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Adkins, Monty and Adams, Tom

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Digital Music, Digital Distribution

Monty Adkins

Tom Adams

University of Huddersfield

m.adkins@hud.ac.uk

tomadams88@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the EMS'14 conference theme regarding alternative forms to the concert of listening and distributing experimental electronic music. The paper presents ways in which current practitioners are engaging with new forms of technology to enhance the reception and appreciation of their music and provides two case studies by the authors as examples of this – Adams' work in the duo 'Hollow Mountain' and Adkins' *Rift Patterns* (Audiobulb 2014).

1. Introduction

Although multichannel concert performances of works continues to be the predominant means for the presentation of new electroacoustic works on systems such as the HISS (Huddersfield Immersive Sound System), BEAST (Birmingham Electroacoustic Sound Theatre) and MANTIS (Manchester Theatre in Sound) and other such systems internationally, by far the majority of experimental electronic music is listened to in a personal space often via headphones and is either increasingly streamed digitally via a subscription service or purchased in a digital format.

In 2011 Bjork released the multi-platform album *Biophilia*. Although released on CD, the main marketing and artistic focus was on the Biophilia APP – a means of listening, exploring and remixing the music on the album in a unique interactive and personal manner. Since then the most ambitious follow ups to this have been Jay-Z's *Magna Carta... Holy Grail* (2013) and Lady Gaga's ARTPOP (2013). The APPstore listing for the latter states that "Lady Gaga brings you a musical and visual engineering system that combines music, art, fashion, and technology with a new interactive worldwide community – 'the auras'. Altering the human experience, we bring ARTculture into POP in a reverse Warholian expedition."¹

Stuart Dredge writing about Lady Gaga's ARTPOP release in the Guardian stated that, "Apps certainly aren't replacing albums any time soon (if ever), but as an interactive companion, this is an innovative and interesting step forward."² What the authors want to propose in this paper is that the iBook offers a distinctive medium for new artistic exploration that moves beyond the album as a purely musical release. It also questions what it means to release something native to the digital domain rather than merely providing digital audio files as an analogue to the physical CD.

¹ <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/artpop/id686145398?mt=8> (last accessed 09/14).

² www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/nov/11/hands-on-with-lady-gagas-artpop-album-app (last accessed 09/14).

Over the past decade there have been a number of bands and artists who have used multimedia formats to extend the understanding of their aesthetic and music. In 2007 Arcade Fire released *The Wilderness Downtown*³. This comprises an interactive music video where the user can enter their address and then the Google street view of this location is used as the surrounding area for the location of the music video they subsequently watch. The band followed this up with *Just a Reflektor*⁴ which was released as an interactive APP for desktop and mobile devices.

Alongside these developments, which pose both interesting aesthetic questions regarding art versus pop, the ergonomics of interactivity, experience design and the additional involvement of a multitude of software and design companies to bring the ‘album’ to market, there have been other commercial artists that have embraced less costly technology. The most prominent of these has been the iBook. Artists as diverse as Shinedown, Coldplay, KISS, Jason Collett, Karl Hyde and Brad Paisley have all released iBooks in 2012-2013 to accompany the release of new albums. These range from Collett’s modest 21-page ‘Uncover the Album’ to accompany his *Reckon* release, to Coldplay’s expansive 183-page audio-visual ‘Mylo Xyloto Live’. The aim of these iBooks has been to provide exclusive audio and video footage, interviews, articles and a plethora of photographic documentation of the making of the album. Their ambition is evident in Shinedown’s iTunes marketing tagline for the iBook *FOR YOUR SAKE: Inside the Making of Shinedown's Amaryllis*,

Remember the days of poring over your favorite band’s expansive album artwork and liner notes while listening to the music, trying to get a deeper sense of what went into the creation of the record? Multi-platinum rock band Shinedown wants to bring that experience back – but in a bigger, better, and fully immersive way, only for the iPad.⁵

Thus far, iBook and APP technologies have been predominantly adopted for new music releases by commercial artists as additional content marketing tools. This paper examines the possible motivations for the releases above and presents two examples by the authors of use of the iBook as the primary means for disseminating new artistic work. Adam’s new audio-visual project stemming from his work in the duo ‘Hollow Mountain’ and Adkins’ *Rift Patterns* (Audiobulb 2014) involving photographer Stephen Harvey, writer Deborah Templeton and video artist Jason Payne will be discussed.

2. In search of an audience

The motivations for engaging with such technology is to enhance the experience of the music and create a perceived closer relationship to the artists and the album’s creation. Philip Auslander presents two interesting examples of the use of new technology from classical music, a genre which has traditionally been antithetical to the spectacle of popular music as a means of engaging new audiences. He writes,

[...] in 2004, the New York Philharmonic, in a bid to attract a younger audience, began to experiment using live-feed video in its concerts so that audiences could experience close-up views of the musicians and conductor, a practice that met with resistance from some of the musicians [...] The experience of the live concert thus becomes somewhat like that of watching

³ www.thewildernessdowntown.com (last accessed 09/14).

⁴ www.justareflektor.com (last accessed 09/14).

⁵ <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/book/for-your-sake-inside-making/id510801741?mt=11> (last accessed 09/14).

a DVD in which one can access extra features as well as the concert itself. This idea has taken on an even more remarkable form in an experiment by the Nashville Opera in which recorded commentary by the director and cast was made available via iPod during performances of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, in the manner of commentary tracks on DVDs [...] (Auslander, 2008, p. 26)

The effort being made to encourage people to experience music live is backed up by figures produced by the music industry itself. An ongoing survey by the National Endowment for the Arts in the USA that shows the percentage of adults who attended a classical concert (even one per year) declined from 13 percent in 1982 to 11.6 percent in 2002, and 9.3 percent in 2008. A further decline to 8.8 percent in 2012 was not considered statistically significant. Figures from the PRS state that according to statistics from the Entertainment Retailers Association Yearbook streaming revenues grew to 26% in 2013 while online sales accounted for a 60% share (£5.3bn) of the market.

Kim Bayley, ERA Director General, said: 'This is stark evidence of the revolution in entertainment consumption being driven by entertainment retailers. The fact that 60p in the entertainment pound is now spent online and 26p in the pound is for access to content rather than ownership is a testament to the huge investment and technological ingenuity of retailers in providing consumers with new ways to enjoy the music, video and games they love.'⁶

For many young people, going to a concert is something to be experienced holistically rather than an event merely to listen to music. In pop music, the revenue achievable from concert sales now far outstrips sales of CDs and digital downloads of the music alone. Artists such as Madonna and Bruce Springsteen currently earn over 90% of their income from concerts. Billboard state that,

Concerts make up 68.9% of revenue for the 40 artists on Billboard's Moneymakers list, which tallies artists' annual earnings. Remove Adele and Taylor Swift, both of whom didn't earn any U.S. touring income in 2012, and the average increases to 72.5%-a figure on par with the 72.6% in 2010 and the 68.3% that touring represented in 2011.⁷

For those engaged in genres of music such as experimental electronic music and classical music where listening is the primary focus of concerts we can still question the cultural and economic value of such events. For a contemporary concert of electronic or acoustic music to attract more than two or three hundred people is an exception. As a result, such music finds a wider dissemination via digital means. David Cecchetto and Eldritch Priest (2013) write that,

If we are to make an argument about listening that starts from concert music, it is necessary for the latter to bear some relation to the former. This assumption is not as obvious as it may seem to those deeply investing in the concert tradition. In addition to the almost total absence of contemporary concert music from the largest economic of music (radio, digital music sales, advertising), even when it is found in these settings it exists precisely in the absence of exactly that which defines it, namely the set of rituals, affordances and listening practices performed in and by the concert hall. This is, it is entirely reasonable to suggest that on the rare occasion that one hears a contemporary work for string quartet on the radio, one is not actually hearing a version of something conceived for the concert hall and subsequently transposed to a new setting, but rather something that is 'recording native' [...] In sum, it is at least arguable that the

⁶ "Streaming Growth", *M Prs for Music online Magazine*, 51, April 2014, p. 13, <http://www.m-magazine.co.uk/carousel/print-m51/> (last accessed 09/14).

⁷ www.billboard.com/articles/news/1549732/madonna-bruce-springsteen-lead-billboards-2013-top-40-money-makers (last accessed 09/14).

concert hall exerts its greatest influence today as an alibi for something like musical authenticity rather than as a literal space.

Whilst the concert for live electronic music and contemporary classical music is still a relevant outlet as a means of experiencing music made in real-time and that demonstrates traditional notions associated with such events such as instrumental (or technologically-based) virtuosity and performance presence, for fixed electronic works and audio-visual works that are essentially studio-based products the pertinence of the concert is a more vexed one. Pedro Oliveira (2012) writes,

The whole point is that the *live* is getting progressively equalized to the *recorded* as being the same aesthetic experience. And there lies the biggest problem to me: we expect concerts to sound *as good, as accurate* and *as clear* as what we hear in a recording that took probably way longer than two hours to be meticulously designed. And to match these expectations, artists nowadays have to rely more on the *spectacle* than on the *musical* part of a live show [...] Music has become nothing but a commodity. Music is ubiquitous, evermore present in our everyday lives and, as a consumer good and sadly so, of little to no value [...] So when music ceases to be the important factor – because you can get the same thing at home with definitely more comfortable settings – why would the performer put a lot of effort to (re)produce carefully what they've recorded before, when they can just press play? To *meet the artist*, to share the same space as this "*carefully-crafted persona*" is a form of social statement, and also one of the biggest characteristics of fandom.

With an increasing emphasis on 3D audio studios⁸ and continued research in this area there will always be a need for concert presentations of such work. However, Gracyk notes that the argument for social interaction at concerts is now being replaced or perhaps augmented by the online communication of the experience of these events via Facebook and twitter. Gracyk (1999, p. 148) writes,

The talk is now in virtual space, where hundreds of Internet sites are devoted to the discussion of music [...] Interaction between audience members is no longer concentrated around the time and place of performances [...] The social formation typical of live performance gives way to a different social formation where audiences favor recorded music over live performance.

Furthermore, psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen claims that technology is a key component for what he calls 'social saturation' and 'bending of life forms' (Gergen, 1991, p. 200). In other words, it means that the relationships mediated by technology, in postmodern society, are not constrained by location nor geography; rather, they may happen anywhere for they have become effectively 'unglued' (Gergen, 1991 p. 64).

3. Digital Artefacts

The arguments presented above suggest that for experimental electronic music in particular there is a place for both the concert and the digital artefact. What the authors question however, is what does it mean to release something that is digital native? Is a collection of digital tracks enough? How can the audience experience be enhanced? Inherent in this latter question are ideas that stem from interactive and graphic design to the wildly ambitious and attention grabbing. There is a sense of occasion that is lost with a digital release and what is

⁸ Such as those at the University of Huddersfield, NoTAM (Oslo), University of Montreal, ZKM (Karlsruhe), KMH (Stockholm) to name but a few.

evident in the past few years is that there is the feeling that releasing an album digitally also requires some kind of event or additional content surrounding it. For example, the release of John Frusciante's *Enclosure* (2014) was accompanied by a spectacular event which comprised the album being sent into space by rocket and with certain tracks being streamed from space only at specific times. On his website Frusciante writes,

On March 29th, 2014, ENCLOSURE was loaded onto an experimental Cube Satellite called Sat-JF14 and launched into space aboard an Interorbital Systems' NEPTUNE Modular Rocket.

Beginning today, March 31st, fans from around the world can download the free, custom-built Sat-JF14 mobile application which will enable users to track Sat-JF14's movement in real time. When Sat-JF14 hovers over a users' geographic region, ENCLOSURE will be unlocked, allowing users to listen to the album for free on any iOS or Android mobile device. Sat - JF14 also supports an integrated social chat platform giving fans the ability to communicate with one another after listening to the music. The album preview will last until midnight on April 7th, at which point Sat-JF14 will cease transmission.⁹

Although *Enclosure* offers an extreme example, other digital, and more accessible technologies, have much to offer the digital musician as a means of communicating more to their audience about a particular release. Erased Tapes Records specialise in limited edition vinyl releases collaborating with Berlin based graphic design studio FELD and American contemporary artist Gregory Euclide and the Wavefolder label offer the digital download of music and origami craftwork¹⁰. Pedro Oliveira (2012, p. 66) writes,

[...] society's experience with electronic objects have evolved and changed significantly in the past twenty to thirty years. Moreover, these shifts have happened at such a rapid rate that the paradigms associated with how these experiences are constructed may have not followed along, particularly in the way electronic objects and conceptual models of interaction are designed. As Anthony Dunne (2005, p. 9) remarks, "[...] generally, designers have not exploited the aesthetic dimensions of new materials with the same energy that engineers have exploited their functional possibilities [...]" This means that there might be a general lack of studies questioning the role of these experiences in everyday life, and how society constructs behavior and organizes itself, in order to comply to these experiences mediated by technology.

Oliveira posits that one possible future for music lies at the intersection of Interaction Design and Sound Studies. For Anthony Dunne the real task for designers nowadays is to explore "the realms of metaphysics, poetry and aesthetics, where little research has been carried out [instead of] technical and semiotic functionality, where optimal levels of performance are already attainable." (Dunne, 2005 p. 20) Another area worthy of further investigation is what Dunne terms 'para-functionality'. According to him, it means "a form of design where function is used to encourage reflection on how electronic products condition our behaviour. [... S]uch design is within the realms of utility but attempts to go beyond conventional definitions to include the poetic."

4. The iBook

In 2011 Bjork released the multi-platform album *Biophilia*. The Biophilia APP was a means of listening, exploring and remixing the music on the album in a unique interactive and personal manner. Regarding Bjork's *Biophilia*, Nicola Dibben states that,

⁹ <http://johnfrusciante.com> (last accessed 09/14).

¹⁰ www.wavefolder.net (last accessed 09/14).

Biophilia represents a good case study to examine the consequences and opportunities of digitalisation for music: the creation of new formats and their implications for modes of listening, stratification of the market for physical artefacts, the role of extramusical materials, implications for the expression of a unified artistic vision, unification of digital and material copy, and new opportunities for musical learning.¹¹

Though less interactive than an APP, what the iBook and concert share with it is the act of listening and watching (or reading) and the exclusion of the external environment and other activity to engage in a contemplative or engrossing activity. What still draws people to concerts and the drive behind the authors use of the iBook is the notion of experience and our role in designing that experience or a consideration of what Simon Emmerson calls 'presences'¹². As the iBook application is free and readily available can we consider the format as the next step in the commodification of 'professional' production. No longer do we merely need CD tools. As with many Apple iOS applications, the iBooks Author software allows the user to be more interactive with NUI¹³ rather than traditional WIMP¹⁴ technology.

For the authors, the iBook offers a distinctive medium for new artistic exploration that moves beyond the album as a purely musical release. It also questions what it means to release something native to the digital domain rather than merely providing digital audio files in an analogue to the physical CD or using the iBook as a means of distributing additional content about the music or the 'making of' the album. What Adams' work in the duo 'Hollow Mountain' and Adkins' *Rift Patterns* (Audiobulb 2014) demonstrates is the dematerialisation of music in the digital age part of what music sociologists term 'digital mediamorphosis' (Huber, 2013). For decades forms of sonic art and experimental electronic music have perpetuated the traditional concert format often expanding the proscenium format through multi-channel surround sound presentation. This was in many ways an inherited form. Radio was also seen as a more native medium for electronic music and some broadcasts such as those by Christian Zanesi at the GRM have investigated binaural and 5.1 digital broadcast formats.

The iBook is a format that facilitates 96 KHz/16-bit audio playback as opposed to the 44.1 KHz of CD and the former was used for the high resolution version of *Rift Patterns* (Audiobulb 2014). Although the authors acknowledge that the iBook is potentially a transitional technology that will most likely be replaced by streaming such content as bandwidth continues to increase, there are a number of advantages that the iBook currently has that were considered by the authors. Once downloaded the iBook content can be watched, read and listened to without further access to the web. The iBook is a readily supported format and allows the individual artist to create a bespoke professional product. As such there is still a sense of ownership for the audience rather than mere consumption via a website. The iBook is a constrained format (in a positive sense). The APP is potentially too rich in its semiotic for many consumers. Although many people like sharing and creating, music is for the majority still a passive experience. As such tools need to enhance the music and not be a

¹¹ Nicola Dibben, Abstract for paper presentation "Digitalisation not Dematerialisation: The Musical Artefact in the Digital Age", *Seminar 22 November 2011*, Southampton, University of Southampton, www.southampton.ac.uk/music/news/seminars/2011/11/22_nicola_dibben.page (last accessed 09/14).

¹² Simon Emmerson, *Living Electronic Music*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, pp. 2-3.

¹³ Natural User Interface.

¹⁴ Windows Icons Menus Pointers.

hindrance to its reception or contemplation. A further advantage of the iBook is that it can provide context for the music without being didactic about its content or construction.

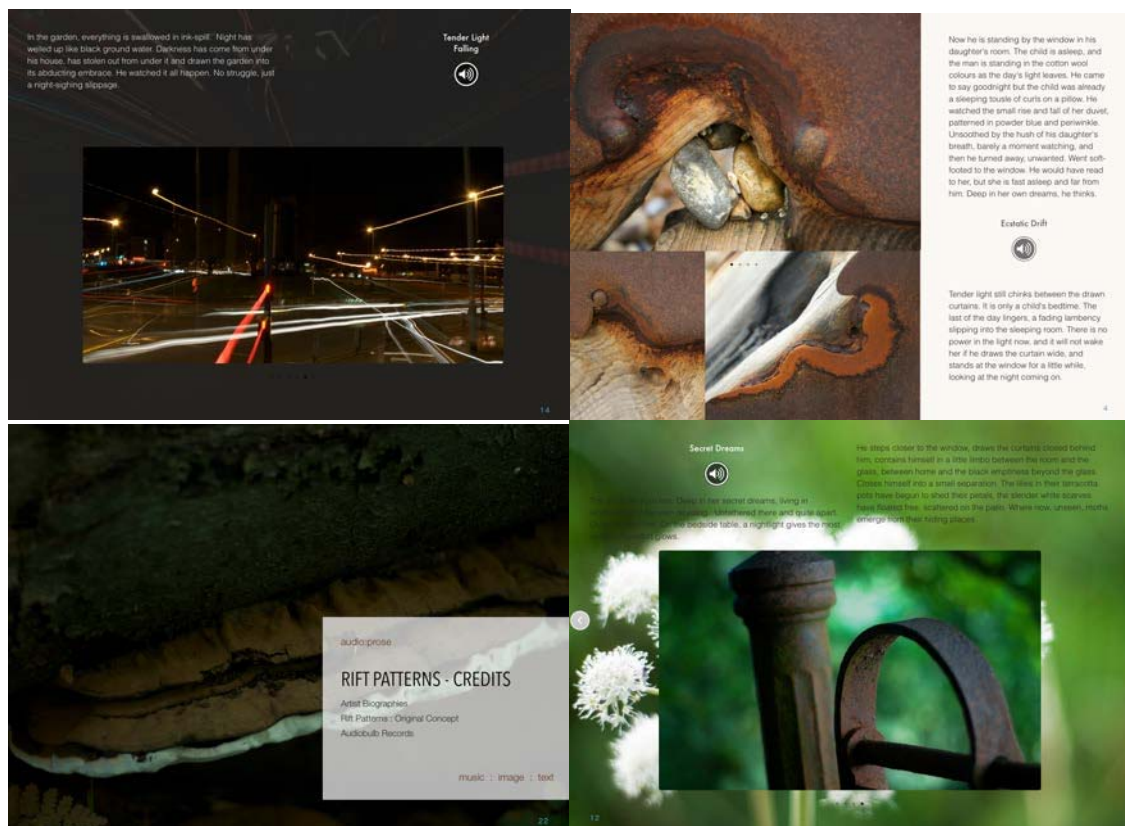


Figure 1: Screenshots from *Rift Patterns* (images by Stephen Harvey)

From this perspective it can be seen as an extension of album art and the visual semiotics this encompasses (see Figure 1).

The *Rift Patterns* release takes the form of an iBook in which the four artists involved (the writer Deborah Templeton, video artist Jason Payne, photographer and designer Stephen Harvey and composer Monty Adkins) responded to the theme of psychogeography. All four shared materials as they were being produced but there was no attempt for any one component to illustrate the other. As such, four different perspectives on the theme emerge and the user is invited to make their own connections between them. This format is rich and suggestive in its interpretative possibilities.

The fact that iBook Author is conceived as a platform to produce books allows a user access to the terminology and paraphernalia associated with books, something that can have its own creative applications. One example of this is the project Hollow Mountain who releases their music as 'chapters' (see Figure 2). Hollow Mountain is a collaborative project between Tom Adams and Rhys Copeland that has a long term creative trajectory. The collaborators regard the project as being a single continuous body of work that develops over time as a result of a cyclic composition workflow involving recording improvisations and resampling the recordings in further improvisations. Due to the non-standard timeframe of the project, a typical 'album' style release is not appropriate. Instead the project is documented via audio recordings, live videos and written passages that are collected and released annually as a new iBook chapter.

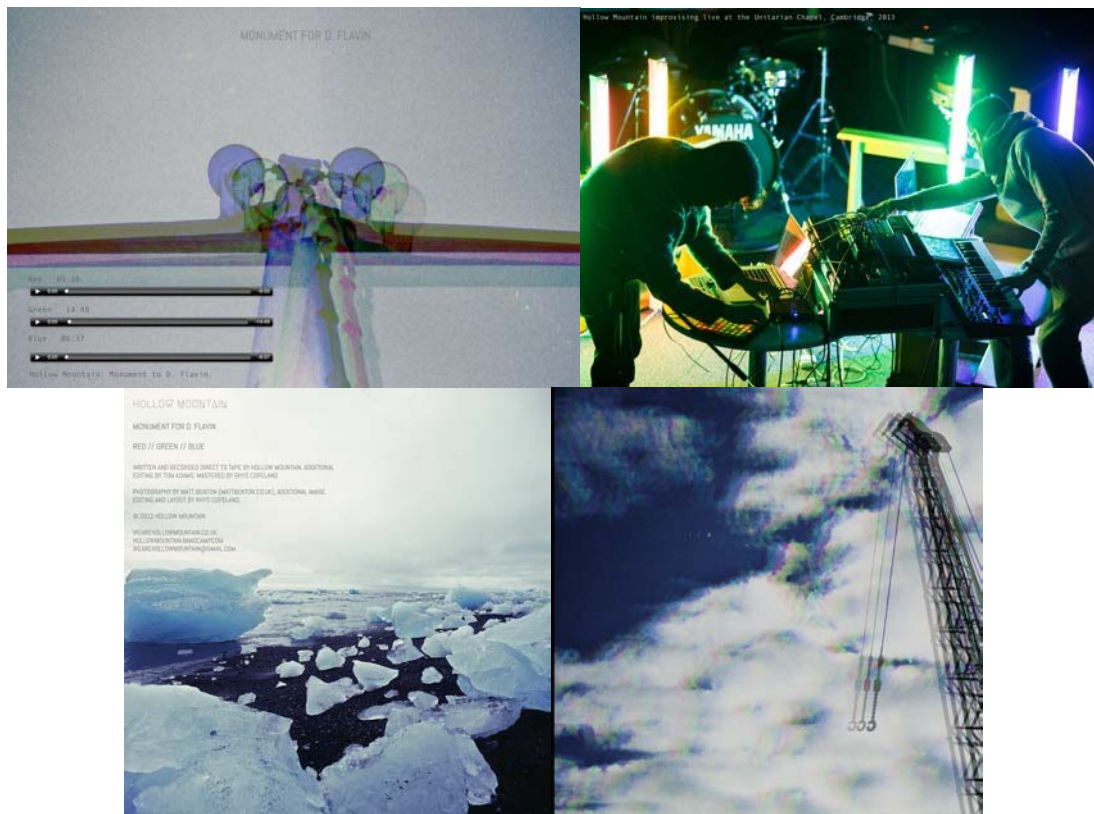


Figure 2: Screenshots from release by Hollow Mountain

By adopting the terminology ‘chapters’ and releasing in a format intended for books the idea that each chapter is part of a greater narrative arc is implied and makes for an increased sense of coherency with the projects manifesto.

5. Conclusion

Whilst the authors recognise that there are many alternatives for the dissemination and distribution of new music we also assert that the iBook has a significant potential as a platform for releasing new work than merely documenting or supporting the release. The format can seamlessly integrate high quality audio, video, image and text to provide an enhanced and integrated new media experience.

What is clear is that the digital consumption of music and other digital content that accompanies it will become ubiquitous. The level at which the audiences choose to consume or interact with this ‘content’ is the variable that seems most likely to develop as interaction design and the ergonomics of user experience come to play a larger part in the consideration of the nature of the final product. This trend is reflected in one of the panel discussions (“Digital Music: it’s not a concert, it’s a conversation”) at *SXSW Music 2014* the introduction to which stated that,

Social platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr have addressed the human desire for everyday interactions online, but digital music services have been slow to adopt it. People find a music service that appeals to them, pay a subscription fee, & begin to listen and potentially rediscover huge catalogs that offer a leaned-back listening experience. Except SoundCloud, the

world of music streaming is still very much a concert environment: you show up, you listen, but can't actively interact or connect with artists or other fans.

Today, music consumption is about the concert, but it should not be. It's about the conversation – where creators produce work while offering fans an opportunity to participate on any level they choose to – listening, sharing, commenting directly on the audio of an artist to offer feedback or become a creator, too. The future of the music industry is a two-way conversation, with artists and labels just beginning to understand how to make use of new formats.¹⁵

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¹⁵ "Digital Music: it's not a concert, it's a conversation", *SXSW PanelPicker, SXSW Music 2014*, <http://panelpicker.sxsw.com/vote/21443> (last accessed 09/14). South by Southwest (SXSW) Music and Media Conference is a leading music industry event exploring the future of the music industry through panels, talks, a Trade Show and other conference activities.

