances the different kinds of interesting musical happenings in Chapel Hill. Unfortunately, I did not have enough battery power, causing the recorder to shut off repeatedly when I was not looking. Finally, a man in his early thirties with an enormous duffel bag offered

me a battery out of his camera. Visiting a sister in town, he had wandered in and although he tells me that the music is weird, he sticks around and sits in the booth with me and drinks beer.

Johnson and Ward busy themselves strategically arranging their speakers around the venue and I ponder where to set my microphone for the best “surround sound” effect. While it was slightly different from the time in the field, the performance was still astounding. I still do not know if they were sampling environmental sounds of the frogs and crickets and remixing them back into their machines, but I imagined it. Here my ears tuned in closer to the field recordings: snippets of street hawkers and shoppers debating in another language, strange instruments that again take me to India or the Middle East, pure tones from Ward’s homemade diddly bow/xylophone, and the spatial confusion as sounds swirl around the space, come to rest, and move again. I sneak a glimpse at the “quadraphonic mixer,” a small box with a rotating handle and a black round knob (is it an eight ball?) that looks a bit like an old coffee grinder. Apparently, Mr. Ward is an accomplished circuit bender; he takes toys, old keyboards, and anything else that makes sound and alters their electronic circuits to make completely different sounds. Description fails the extraordinary nature of this music. I leave with the sense I have been let in on a secret, but really nothing was hidden.

CHAPTER 5: Nightlight and tradition

The temptation is strong to categorize changes in cultural trends, tastes, and practices—like those that identify a music scene—as disruptions or breaks with previous formations. As sounds and styles become associated with a particular time, place, or social movement, the reality of their constantly shifting relationships to their creators can get lost. In the history of Triangle music scenes presented thus far, the shift toward improvisation and experimentation in performance during the 1990s can be interpreted as a dramatic turn away from “traditions” of regional indie rock and its perceived commercialization and popularity. Tradition, “as a process of cultural construction,” however, frees history from an “obsession with rupture, . . . from the need to segment time periods” and brings to the forefront the “massive fact of continuity” (Glassie 1995, 398). As a site of emergent cultural practice where a “mad convergence of different styles” appears chaotic, underground scenes depend on processes of continuous negotiation and selection by individuals interacting as part of the community. From this perspective, a music scene at Nightlight embodies and enables tradition that embraces discontinuity and celebrates change. As an institution founded with a spirit that rebuffs relying on fixed forms as a condition of creation, Nightlight offers a space to observe a process of tradition that may appear atypical, but reflects the lived experience of scene participants. Relying on the perspectives and voices of my consultants, this chapter considers how a tradition of experimentation is learned and communicated through performance and social interaction within a music scene.

Considering the history of improvisational music in the Triangle, the Recess series described in Chapter 4 would appear to be an immediate successor to the Shortwave series presented by Chuck Johnson at the Lizard & Snake almost ten years earlier. This narrative is

consistent with a pre-1980 “prevailing conception of tradition, both in common sense and in social theory,” that “has envisioned an isolable body or core of unchanging traits handed down from the past” (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 286), but when Robert Biggers first imagined Recess, his inspiration was a festival of music in New York City.

I went to this club called Tonic to see this two-night festival of Erstwhile Records. Are you familiar with that stuff? It gets called electro-acoustic improvisation. And it's like, I'm trying to think of the big names, Keith Rowe? Table-top guitar, and um, this no-input mixing board guy, which tons of people are doing now, but it felt new to me, his name is Takahashi Nakamura, I think. Anyway, a bunch of people like that. I don't know why but I started to get into that stuff. So I went up there and saw it, and was like, blown away by it and, um, inspired by it, as a . . . as like an event. I came back and I kind of thought, I know there's people that do this kind of stuff. And the other thing that was happening was that Coldsides was going on, but there would always be these ideas that I would get, or Zeke and I would get, that would be, like, “Oh it would be cool to do, like, this thing or that,” you know, “we're not going to turn this into a song—this is like an idea. It would be cool to just, do this at a show, but we're not going to book that show at Go, you know, because, I mean we could, but” You know, because of it being more like a conventional-type place. (Biggers 2007)

It is possible that Biggers had heard of the Shortwave series, but it seems unlikely, as at the time that series was active he was a college student in Greensboro playing in indie-rock bands that sounded “a lot closer to, like, poppy punk music that's been deconstructed. And I was coming at it from like the Chicago bands, I guess” (Biggers 2007). But his personal tastes oriented more towards free jazz, avant-garde composition, and improvisational music. Talking about his early bands, Biggers notes, “It was not the kind of music I was listening to, and it ended up never being the kind of music I was listening to, like, stylistically. But I liked it and I liked doing it” (Biggers 2007).

An attempt to stretch out creatively with his band Coldsides during a sampler-based performance at Go! was not well received by an audience hoping to see a more traditional rock band (“people at the end kind of like, laughed, literally.” [Biggers 2007]), but Biggers was not deterred. After Nightlight opened and he noticed the space was “booking neat shows,” he thought,

there are tons of people like Cantwell and Bjorkback, and um, whoever; there's tons of people who do this weird kind of stuff. And I figured there would also be people that

wanted to do stuff that wasn't what their band did. Especially if there was this thing that was there for it. (Biggers 2007)

While a goal of Recess was to create a space for musicians to share ideas that may not be fully formed, a designated space that encouraged experimentation for an audience of listeners whose tastes reached beyond independent rock and punk, Biggers believes his motivation to be at least partially selfish:

I think it sort of got to be a little bit of a community-oriented thing, but it definitely wasn't that in my—I mean it wasn't not that—I just mean that it was a little bit self-serving. I wanted to be able to play a set of this one idea that I had that lasts 15 minutes. And then that'll be it, you know? Or I wanted to just be able to do a show of something that I haven't got a whole set worth of material, or feel like I'm gonna form a band around, or et cetera. And also there's the thing that happened when I went to that show up in New York—it's like, I want to be able to see this stuff regularly. (Biggers 2007)

At the same time, he specifically points to Nightlight and the broader community as integral to the event's origin, saying:

I thought it would be great at the Nightlight, because, I mean, I think I would not have come up with the idea without the Nightlight in existence, I think that inspired it too, because you know, like Nightlight is so casual, for the audience. And knowing Isaac—I feel like I can propose this idea to him and he'll probably be really excited about it. (Biggers 2007)

While there is no direct lineage from Shortwave to Recess, the common origin stories and the commonalities between events—an individual looking to express themselves outside of the dominant cultural norm recognizes persons in their networks with similar desires and, through social interaction, they create the opportunities to do so—point to a different understanding of tradition than the “dominant social-scientific understanding of tradition . . . built upon a naturalistic metaphor” (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 286). Biggers had attended performances organized by Walt Davis and AIM, and his bands had played a number of house shows, including the house on Mallette St. Many performers at Recess events were aware of, and had participated in, the Shortwave events, including organizer Chuck Johnson, Chris Eubank, Anne Gomez, Jason Bivins, and Dave Cantwell. Both events encouraged musicians to use the tools of rock music in new and different ways or even to abandon them altogether using

extended techniques, feedback, altered electronics, synthesizers, pedals, improvisation, alternative song structures, and whatever anyone could imagine. Through these connections, and certainly many others, both clear and crooked, sonic and social, Recess was deeply connected to the Triangle experimental underground music scene, and came to reinforce Nightlight's connection to the same.

Looking closely at Recess, the role of tradition may not be immediately apparent. But by examining the different dynamics through which tradition influences the music scene at Nightlight, our understanding of its function emerges. Glassie observed,

Artists who merge preservation and experimentation in performance guide folklorists into understanding tradition as a dimension within every creative act. In one dynamic, the whole is repeated. In another, entities are dismembered and essences are preserved. In a third, what is preserved is a general tone, a sound, a look, a certain spirit. (1995, 108)

As participants move into, out of, or through scenes in the Triangle, and as styles, performance practices and tastes shift, the "tone," the "certain spirit," is an important category through which identity and meaning is "symbolically constituted" (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 287). At Recess, and more broadly at Nightlight, creative activities embody a spirit of community built around experimentation. Folklorists often look for tradition in objects or texts or melodies passed down from generation to generation. The traditional is identified by practitioners committed to a constructed authenticity dependent on repetition and historical accuracy determined in the context of performance for a particular audience. At Nightlight, however, the traditional is not limited by adherence to any particular set of practices or performative norms. A shared understanding of what constitutes experimentation develops through performance, changing over time while preserving a tone of radical acceptance.

Anne Gomez locates this understanding in mutual appreciation for certain kinds of sound:

So there is something about playing music and listening to music that draws people together. And some people like certain kinds of—some people, the stuff that plays at the Nightlight they would really want no part at all. But for the people who do like that kind of

music—you can call it a scene community or whatever—but that seems to be the center of it, that we all kind of like this thing that’s a little bit weird. It’s a little out of the mainstream, and that’s a commonality. It really doesn’t matter so much, even though it’s mostly a male scene; it’s not like women are unwelcome there or anything like that. Mostly a white scene, but not like people of color are unwelcome either. It mostly has to do with people liking this really indefinable thing about certain kinds of sounds that are put together, and wanting to share them with each other. (Gomez 2007)

Gomez does not specify timbres, rhythms, or other stylistic markers associated with any particular genre (i.e., the “normal” identifiers of “tradition”); instead she highlights the context of sound creation: within a community with a history of support for music with no commercial intent.

I just don’t like pigeonholing stuff. I think that kills it. Kind of whenever people—if someone asks me to have a talk about the Chapel Hill scene or Durham scene, it’s just a bunch of people making music who aren’t necessarily ever thinking they are going to make any kind of money from it, and who are very supportive of each other; and also a very supportive community of small clubs and stuff like that without too much trouble. And so it’s been like that since before I even got here in 1987, because I know there was a whole other generation of bands before that. And I think trying to say anything else about it besides “that” doesn’t mean anything. So the kind of music is going to change and the clubs are going to change, but there has consistently been a very large concentration of musicians and bands in this area—and I think especially WXDU and WXYC help that a lot. But there’s a huge concentration, in terms of the population, how many musicians live here. Compared to a lot of other places, people are really nice and very supportive of one another. (Gomez 2007)

As individuals select which sounds and which practices fit those categories—weird, good, “out of the mainstream”—negotiated through performance, an experimental music scene at Nightlight comes into view. Williams (1977) and Glassie (1995) identify this process of selection as tradition.

Culture and tradition are alike in that they are constructed by individuals and in that they are constructed differently by people who, as a consequence of interaction within different environments, develop ways that, being shared to a degree of mutual comprehension, serve to draw them together, while distinguishing them from others. (Glassie 1995, 180)

Other than what Trogden described as “alternative to the alternative: old-guard indie music” (Toenes 2007), no one genre or sound has dominated at Nightlight. Instead, an underground scene at Nightlight is drawn together through performances that reflect the

community's commitment to experimentation. Performances at Nightlight encompass a vast range of instrumentation, genres, sounds, and physicality on a single bill. A listener might experience abstract electronic artists performing controlled improvised music on prepared guitar; a synthesizer-fronted three-piece rock band; a solo performer utilizing keyboard, guitar, and sheet metal to drift between acoustic bedroom pop to visceral harsh noise; and a shrouded individual crouched on the floor patiently looping voice and live samples made with mixing board, microphone, a few effects pedals, and found objects like sticks, rocks, and bits of metal. That same listener may encounter some of the same individuals at a dance party with both deejays playing deep house music and live-hardware sets by local producers; or at a performance of solo-acoustic guitar by a relatively well-known touring musician. All of these elements, however disparate, assemble under the same roof—drawn together through social and economic networks—united by two traits: a departure from musical genres considered to be “mainstream” and by a desire for the kinds of intimate performance experiences only available at relatively small community-oriented spaces and other non-traditional venues.

Anne Gomez describes the club as on a “circuit of people who are completely crazy; just when I think I’ve seen the craziest shit, something shows up from the bowels” (Gomez 2007). Bob Pence adds that, Nightlight “became a home to that kind of stuff when no other place would.” But other than calling it “crazy noise,” Pence does not settle on any particular Nightlight sound; instead he creates a category open to anything other than that which has a “home” elsewhere. “That kind of stuff” may be vague, but it is distinguished by its connection to the Nightlight, and that connection has meaning. Dave Cantwell observes:

I can go there, and if there’s a bunch of different bands I’ve never heard of, I see a flier and I can immediately tell it’s a Nightlight flier, because of the style or by whatever about it. You can go and you don’t know exactly what you’re getting into, but you have some idea it is going to fit within some kind of aesthetic parameters, and there is a good chance that what I am going to like is going to fit into that at least somewhat. (Cantwell 2007).

For Chuck Johnson, the sound of a Nightlight scene remains tied to social networks: “It

was an extension of Isaac as far as his involvement in local music and his friends. It wasn't just open the doors to the local rock scene, like 'Here's a new place'" (Johnson 2007). But Trogden's network was not exclusive to Nightlight: he was a longtime deejay and station manager at WXYC; through Dyssembler, Lingual, and other events, he worked with a wide variety of deejays and visual artists; as a musician, he performed at house parties and prominent festivals like Transmissions; and as a promoter, he shared event invitations and comments through listservs like alt.music.chapel.hill. These represent but a few of the networks in which Trogden was involved at the time he opened Nightlight. Co-founder Lauren Ford's networks were equally diffuse. Individuals move into and out of scenes, varying their participation in many different social networks as they shift over time. Unlike an underground scene dependent on word-of-mouth house shows or irregular monthly events at changing venues, however, the stability and visibility of Nightlight created a space around which a social network could organize. Visibility, of course, is a relative concept, and posting on a college radio station listserv still only connects with a limited audience. Additionally, the physical location of the Nightlight, twenty paces down a narrow alley off a street that doesn't see a high level of foot traffic, means that access tends to proceed from foreknowledge. Most visitors to the Nightlight do so intentionally rather than discovering the venue incidentally. Even among those who make the decision to visit, it can take commitment and perseverance to overcome feelings of insecurity.

Katie O'Neil first attended a performance at Nightlight after being invited by an acquaintance, as she was becoming more involved in the music scene as a DJ at WXYC and through the process of making friends:

I would go to shows at the Cradle and the 506. I went to Nightlight for the first time the first month I was in Chapel Hill. it was definitely an experience. Someone I had met in Chapel Hill, he was a freshman as well, but was from here. He lived in Davidson and knew about the Nightlight before he came to town. It was the Tracy and the Plastics show. He said, "You should come check this out." It took me a while to go back, even though [Nightlight] was only around a short while, I assumed—it seemed like it had a history to it. So it felt really overwhelming and intimidating and I didn't go back for some

time. I think that changed through experience and growth, just WXYC, meeting people in the community, making friends with people. (O'Neil 2007)

David Harper's experience echoes O'Neil's, also pointing to Nightlight's connection to WXYC as a pathway to greater participation; for Harper, WXYC's communication platforms made him aware of the venue's performances and activities.

A guy I talked to occasionally on a message board was playing at a venue in town called Nightlight, and he just mentioned that he was playing and I decided I would go. I didn't talk to anyone then, but found that this place I'd been walking past repeatedly, like on the way to go eat a burrito—in addition to being this small bookstore—also put on shows. It was totally unlike what goes on at Cat's Cradle and what went on at Go!. It was a while before I went back. I wanted to and just had no clue how to figure out what was going on there. Working at XYC made it a lot easier to find out about shows, because the guy who more or less runs it was also a deejay at WXYC. (Harper 2006)

While O'Neil and Harper's first experiences included some trepidation, their interest was piqued enough to return. Both had an interest in experimental and underground music bolstered by their social networks, and both had a preference to experience music in a way that differed from what was available at other venues. Nightlight offered an entry point into a scene that satisfied both of those needs, a space where “history, culture, and the human actor meet in tradition” (Glassie 1995, 193). Through their actions, O'Neil and Harper contribute to the creation of tradition as part of a Nightlight scene.

Folklorist Henry Glassie also called attention to the effect that the environment can have on the process of tradition. He writes that tradition is constructed differently by people as a “consequence of interaction within different environments” (Glassie 1995, 180). As a business that served as a gathering space for a Chapel Hill counterculture, Skylight Exchange already served a clientele that valued diversity and oppositional politics. It is not surprising that a music scene that depends on a safe space to foster improvisation and non-traditional performance found a welcome home in a building that had a long history of supporting alternative art and lifestyles. Reflecting on their inspiration to open Nightlight and its relative longevity, Lauren Ford focused on the locale as integral to the club's success. Isaac Trogden agreed:

The difference is the location. The Skylight had always been a place for free-thinking, time-wasting, hippie action-ism. In that regard, it does not surprise me that [Nightlight] has lasted so long. Had we started it somewhere else, I don't think it would have lasted or even should have lasted. (Toenes 2007)

Nightlight's centralized location, off the main strip in downtown Chapel Hill, makes it convenient for individuals to attend, while its entrance off the alley also provides some protection from people not receptive to the kinds of performances and activities that occur there.

The interior of the space also affects the ways the music and art is performed and consumed. Similar to house shows, the line between audience and performers at Nightlight is not always clear; indeed, at the venue's many dance-oriented events, there often is no line. Also like house shows, the act of performance as dictated by the materiality of the space creates environments of intimacy and inclusion. With a platform for performers that is only as "high as a sidewalk curb," and with many acts that intentionally perform off-stage on the floor, there is no proscenium to focus the audience gaze on any stage. This blurriness between stage and dance floor was one of the features that Katie O'Neil welcomed as she became acclimated to the Nightlight music scene: "It doesn't feel like there is any separation between performance and audience. Especially the first show I went there I definitely felt that" (O'Neil 2007). Mike Nutt had a similar experience at the first performance he attended at Nightlight:

One of the reasons I remember it so well is because, like, everybody was having a good time. Everybody was—or a lot of people were dancing. It's just interesting that people were dancing to a trio of laptops because, like, how animated can you be when you're playing a laptop? So I think it was just being so close to them, it was really exciting. (Nutt 2007)

The audience can often stand within a few feet of a performing artist and see how they create sound. Feelings of intimacy, reinforced by the limitations of the physical environment, are bolstered by audiences supportive of personal creative expression and expecting unconventional approaches to performance. As part of a tradition of experimentation, artists and audiences find security in that intimacy to improvise and explore new styles and sounds with an encouraging community. In this way, Nightlight serves as unique space that facilitates a

music scene characterized by a particular spirit of experimental artistic practice.

Applying Glassie's terminology, a "mutual comprehension" of what that "particular spirit" means extends beyond local social networks in the Triangle to underground music scenes in other communities where tradition is expressed through a similar dynamic. Beyond the Nightlight and the Triangle, tradition promotes interlocal networks between different underground scenes that significantly shape each other as a result. Even though booking at Nightlight is managed by the owner or an employee, underground scenes depend on participants to negotiate their own categories of what kinds of activities are appropriate. Bands and musicians, as well as audience members, familiar with Nightlight often serve as curators, inviting touring artists with shared understanding of a tradition of experimentation to perform. Dave Cantwell recognizes the role of Nightlight in fostering these relationships beyond virtual connection on the internet:

I guess that mostly is because of the internet. Bands—it's funny how one contact can explode into many contacts. You know you go to some town you don't know, and you play with some band that you've never seen before, and they're pretty good but they are nice, and then all their friends get in touch because Chapel Hill is a place to play? If we need to get a show quickly, that we know is a little bit weird—if it's some band that's buddies of ours that are coming through town and they need a show—the Nightlight is usually able to accommodate that. And it's almost like they know that if we're suggesting that a band plays, they will assume that it must fit into their aesthetic philosophy. And they've always been very welcoming to us. (Cantwell 2007)

Through his understanding of a tradition of experimentation, Cantwell and other scene participants know that Nightlight will support and even welcome something "a little bit weird." As a scene that feeds on experimentation, it omnivorously celebrates outside influences that introduce new ideas that fit within that same tone or spirit. Musicians from outside local networks challenge listener expectations and inspire variation in local music practices at Nightlight. This exchange is fully realized through two different music festivals organized at Nightlight: No Future Fest and Savage Weekend.

Musician Jason Crumer, along with Michele Arzano and Ryan Martin, hastily organized the first No Future Fest in June of 2005. The event included 20 bands over two nights that

“represent a broad sample of the harder edge of the noise genre, sharing characteristics and aesthetics without sharing sounds or means” (Currin 2006). The follow-up events included more performers and slightly expanded the palette of sounds beyond harsh noise to a broader spectrum of sound experimentation. After 2007, organizers went their separate ways, but No Future Fest had a lasting effect. The event exposed the Triangle community to a huge variety of artists, many of whom had never performed in the Triangle before, and in the process established Nightlight as a focal point within the broad interlocal networks of underground noise scenes across the country. The venue became recognized as a safe and supportive space for experimentation regardless of genre, and as a result more artists of this kind sought to play in Chapel Hill. Many of those artists ended up at Nightlight.

In 2011, Martin founded another festival—Savage Weekend—drawing from his experience with No Future Fest and from experiences at the International Noise Conference in Miami (which Martin calls “his biggest inspiration” for the new event). According to Martin, Savage Weekend highlights “weird noise or weird pop, weird performance or weird techno or even good, solid techno No Future was about a certain style of noise, harsher or darker stuff. We have that at Savage Weekend, but I wanted it to be more open” (Howe 2013). Savage Weekend features up to 80 performances over two days at Nightlight. Artists set up anywhere there is space to serve their performance style and the staff works tirelessly to manage sound reinforcement needs. Sets are limited to 15 minutes maximum and follow one after another in a constant stream of sound. The diversity on display at Savage Weekend reflects a spirit of inclusivity within the tradition of experimentation in this Nightlight scene. Martin’s goal is to curate “real distinct sets by people trying to do things on their own” (Howe 2013), emphasizing the importance of personal artistry over adherence to established categories of music.

Rejecting generic restraints, the schedule at Savage Weekend echoes the broader Nightlight scene’s activities and performances. For audience members, the range of styles, skill

levels, and instrumentation encountered at the festival or in any given week at Nightlight offers inspiration for countless entry points into performance. A tradition that depends on experimentation and change also depends on new ideas brought in by new participants to carry on that spirit. The process of tradition, as articulated in the Nightlight scene that encourages experimentation over repetition, reduces barriers for participation and provides security for individuals to become musicians themselves, if they have the desire. Stepping into performance, these individuals draw on historical and cultural influences to contribute their own ideas, voices, and sounds to the scene, ultimately altering its structure. Henry Glassie emphasizes the relationship between the individual and tradition in this dynamic: "Culture and tradition are created by individuals out of experience. They have reasons for their actions, and their actions entail change" (Glassie 1995, 398). For individuals like Charlie St. Clair, experiences as part of the underground scene at Nightlight led to becoming a performer himself:

Part of what Nightlight is to me, it is intimidating and it's challenging, because it's challenging you not only to be open to receiving forms of expression that don't all jive with other things in your life, but it's also encouraging you to do things, like come out to the dance party and freak out like you're a maniac, like you've never danced before. Or come out to a show and get really close to a band that's dressed like elves. So there is the intimidation part, which is partly a good thing, because if you can stick it out, you really feel like you've developed a new part of yourself, that you've gotten something back from the club other than just seeing a few good bands. You really sort of feel like a new part of yourself is developing and it may turn you, just like it sort has turned me, into a performer. It may help you get inspired to do something you wouldn't have tried otherwise because it challenged your thinking of what is acceptable and good or high forms of art or performance or whatever. (St. Clair 2007)

St. Clair's personal experience mirrors that of others in the Nightlight experimental music scene. Ryan Martin's personal history as a performer followed a similar trajectory; "I guess after seeing so many other bands perform, I just wanted to try to do something like that. And also try to do something that I would enjoy seeing" (Martin 2007). Facilitated by a process of tradition that encourages individual self-expression, individuals regularly shift between roles of performer and audience, depending on the event. Dave Cantwell witnessed this process in the experience of his wife Kerry Cantwell:

I've seen a lot of other musicians who you might think of as conventional rock musicians do something really out of the ordinary there. But I've also seen people like my wife Kerry, who does not consider herself a musician at all, put together a little piece that she had been working on and just presenting it to people because she was asked to. And you know, no other place is going to do that. So the Nightlight encourages people to be adventurous in a relatively safe environment. So the music they are playing may not be very safe, but the social tone can be very safe. (Cantwell 2007)

The “social tone” of the scene at Nightlight reflexively emerges from the tradition of experimentation that it also facilitates. The tradition removes obstacles—in the form of musical ability, access to specific equipment, and knowledge of technology—for participants to create music using whatever tools are available. The tone reflects the scene’s commitment to personal creativity as a marker of authenticity in performance. When individuals like Kerry Cantwell, Charlie St. Clair, and Ryan Martin make the decision to express themselves artistically in the context of this scene, their actions are shaped by the tone and spirit of tradition. Absent a “corpus of pre-established forms” attained in the process of traditionalization (Handler and Linnekin 1984, 287), new performers rely on their interpretation of a spirit of creative expression learned through their experiences in the scene at Nightlight, and “when they act authentically, their creations will necessarily, nonchalantly radiate the aura of tradition” (Glassie 1995, 408).

Created by individuals through experience, tradition weaves its way throughout the shifting formations and networks of every music and cultural scene. Tradition shifts along with the scene, created by individuals through their experiences in those clusters of activity. Nightlight is a space where we can observe an underground music scene shaped by a particular tradition of experimentation that embraces discontinuity and celebrates change. This tradition is learned and communicated through performance and social interaction between participants connected through the Nightlight. Embodying values of inclusion and support for personal artistry, the scene at Nightlight enables a variety of practices and styles. Performers from other communities and new performers are encouraged to participate, bringing new ideas and influences into the process of tradition. By looking at this process as experienced by individuals

and expressed through performance, we can observe the shifting boundaries of an underground music scene at Nightlight as they change over time.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

Nightlight demonstrates the importance of local spaces to musical activity—spaces where individuals perform the properties of local music practice and present opportunities to study contemporary musical activity in context. With short lifespans and challenges to access, underground rock music communities have not often been studied through the the lens of folklore. The processes of differentiation that define the underground provide limited “things”—narratives, patterns, recipes—passed down from one generation to another that folklorists often use as entry to examine artistic communication within a group. If we use the concept of “scene” as a frame however, then—tradition—as a dynamic process crucial to the development and maintenance of music communities—presents an avenue for ethnographic investigation. Participants in music scenes are radically selective. They negotiate the aesthetic value of sound and performance according to taste and through social interaction in different environments. In this process we can locate tradition.

An underground scene at Nightlight grew out of traditions of experimentation and improvisation that developed in part as a response to the cooptation of regional indie rock into the dominant culture industries. As a relatively stable environment that gives access to performers and audiences whose preferences for artistic expression lie far outside the mainstream, Nightlight creates an opportunity to explore the role of tradition as a process that supports discontinuity and change rather than repetition and staticity. Tradition is an actively shaping force in the Nightlight scene that supports a community of artists who value personal artistry and invention.

A focus on tradition in underground scenes like that at Nightlight also pushes us to explore the broader affective dimensions that come into play in these communities. Drawing on Raymond Williams, one could argue that these sites reveal key changes in what he calls “structures of feelings,”

characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis . . . has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics. (Williams 1977, 132)

A tradition of experimentation rejects “reduction of the social to fixed forms,” leading to a process that nurtures artistic expression reflecting “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (Williams 1977, 132). Williams emphasized that “not all art, by any means, relates to a contemporary structure of feeling. The effective formations of most actual art relate to already manifest social formations, dominant or residual” (Williams 1977, 134). Underground music scenes, however, offer fertile ground for nurturing emergent formations to which a

structure of feeling, *as solution*, relates. Yet this specific solution is never mere flux. It is a structured formation which, because it is at the very edge of semantic availability, has many of the characteristics of a pre-formation, until specific articulations--new semantic figures—are discovered in material practice.” (Williams 1977, 134)

In the process of traditionalization at Nightlight, artists and audience create new sounds and styles through performance based on experimentation and improvisation. Folklore is well equipped to investigate “new semantic figures” as they emerge in tradition. Using tradition in underground music scenes as a starting point, folklore can move past cultural analysis “expressed in an habitual past tense” toward a perspective that can encompass the complexities of the cultural process as it is lived and experienced.

Epilogue

Against many odds, weathering multiple potential closures and shifts in ownership, Nightlight remains in business in 2018. The Skylight Exchange closed permanently in 2008,

radically altering the space as all the used books and booths were removed and food service was discontinued. Alexis Mastromichalis, the space's owner from 2007 through 2012, expertly navigated this transition and secured a liquor license for Nightlight to generate more revenue—a necessary addition, now that Nightlight was solely responsible for the rent and utilities.

According to North Carolina law, any business that sells liquor by the drink must be a private club, requiring individuals who wanted to attend performances to register and pay a membership fee. While a membership fee was an added cost for showgoers, the newly open layout provided opportunities both for new kinds of performances and activities, and for larger audiences. Having been open for five years by the time of the Skylight Exchange's closure, Nightlight's reputation as a space that welcomed music and performance that challenged expectations, that supported artists both new and experienced, and that promoted experimentation grew, leading to an increasingly diverse calendar of touring bands, packed local bills, rock operas, theme nights, dance parties, art shows, and community events.

Current owners Charlie Hearon and Ethan Clauset took over in 2013 and remain committed to maintaining a “tiny art-land vortex run by low-income party people, a dedicated task force of interns, well-wishers and sympathizers . . . backed up by a fabulous community of fans and music lovers who support experimentation, surprise, social improvisation, hollering, dancing and frequenting out” (Nightlight). Also owners of the independent record store, All Day Records, in Carrboro, both Hearon and Clauset have long histories with Nightlight and the local arts communities as promoters, musicians, label owners, visual artists, deejays, and political activists. Beyond Clauset's work with Transmissions and other pre-Nightlight experimental events, both he and Hearon have been dedicated to fostering communities of support of electronic and dance music for almost 20 years, organizing parties and deejay crews at venues across the Triangle. They have maintained a space for underground music and art from the fringes to grow and flourish outside of the dominant music industry. Embracing a tradition of experimentation, they help to create a Nightlight scene that can respond to shifts in social

networks, cultural trends, and personal taste while remaining connected to the history of the physical space and music scenes of previous eras.

Throughout Hearon and Clauset's tenure, I have maintained my connection to the space as a performer, audience member, and unofficial historian. Recognizing my experience with communal cooking, Hearon has invited me to cater at special events, including the Nightlight's locally-focused Moogfest day party, staff retreats, and birthday celebrations. In February 2018, Nightlight celebrated 15 years in operation with "5 special shows over 2 weekends showcasing SOME of our best buddies and SOME of the different types of shows that we do at the club" (Hearon 2018). Performances featured experimental guitar music, old-time, acoustic blues, deejays, underground rock, electronic music, noise, theatrical dance, and more. For the grand finale of the Nightlight's 15th anniversary, I set up a mobile kitchen in the back alley and served a menu of traditional NC slaw dogs, both regular and vegan, and an assortment of sides. These efforts earned me the honorary title "Nightlight Executive Chef" in Hearon's promotional messages and advertising.

Spooning pickled jalapenos over queso and fresh-from-the-fryer french fries that night for a grateful crowd, I thought about the ways in which I have moved through the Nightlight scene. Through watching performances, playing music, serving food, and doing ethnography with this community for 15 years, I have shaped, however unintentionally, the collective understanding of Nightlight's connection to local music history. When I first started my research in 2004, the Nightlight's presence in a building that has been connected to underground music scenes since the early 1970s did not appear to be widely known. Through my activities conducting interviews, sharing my research, and holding informal conversations, that legacy has become part of the Nightlight scene's identity. Now, when Hearon introduces musicians to audiences who may have been active at the space when it was occupied by Cat's Cradle, Rhythm Alley, and Skylight Exchange, he often offers tribute to Nightlight's predecessors, calling out the former occupants of 405½ West Rosemary by name. By invoking the spirit of

counterculture movements whose expressive creativity once found a home at the club, Hearon acknowledges their influence on the current scene and welcomes participants back into the fold as forebears of a tradition of experimentation that they continue to support at Nightlight today—a sentiment lucidly conveyed in a promotional message about the 15th anniversary celebration: “we’re proud to be part of a chain of people keeping this excellent room for music (which has been serving the community for almost 50 years) going. long live the NIGHTLIGHT!” (Hearon 2018).

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