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Spatial Distribution and Participation in British Contemporary Musical Performances

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The British independent ('indie') music scene is a disparate community brought together by participation in a distinctive event, the gig. By examining the participant framework of gigs, this article shows gigs to be highly structured and repetitive events. Physical placement is an indicator of the participant's level of orientation to the musical performance, the type of physical activity that participant will be engaged in, as well as the participant's age, experience, and professional status. This participant framework also informs an ideology of aging within the 'youth' culture of indie music.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the differential participation and spatial distribution of audience members at British 'indie' music gigs. My analysis builds on linguistic anthropological research which suggests that meaning is created interactionally across modalities, incorporating verbal, cognitive, spatial, temporal, and physical codes, and that the situated use of the body within a socially organized event is a resource for the deployment of meaning (Duranti, 1992; Goodwin, 1994). For British indie gigs, live musical performances of a distinctive "youth" genre of music, the primary modalities for the expression of social difference are through spatial distribution and different modes of participation within a gig's specific participant framework. A participant framework provides a frame for the interpretation of activities, a sense of how actions and utterances are to be taken (Goffman, 1974). Participant frameworks provide a guideline for the expected behaviors in an event including different activities for those in different roles.

This article is a description of the participant framework of indie gigs. As such, a singular gig is not described, but rather the organizing principles that govern spatial distribution and comportment in general are set forth in detail. Within the gig's participant framework, physical placement is an indicator of a participant's level of orientation to the performance, the types of activities one will engage in, and one's degree of alignment to the band on stage. These principles tell us not only about the mechanisms used to organize the activities

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of audience members at a gig, but also reveal the salient issues used to differentiate members of the community from each other, namely, the degrees of affiliation or fanship with the band on stage and the underlying concern of members with age. In other words, organizational principles governing participant activity reveal part of an ideological infrastructure that underpins being a member of the indie music community.

At issue in this paper is the constitution of subjectivity within a community of competent practitioners who are able to understand the relative subjective positions of different members of the indie community by their spatial distribution and comportment. Understanding ritual as a communicative activity entails the examination of the interactional production of subjectivities for participants through embodied practice. The subjectivity of perspective is not merely a category marked by *a priori* identities, but is embodied in the activities of social actors organized within participant frameworks. The activities of participants (what they do during the course of their engagement in an event) need to be examined in detail in order to understand what crucial distinctions between members are articulated by their participation.

I ascertained the participant framework of indie gigs through participant observation and microanalysis of video taped interaction. The observations herein are based on data from 14 months of fieldwork in Great Britain where I videotaped 28 hours of audience behavior and was a participant observer at more than one hundred gigs and five festivals. These events were observed in a broad range of areas in England, Scotland, and Wales, including gigs in immense urban areas such as London, Sheffield, and Glasgow and in suburban hamlets in areas such as Middlesex and Yorkshire. My research also included an analysis of indie discourse in the main public forum for British indie music fans, the weekly music press, interviews with audience members and professionals, and recorded conversations between participants at events.[1] Thus, the generalizations regarding interaction do not stem from a single piece of data or a singular encounter, but can be seen repeatedly in a wide range of events and settings all over Great Britain.

For the indie community, a community delineated by selective consumption of music and recognized as constituting "youth" culture, these issues involve different modes of engagement from active and demonstrative to inert and reserved representing relative degrees of fanship in relationship to performers. The gig is a ritual that performs the category of 'youth,' designating it as a liminal stage characterized by modes of engagement different from the modes of engagement reserved for older audiences. Age is a central concern of gig participants revealed both in the participant framework of the event and in public and private discourse where aging is seen as limiting one's ability to maintain membership within the indie community. For indie gigs, a variable participant framework is correlated with different spatial domains to designate a topography of fanship and articulate an ideology of aging.

The *gig* is the primary event that transforms a disparate community characterized by the mediated discourse of the media into a community of face-to-face activity. This community, located in Great Britain, is colloquially known as *indie*, which is an abbreviation of the term *independent*. It is a genre of music many consider analogous to 'alternative' music in the United States. This style of music was historically defined by its close association with small independently owned record companies and independent distribution networks. It is a subgenre of rock and pop and for the most part is popular amongst anglo adolescents from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

For the audience at a gig, there are different modes of participation depending on where one locates oneself within the venue. Activities appropriate in one area are entirely inappropriate in another. Indie gigs take place in social spaces that differ from traditional concert halls. At a typical gig venue, participants distribute themselves in space and often stand throughout the entire performance, whereas at concert halls the audience generally sits in chairs, seats pre-assigned. Gig venues present the opportunity for interaction involving a high degree of activity and bodily contact, often in ways rarely seen in other cultural settings. By contrast, concerts that occur in seated halls place participants in equidistant positions and generally discourage or limit participant's physical contact. Although the musicians' performance may be the same in seated and non-seated venues, the participant framework and the experiences of audiences in concert halls and gigs are distinct.

My description of audience participation is based on the spatial organization of well attended gigs, ones involving at least two hundred participants. Gig attendance ranges from a performance in a venue where only the club or pub employees are present to larger venues of approximately 4500 participants. But the number of individuals engaging in the indie participant framework can be much greater; the distribution of audience members at an indie festival such as Reading attended by between 38,000 - 50,000 functions like a large gig.

For analysis, I have classified the space occupied by the audience at indie gigs into three zones due to the distinct types of activity that are exhibited in these areas. For well attended shows, three zones regularly appear. *Zone one*, the area closest to the stage, is the most physically complex with people packed together in close proximity and the potential for vigorous movement.[2] *Zone two* begins a quarter of the way back into the venue and reaches the back of the floor area. This area is far less dense and is the most static. *Zone three* is in the back of the venue including the bars, bathrooms, and at times a cloakroom and foyer area. This zone exhibits the most disparate activities.

Structurally, gigs are predicated on a rudimentary distinction, between the space of the performers and the space of the audience. Indie gigs occur in a number of different settings from small pubs without stages where the line between audience and performer may be as thin as a piece of tape adhered to the floor to huge events such as the Reading with large stages, security personnel and a gap of some twenty feet between the performer and spectator.

THE ZONES

Zone one is composed of the front rows of people, the "pit," and a "mosh pit," a subsection of the pit area. Near the front at well attended shows, audience density is very high. Often horizontal pressure is such that audience members in the front are lifted off the ground by the sheer force of other human bodies. There is a high degree of movement in this area including dancing, jumping up and down, and the shaking of heads. In addition, zone one presents the opportunity for having intimate bodily contact with strangers and the density of human bodies in the forepart of the venue allows for certain distinctive activities such as diving from the stage onto other audience members and the practice of *crowd surfing*. The latter is an activity where an individual is hoisted on top of the crowd and is supported by other audience members while being tossed or rolled horizontally across the crowd. During this activity the supporting 'ground' consists of human bodies.

Crowd surfing is extremely collaborative. Not only does an individual need at least one other person to enable him/her to climb on top of the crowd, but the spectators that compose the ground need to be supportive. Audience members standing in the front area or the peripheries of zone one rarely initiate and engage in rolling.[3] While people in the first row are often not very happy about spending a large portion of the show having people roll over them, handling crowd surfers is considered to be one of the occupational hazards of being close to the band. The bulk of individuals in zone one consider crowd surfing to be an integral part of the gig experience and allow and aid individuals to crowd surf. However, if the basic audience members in zone one do not collaborate, crowd surfing is not possible. For example, when the Lemonheads played at Norwich UEA in 1994, there was only a small section of audience members who wanted to crowd surf. During the set, the same seven lads tried repeatedly to get up and onto the audience to crowd surf. Each attempt was rebuffed by audience members who, instead of passing forward, pushed back the crowd surfers until they dropped. By the end of the headliner's set, not one individual had been successful at staying on top of the crowd for longer than 20 seconds.[4] This was a case of an audience that was not compliant to the activity of crowd surfing and precluded the possibility of it occurring.[5]

In practice, audience members do not collaborate with individuals who violate norms of conduct while crowd surfing. If an individual is not rolling properly or if he/she dives off the stage improperly, this person will be dropped immediately. Several of the violations are not keeping one's feet up, kicking people, diving in such a way that one's body weight is concentrated in a single location rather than distributing it horizontally, and staying in one location rather than moving across the space.

In general, participants are careful to make sure that no one gets seriously hurt at gigs although at times injuries do occur. Crowd surfing is one of the more dangerous endeavors involved in gig attendance. While getting up on top of the crowd is fairly easy to coordinate with one or two others, coming down is less assured. To get down from the top of the crowd, rollers either move towards the front row where they will be pulled off by concert security or move to the side where they slip down, ideally feet first. There is a risk when one engages in these largely socially constructed activities, that the diver or roller will not be caught or that the audience will not be compliant. There are times when, despite the efforts of others, a person who is rolling will fall down in the middle of the crowd. This is a very dangerous moment for there is a possibility that this individual could be smothered or trampled. If a person is falling through a pocket in the crowd in any way other than feet first, those around him will grab hold of anything they can to preclude the roller from hitting the ground. If a person does fall down, the people in the area will stop jumping and dancing around the individual who has fallen and help him or her to get up. At festivals, this is a far more complicated and dangerous project. A great number of people can fall simultaneously. This is due to the great number of people in the back and sides exerting a constant pressure in moving forward and toward the center, often causing huge horizontal waves that result in a whole section collapsing. The process of helping people to their feet may last a significant portion of a song.

Audience members are aware of a responsibility involved in being a member of zone one:

> There's an etiquette in the moshpit. When people dive, you expect them not to kick you in the head or to be too violent. If someone falls over you expect people to pick them up....there are unwritten laws. When you go to a gig you expect people to have a good time and get along (Chris, *Melody Maker*, May 18, 1992).

Initially, looking at the frenetic activity of the front region of a gig, the audience may appear wild and uncontrolled. However when one observes the microlevel of interaction, it becomes apparent that the activities of the front are regulated by participants and mechanisms are present by which the crowd monitors itself.

Zone one is the area of the most energetic activity, the youngest audience and strongest statement of fanship. The front is typically comprised of individuals ranging in age from approximately 14 to 21. Within this area, there are acute gender distinctions in terms of bodily distribution. At indie gigs, females consistently constitute only 35 percent of the audience. In zone one, females generally stand in the front three rows or slightly farther back in the peripheral side areas. The mosh area, where people dance by running into one another in arhythmic abandon is primarily male. The mosh pit appeared irregularly and appeared to be languishing during the tenure of this project (1993-1995). Mosh pits generally surfaced only at the larger shows with bands who play a more spirited and lively style of music. For more reserved indie bands, no mosh pit would develop.

Zone two extends behind the front area toward the back of the venue. Zone two is the area in which fans watch the performance with the least amount of distraction—visibly, physically, or aurally. This area is characterized by the least amount of movement. The line between the activity of the front and the stasis of zone two is quite sharp and demarcated. In zone two, people are located in close proximity without actual physical contact between bodies. In this area, there are proxemic distinctions between strangers and those who know each other. Friends stand in close proximity and larger spaces appear between strangers. The distances between strangers becomes even greater in zone three. In zone one, there are no discernible proxemic distinctions between strangers and friends with nearly all audience members in the region packed as closely together as possible.

The audience members in zone two tend to range in age from early to late twenties. The majority of those who comprise this section are those who once were participants in the zone one, but have moved back as they have aged.

In zone two, participants are visibly and physically oriented toward the band and stand facing the stage. There is a modest amount of physical response by some participants—rocking of the body back and forth, gentle movement of the head, and tapping one's feet in rhythm to the music. Nevertheless, within this area the physical demonstrativeness of the audience is rather muted. The primary mode of orientation to the performance for those in zone two is extended visual focus on the band. Like the majority in zone one, members of zone two stand facing the stage, but while zone one audience members are engaged in a number of activities that can distract visual focus on the band, those in zone two primarily stand in visual contemplation of the performance for the duration of a band's set.

If people in zone two want to be more physically active, they will move forward. How far forward, depends on how active the audience member wishes to be. Audience members in zone two who wish to participate in exuberant dancing or crowd surfing will move into the pit area of zone one. Additionally, if people in this area attempt to conduct the activities associated with the front such as bumping into other people or jumping on them, they can be thrown out of the venue. During the tenure of this project, there was only a single occasion where individuals in the back of the venue were found dancing energetically. On this occasion at the Garage in Islington, employees warned the audience members that they must either move forward or face ejection from the venue.

Zone two moves gradually into zone three. *Zone three* is where numerous activities that do not directly pertain to the performance take place. Thus, toward the back of zone two, one finds participants who will engage in moderate conversation, drinking, and smoking, all activities common in zone three. Within zone three, one finds the bar and the most socializing in the conventional sense of the word. Zone three is also the domain of the music industry professionals including: booking agents, promoters, press agents, managers,

recording executives, product managers, journalists, and musicians from other bands not performing. This area includes the oldest fans (late 20s - 30s), and individuals who are engaged in activities other than watching the band.

There is a marked contrast between the activities in zone three and activities in the other two zones. The attentional foci in zone three are relatively diverse and there is not the same degree of specificity and regularity of activities. Visual orientation toward the stage is much more lax. In general, eye gaze is not focused on the band, yet body orientation is still to a large degree toward the stage. Thus, individuals speaking to each other generally do not stand face-to-face, but rather a mid-orientation between stage and co-conversationalists. At times, zone three may include a room separate from the main performance area and in these cases, members of zone three orient in a face-to-face formation with co-conversationalists with no attention to the performance.

Two of the primary activities of zone three are watching other audience members and engaging in conversation. Just as the individual who wants to be more active moves up toward the stage, so people in the front wishing to talk move back into zone three. People also move to the back when they are disinterested in or dislike the performance. Bars in most venues are located in the back. Therefore, individuals wishing to drink need to come to the back to engage in the transaction of purchasing drinks. By placing the bar in the back, the structural design of venues encourages the location of the back for activities such as fiscal transactions that are not in coordination with the performance.

This schematic description of the zones exhibits the variation in participation at a gig. This variable participation framework correlated with different spatial domains designates a topography of fanship. Within the participant framework of the indie gig, locating oneself in the front is a public assertion of alignment to the band; the physical location of a person close to the stage is a public statement of positive assessment on the part of the audience member. This is most evident when comparing a well attended show to one that is not. At poorly attended shows, distribution of crowd density is often inverted. In these cases, the back of the venue is most densely occupied. The majority of audience members stand beyond 12 to 15 feet back, usually just outside of the light from the stage. On occasion, a few individuals, usually friends of the band, will stand in the visible range. Thus, standing in the front is not merely the result of an *a priori* assumption that the front is the best place to be. Rather selection of that location visibly signifies an assessment to other participants including the band. To move up front is to positively align oneself and one's identity within the community with the band on stage.[6] Placement in the back publicly communicates non-commitment or disalignment. Hence, the architectural feature that audience members most commonly use to distinguish between standing 'close' in a position of affinity and standing at a 'distance' in a position of ambiguous affiliation is the light from the stage, the feature that makes their selected location visually available for the other participants. Additional participants cluster around those who have already selected their

positions, resulting in a venue that is rather full in the back and empty in the front. For popular bands, audience members will wait in line for hours to have the opportunity to be in the front. For unknown bands without fans, the gig becomes in part a place for bands to try to entice people to move closer and inhabit the space of fans or to take advantage of the opportunity to share another more successful bands' fans.

SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

A fundamental distinction in the cultural organization of space at the indie gig is communication of alignments. At the indie gig, a body's placement is a physical enactment of an assessment. Physical proximity, physical activities (such as movement that corresponds to the music's rhythm), and visual concentration on performers are socially constructed markers of positive alignment or affinity to the band on stage. Physical distance and attention to other activities are acts of negative alignment, non commitment and/or expressing a non-fan relationship to the band.[7] Thus, an activity such as crowd surfing where audience members stop between songs is taken as a marker of alignment with the band, of inhabiting a fan relationship. An activity such as talking that does not attend to the performance on stage is taken by co-participants as inhabiting a non-fan relationship. Each of these activities are associated with different zones and therefore where one locates oneself in space is taken as inhabiting a kind of spectatorship, a relative degree of fanship. So while there may be a preponderance of reasons to stand in a particular location within the venue, the act of standing within a particular space and comporting oneself in a particular way is read as taking a stand. Location selection within the venue is voluntary and willful and therefore is seen as having intent, like a gesture for which a participant is held accountable (Kendon, 1990). This homogeneity of meaning held in common by the various participants that constitute an audience is the result of audience members' shared experiences of moving forward and back in relationship to their assessments of bands.

The space at a gig is organized not only around this principle of alignment and disalignment, but also by distinctions made in age groups. Age is a critical issue for indie music fans. In both public and private discourse, age is a topic of great concern and aging is seen as marginalizing one's ability to participate in the community.

Age is a key feature in the spatial organization of the gig. The space at a gig is age graded with the youngest participants in the front, gradually moving to the oldest in the back. Although younger people may stand in the back at times, getting drinks, or waiting for a different band to perform, it is extraordinarily rare for older individuals to be in the front. For the indie community, old refers to anyone over the age of 26. The centrality of the issue

of aging is apparent in the participant structure where being further back in the venue limits the kinds of positive enthusiasm one can display. To be in the front embodies a particular way of being in the world—passionate and physically expressive, leaving an event drenched with sweat and physically exhausted (cf. Turner 1977). Moving through space, one finds the embodiment of a different world view, one of composure—cool rather than hot in demeanor and bodily activity. Each of the zones invoke different forms of spectatorship with the most actively passionate in the front, moving across space to more reserved and remote in the back.

Indie music is imagined as a youth phenomena and gig going marks one as being 'young.' The movement across these zones from a hot spectatorship to a cool spectatorship, from active and demonstrative to inactive and undemonstrative is a marker of aging. In this social organization, one can see the gig with its accompanying participation framework as an event that marks one's course through adolescence. As individuals age, they move back through space, until the point they are aged out the back door. However, when older people stop going to gigs, they do not stop attending musical performances. They attend concerts—concerts that are performed in venues with seats—a move that compels even more reserved bodily composure. The gig is an event that communicates the expected behaviors associated with aging for this community: youth is enacted as the time of physical and emotional expressiveness and adulthood as a time of reserved, composed demeanor and sedentary lifestyle. The young fan in the front is ardently expressive. Moving further from the stage, age and distance increase to the perhaps equally ardent, but diminutively expressive older fan in the back.

Within the scope of the gig, we can see variable modes of activity correlated with different spatial domains. Placement and bodily comportment are a public statement of degrees of fanship. For the people who make an intense association with music, finding others who like the same music and bands is a compelling force in their lives. A disalignment on the value of a band is not merely a disalignment on topic, it is a disalignment in a relationship. It is through this process of making alignments and disalignments manifest in the spatial distribution of the gig that members of the indie music community constitute their social group and make affinities and distinctions between themselves.

NOTES

[1] Analysis of the public discourse of indie included the review of archival issues of the British weekly music press dating back to the mid-1970s when the weekly music press began to cater to the specialized interests of fans of punk and the incipient independent music sector developing in Britain at that time.

[2] Music style is a factor which contributes to the degree of movement found in the front. For bands with an introverted or quiet musical style, there is little movement in the front. The vigorous activity found in zone one is generally characteristic of a

frenetic style of music. However, irrespective of a band's musical style, for well attended performances, the front is characterized by high density and a great degree of interpersonal contact between participants.

[3] The highly dense area of the front, near the stage presents a difficulty for stage divers. Since stage divers usually inhabit the main pit area, they need to get through the people in front of them to access the stage, often asking permission of audience members in the front to be let up in order to have access to the stage, at times resulting in a small queue of potential stage divers waiting to get through to the stage.

[4] The majority of crowd surfers can expect on average to stay on top of the crowd for a couple minutes. However, since crowd surfers are let down at the end of a song, individuals who are hoisted on top of the crowd near the end of a song have a very short ride.

[5] There are several possible factors that may explain why the crowd at this show was adverse to crowd surfing. While the Lemonheads were very popular with the indie press, their audience configuration was not particularly indie. This crowd was significantly younger than the average indie gig crowd as well as having a significantly higher percentage of females. The combination of less experienced gig goers along with audience members who do not actively participate in crowd surfing made it apparent that the majority of audience members were there to watch the performers on stage rather than participate in the standard activities of a gig.

[6] There are at times criticism of those in zone one by audience members of zone two that many are more interested in crowd surfing and stage diving rather than in the performers on stage: an allegation of alignment to the activities of zone one rather than a alignment to the band performing. However, it is quite apparent from crowd surfers and stage divers coordinating their activities with the music that they very much attend to the performers on stage. Additionally, even the most spirited crowd surfers only come to the front for a band they like. As one informant put it: "You can't get into it, when the band is crap."

[7] Placement in the back may also be seen as articulating status differentials. The primary emic distinction between audience members in the indie community distinguishes between the *punters* and the *liggers*. The punters are fans who pay to get into a performance and the liggers are those, generally professionals, who get in for free on the guest list. Since the majority of professionals stand in zone three, standing in the back is seen at times as articulating the status of music industry professional and held in contrast to the status of fan. The fans of zone one and zone two, regularly criticize the professionals of zone three for being disinterested in the band's music, but few would characterize professionals inhabiting the position in the back as being disinterested in the band in general. Professionals, who habitually stand in zone three often have strong affiliations with the band performing. However, it is important for professionals to differentiate themselves from the ordinary audience member presumed to have a submissive relationship with the performers. Standing in the back serves to differentiate the professional's seemingly peer relations with the musicians from a fan's asymmetrical and idolatrous one.

Additionally, many gigs function for the recording industry in much the same manner as professional conferences do for other fields, providing the opportunity to network and augment professional ties with colleagues. Therefore standing in the

back is seen as inhabiting the position of non-fan, a position that may or may not reveal the interest the participant has in the band.

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