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# “It’s A Social Thing Not A Nature Thing” : Popular Music Practices in Reykjavík, Iceland

## Introduction

Over the last three decades, alongside its volatile volcanoes and the collapse of its banking sector, Iceland’s reputation has been increasingly tied to the prominence of its music.<sup>1</sup> Associated with an effervescent independent scene, the global success of the singer Björk and the post-rock band Sigur Rós, as well as what is billed as the “hippest long weekend on the annual music-festival calendar” (<http://icelandairwaves.is/>), the country has been positioned as one of the world’s most vibrant cultural hotspots. Its music has been subject to a number of journalistic eulogies, books and documentaries, the most well known of which, *Screaming Masterpiece* (2005), announces the vibrancy of the country’s music scene as radically disproportionate to its size. Meanwhile, Iceland’s popularity as a destination for music tourism has shaped commercial and state-led initiatives for economic growth and spawned a number of official reports attempting to quantify the contribution that music makes to the country’s cultural and economic well being (Sigurðardóttir and Young, 2011). With a population of only 120,000, Reykjavík, in particular, has been lauded as a hub of prodigious musical activity, its status enhanced by associations with a spirit of frenetic creativity and untrammelled hedonism immortalized in Baltasar Kormákur’s indie film, *101 Reykjavík* (2000).

Why, and indeed whether, Iceland “punches above its weight” musically, is a matter of some debate (Barrett, 2008: 11). As we shall see, the question already assumes certain assumptions about privileged or aberrant cases and, in any case, there are important counter-narratives to be considered, here. But those looking for answers are invariably directed to a raft of ill-defined conditions: the nation’s Viking heritage, its geographical isolation in the middle of the North Atlantic, as well as a hostile climate that forces musicians to spend dark winters in recording studios (Sullivan, 2006). Another explanation with traction is apparent in the drift of much music journalism as well as some academic work and it is the idea that the country’s music is deeply rooted in and inspired by its nature and landscapes. Here, the sheer quality and depth of feeling apparent in Iceland’s music is attributed to the creative turbulence of its natural environment. As with nature, so with culture.

Of course, it would be short-sighted to dismiss environmental factors in the shaping of national identity and creative practices. Indeed, important research

exists on the importance of place and space in the construction of musical, regional and national identities (Connell and Gibson, 2003; Whiteley, Bennett and Hawkins, 2004). But, to reduce the complexity of musical worlds to the immanent or generative qualities of nature is simplistic at best, and damaging at worst. After exploring why this might be so, the paper takes a different tack. Rather than begin with an assumption of Iceland's natural or cultural exceptionalism, it chooses to build a more grounded picture of the activities of musicians and associated workers. It therefore takes its cue from work in anthropology, musicology, cultural sociology and popular music studies (some, but by no means all of it, ethnographic in character), that examines the texture of material practices in the everyday lives of musicians and associated cultural workers (Cohen, 1991; Becker, 1982; Finnegan, 2007; Becker, 1982). As Finnegan argues, when one asks what practices operate at a local level, the picture that unfolds is one of "people actively engaging in intensely human practices in which they took trouble and pains, in which they experienced disputes and sociability" (Finnegan, 2007: xv). To understand why music matters to people is, in other words, to be oriented to the encounters, moments and events through which particular music-based attachments are given shape and meaning (Cohen, 2007; DeNora, 2000). This is to offer insights into the collective nature of "musicking" (Small, 1998) where music expresses a "continuing ability to enhance sociality and sociability in ordinary life" (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 9).

From this foundation, we are certainly better placed to identify those situated interactions that contribute to the flourishing of local music cultures. With particular reference to Reykjavík, then, the paper aims to show how the city's socio-spatial configuration both mirrors and favours the development of dense creative networks and attendant forms of conflict, diversity and collaboration. To attend to the social spaces of music is, after all, to consider music as a collective accomplishment that happens *in situ*, in concrete settings (Becker, 1982). But there are other important factors, too, including the integrative nature of music education on the island, the formation of a small but influential punk scene in the 1980s and the global marketing of the country's music through an increasingly agile cluster of cultural agencies and intermediaries. Getting a sense of the city's routine musical practices, therefore, opens an aperture on the location of place-based musics within prevailing social and economic conditions. This is where scene dynamics and the operation of everyday networks meet systemic constraints such as the commercial positions taken by national and trans-national agents in a context where particular forms of creativity are commodified and turned into reputational capital.

The article is based on a mix of semi-structured, primary (n=15) and published, secondary (n=20) interviews with Icelandic musicians, journalists, historians and industry personnel, as well as four ethnographic fieldwork visits and an examination of an assortment of documentary and statistical sources. The

observational material is based on three short periods spent around the *Iceland Airwaves* festival between 2009-2012 and a similar period spent in the capital and the Westfjords region outside the festival period. Very little English-language academic work currently exists on Iceland's musical worlds, so one of the article's rather modest aims is to provide non-specialists with a critical introduction to some selective aspects of this cultural setting (see also Dibben, 2009; Mitchell, 2009; Cannady, forthcoming). A second aim, however, is to explore what might be accomplished in bringing together what are often seen as discrete concepts - field, space, world and scene - in understanding the nature of music-based associations in dense urban settings. Here, the paper's intention is to show how one might deploy different concepts at strategic points in order to draw out different scales, characteristics and emphases without necessarily reducing one to the other. Indeed, if one conceives of an overlap between global, urban and local processes, then it's important to show that music-based social spaces are complex imbroglios in which are bundled a range of materials, practices and relations. After presenting the empirical case, the paper will conclude with some hints towards a sociology of music spaces that doesn't lose sight of the "stuff" of place, position and practice.

### **Borealism and the Myth of the Landscape**

From an historical point of view, the cultural distillation of Icelandic nature, folklore and national character was already well under way by the turn of the last century (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1996). North American and European artists and poets, such as William Morris and W.H. Auden made arduous "pilgrimages" to the country and, propelled by a post-Enlightenment search for the pure and beguiling, sought out a Europe at the very limits of Europe: animistic, unspoiled, primitive, and therefore readily incorporated into the aesthetic predilections of European romanticism (Einarsson, 1996). With its face turned towards antiquity and against the vagaries of modern industrialism, Iceland was the perfect container for a romantic vision of the grandiloquent, untouched and authentic. Its landscapes evoked strong passions, its sagas connoted adventure, while its peoples' egalitarian relations even offered Morris a potential model for utopia (Morris, 1996).

Schram terms this package of representations "Borealism" and defines it as "the signification, practice and performance of the ontological and epistemological distinction in power between North and South" (Schram, 2011: 99; see also Isleifsson, 2011). The "idea of north" is relational, of course, which is why it can be mobilized even within Nordic countries to represent the far northern, Sami-populated, regions as exotic or primitive (Hastrup, 1998). Further, if Borealism has conceptual leverage, we must be careful not to conflate it with the subjugating processes of "Orientalism" that construct the West's relation to the far East through a well-developed institutional and discursive apparatus (Said, 2003). After all, Nordic countries have largely only been colonized by other Nordic countries. Yet, there are parallels between the

two ideological formations, not least in the way Borealistic imagery functions to exoticise the north through logics of self identification and othering. Here, the north stands for a remote and magical kingdom, distant from the centres of European power, but evoking a mix of wonder, awe and credulity.

As far as music is concerned, the romantic exaltation of natural beauty is tied to two related assumptions: firstly, that nature inspires sound, art and national culture - that is, that a relation of affinity exists between the natural environment, autochthonous creativity and the national "soul". This is an assumption that can be traced back to the idealist and *sturm und drang* philosophies of Herder and Fichte (Oxfeldt, 2005); and, secondly, that Iceland's music, could not have come from anywhere else but the rousing wastes and wilds of its land. Here, music and nature collapse in the act of representation, analogy and metaphor.

It's rare, in this connection, to find a review of the Icelandic post-rock band Sigur Rós that does not describe their music as "glacial" or decipher its emotional effect in relation to qualities of desolation or loneliness. Journalists often frame their stories of Iceland and its music as if they were pioneering anthropologists discovering uncharted lands or geologists describing an alien planet. In 2001, the British music journalist Rob Young characteristically titled his piece on Icelandic music, "Desolation Angels" and wrote that Sigur Rós made "hymns from the waste" (Young, 2001: 33). Another critic notes the "stream of talent [that] has leaked from the island like lava" (Sullivan, 2006: 12), while much of Björk's *oeuvre* is, equally, aligned to ideas of an awesome but nurturing landscape. Meanwhile, nature documentaries, such as the BBC's enormously popular *Planet Earth* series, are particularly inclined to overlay Sigur Rós' hit "Hoppipolla" onto an iconography of natural wonder, the song's sweeping crescendos deployed to add greater impact to footage of craggy landscapes, waterfalls, glaciers and volcanoes.

Now, place is undoubtedly an important condition for the unfurling of musical meanings. As Mitchell rightly points out, it's not just that bands get associated with particular places (Liverpool and The Beatles, Nirvana and Seattle, Kraftwerk and Düsseldorf), but that these places also get "into" the music through imaginary cartographies or what Crang calls "sonoric landscapes" (Mitchell, 2009: 174; Connell and Gibson, 2003). From this perspective, Sigur Rós' music (and particularly their 2007 documentary *Heima*) can certainly be read through a poetics of the Icelandic landscape, as evoking and dramatizing "Nordic textures" (Mitchell, 2009: 188). Equally, it would be hard to decipher the semiotic density of Björk's music videos without recourse to the interpellation of Icelandic nationhood as a harmony of people and land (Dibben, 2009). In both of these cases, in fact, music and its associated imagery helps to actively constitute rather than reflect a pre-existing and static national identity.

But there are still dangers, here. The first is the assumption that only “pure” Icelandic cartographies are constitutive of musical practices, not their imbrication with an always already existing *mélange* of local and trans-local imaginaries. As the Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson in the documentary *Screaming Masterpiece* points out, Iceland’s geographical location between North America and Europe favours a cultural in-between-ness in which a complex re-translation of nested influences and “scapes” (financial, technological, global, rural, urban, linguistic, natural, cultural) play out (Appadurai, 1990). Secondly, in reaching for nature as a locus of meaning, there is the danger of drifting back into a naïve Borealism that neatly packages up Icelandic identities and marginalizes diverse other ways of understanding its musics. Nowadays, as Grétarsdóttir (forthcoming) points out, the discursive affiliation between nature and creativity has itself become a strapline used by neo-liberal agents in Iceland, because branding the nation as a free-spirited creative centre suits a corporate nationalist version of innovation. Here, she notes how the state’s “Image of Iceland Report” of 2008, was based around a graphic of an erupting hot spring, explicitly linking the bubbling core of Icelandic nature with economic innovation, cultural expression and Icelanders’ “wild and often bold and unpredictable behaviour” (Icelandic Prime Minister’s Office, cited in Grétarsdóttir, forthcoming: 5).

Little wonder, then, that these images and connections are often experienced as restrictive by Icelanders themselves. When asked about how nature entered into or influenced their works, most of the musicians I spoke to responded with a mix of despair, boredom and irony. They lamented the lack of repertoires for understanding the multi-faceted and plural influences on their music. The formation of contrapuntal narratives about musical identities are more than resistant gestures, here, but point to the diverse sites and relations that articulate with musicians’ everyday working practices:

“If you’re 15 it’s really boring to live here, because you can’t do anything. You smoke outside a shop and spit into a giant puddle” (Musician 1, personal interview).

“I’ve actually never been to a glacier. I’m not proud of it, but I think it’s a different thing when you live in a place. In the city there are good things to see as well” (Musician 2, personal interview).

“So what is it about Iceland that leads to such great music? Every time you ask this, PR agencies piss themselves with glee and half of the music scene vomits a little. And so are born the stories of being under the influence of unique Icelandic nature – the stories that will get written about (because that’s what this game is really about)” (Borgason, 2012: n.p.).

“It’s much more of a social thing than a nature thing” (Musician 3, personal interview).

Not only do these reflections paint a very different picture of Iceland to the hegemonic narratives of Borealism, but they act as an opening onto another set

of influences and ways of seeing - the “social thing” as Musician 3 puts it - from which a grounded analysis might begin. If “musicking” is essentially about doing music in location with others, then one way to identify these practices is to examine processes of collaborative interaction *in vivo* - in other words, to examine creative endeavours as collective accomplishments of flesh and blood actors, situated and contextualized in specific locations (Martin, 2006). The rest of the article attempts to do so in relation to four overlapping activities: learning, collaborating, conflicting and promoting. This follows a brief contextual summary of the development of Iceland’s rock and popular music field.

## Rock and Popular Music in Iceland

The early history of rock and popular music in Iceland derives from two factors that are common to many national cases: the emergence of working-class youth formations in a transitional labour market, and the siting of an American airbase. During the Second World War and after, the airbase at Keflavík, though controversial, provided a significant boost to the jobs market and Icelandic economy. It also impacted on Icelandic culture, in general, with the rise of the dance hall and youth-based rock ‘n’ roll cultures. Diners and milk bars with jukeboxes sprang up in the capital while the military’s radio station was a crucial channel for the dissemination of “youth” records by the likes of Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Chuck Berry and The Rolling Stones. Those who wanted to sample the latest imports from Europe and America could also see live performances by both local and foreign bands at the Hótel Borg, the first hotel to be built in the capital.

By the 1960s and 1970s, a “second wave” of rock marked itself in the emergence of young beat groups, including Beatles cover bands like Hljómar and the rise of politically-motivated acts like Megas, who inspired a cult following in the “alternative” arts scene in the mid-70s (Gudmondsson, 1993). The development of this scene was, in fact, a key catalyst for the emergence of a more diversified field and the aspirations, position-takings and shock tactics of a newer generation of aspiring avant-garde musicians (Bourdieu, 1993). The rise of “Music Nova” (new music), was one aspect of the attempt at alternative sonic experimentation and the satirising lyrics of the band Stuðmenn were clearly directed towards an older ‘60s sound. Another was the development of the punk scene from the early 1980s.

As one of my respondents put it:

“There is no deep musical tradition in Iceland so the base we have to build on is punk...that is when music started growing here so there has been a do-it-yourself attitude here...it’s an inherited attitude” (Musician 4, personal interview).

Drawing on the punk aesthetic of American and British bands, the Icelandic punk scene articulated with networked self-reliance as a modality of creative conduct and collaboration. Punk bands like Tappi Tíkarrass, Kukl, Utangarðsmenn and Purrkur Pillnikk represented a close urban network of like-minded individuals who defended the idea of creative autonomy by “shaking things up”, as Björk put it in the film *Screaming Masterpiece*. While incorporating the avant-garde pretensions of poets, literary figures and pranksters, it was through music that the scene channeled its collective effervescence. Captured in Friðrik Þór Friðriksson’s 1981-1982 documentary *Rokk í Reykjavík*, a spate of newly formed bands - many of whom admitted they couldn’t play their instruments - performed to enthusiastic young audiences in the youth centres, pubs and basements of the downtown area of Reykjavík.

Apart from the live circuit, central to this emerging network was the rise of independent record stores and labels such as Smekkleysa (“Bad Taste Records”), which provided an outlet for new bands to record and distribute their own material for the first time. There are no international chain stores on the island, so the independent stores were, and still are, crucial for shaping the contours of the local scene. Indeed, while punk was (like elsewhere) a fairly short lived affair on the island, much of the musical support system that was laid around that time is still intact, as are many of its network dynamics and representative figures. The latter includes Einar Örn Benediktsson, founding member of The Sugarcubes and Smekkleysa, and who, at the time of writing, chairs the committee on culture and tourism at the Reykjavík city council.<sup>2</sup>

Here, it makes sense to think of Reykjavík as hosting a small but closely knit micro-industry or “art world” (Becker, 1982), comprising a loosely structured collection of often informally organized personnel, tied to a local system of attention, reputation and sales. Today, around 230 titles are released in Iceland annually and 55% of albums sold are by local artists (<http://www.static.is/>). But, while the local scene still has a strong CD-release mentality, the small size of the market means that any artist who sells 20 or 30 CDs during a week is likely to have a top 10 selling album. This means that intra-dynamic forces of friendship and locality are significant driving factors in retail because, as the composer Ólafur Arnalds puts it: “you probably know someone in the band, so you want to buy the CD” (Ólafur Arnalds, [sonic-iceland.com](http://sonic-iceland.com)).

Precisely because sales are so insignificant and the market so small, however, the aspirations of many of the bands I’ve spoken to are not about “making it” as a commercial success or even through live performance, but to self-sustain music practices with friends. In other words, success is measured more by sustainability than sales. In the absence of major labels even getting signed is a fairly understated exercise as one representative from the small Icelandic label,



Brak Records, puts it:

“The basic concept is that we find an artist that we like, and we offer a release - most of the things are already home-recorded, so we’re not doing anything extravagant to put their stuff out. And they have complete artistic control” (Petur, Brak Records, [sonic-iceland.com](http://sonic-iceland.com)).

While one must be careful with deploying the term “DIY” to describe a whole regional system of music making, there is certainly evidence that much of the local scene is sustained by mutual practices of sharing, self-sufficiency and collective conduct. Here, what de Certeau (1984) terms “making do” is very much part of the everyday tactics and culture of survival in the capital, a way to bypass financial considerations and make use of reciprocal processes of “people making music and music making people” (Chrysagis, 2013: 19). Indeed, one of my respondents described this as a kind of “pragmatic fearlessness”, where musicians will often alight upon musical projects and collaborations without being haunted by failure because planning is rare and obstacles are sorted out in each unfolding moment.

This is certainly not to say that Icelandic music hasn’t widened dramatically since the days of punk, however. Nor is it to dismiss internal conflict or the growth of a set of subsidiary cultural agencies geared towards promoting Icelandic music abroad (as will be argued below). Indeed, there has been a dramatic proliferation of genres, musicians and organisations associated with popular music since the 1980s. The Icelandic Musicians’ Union, for instance, is by far the largest of the culture and media associations, while an increased number of music publishers - rising from a base of 19 in 1979 to around 100 in 2010 - reflects this widening, ([www.static.is](http://www.static.is)). Like elsewhere, digital models of dissemination and consumption are also gaining ground. But, even here there is a localized digital infrastructure at work with indigenous sites like Gokoyoko providing a largely Icelandic catalogue for purchase and subscription. In short, intrinsic to the capital’s creative endeavors is an inter-subjective desire to make music happen despite market constraints. Indeed, there is some speculation among commentators and musicians that the scene survived the economic crash of 2008 unscathed precisely because it was small and autonomous enough from the large-scale sector to be unaffected: there was never much money in the local music industry to begin with. In any case, as a system of collective urban conventions and practices, punk prepared musicians for the rigors of everyday musicking because bands already knew how to make their own posters, distribute their own CDs, promote, and put on their own gigs. And here, self-sustaining qualities of urban practice are predicated upon and mirrored by the early formation of education and friendship networks.

### **Learning: Education, Friendship and Competition**

While formal music education is often seen as an ideological mechanism for the

acquisition and reinforcement of a refined musical habitus, it can also play a vital role in the dissemination of basic musical literacies. As Green (2008) notes, the Nordic countries have been particularly progressive in promoting inclusive policies into their music curricula, including bringing popular music into the classroom and both the state and private sectors are hugely important in providing young people with a musical start. Indeed, schools are arguably more integral to the creation of musical networks in Iceland than art colleges and universities and this has important implications for how, where and with whom young people learn.

School expectancy rates are high in Iceland. On average, Icelanders stay in education for 20 years, a figure second only to Finland in Europe, and a key strand of the education system is provided by music schools. Iceland has an extensive system of music education, comprising a large, subsidized sector and a smaller, private sector of schools and conservatories. A third strand comprises a voluntary and amateur network of school marching bands, choirs and youth clubs with strong links to local communities, where tuition often also takes place.

As far as the subsidized sector goes, in 1989 it became statutory for local authorities to fully-fund music schools in their region. Hence, every municipality in Iceland has its own music school, there are 87 in total, with an estimated 12,000 students studying music at any time (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2007). Many schools offer additional pre-school classes, where children as young as 3 years old can play along with other students, their parents or grandparents, although music education tends to begin around 8 years of age. At this age, students usually enter the music school at elementary level and progress through intermediate and advanced levels through a series of examinations. A national curriculum exists and while it conforms to a fairly conventional syllabus based on the western classical tradition, it also includes provision for rock, jazz and popular music, where the emphasis is on improvisation and group playing (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2007). Some schools also offer their own out-of-school provision in other styles and techniques like African drumming, although classes for voice and guitar tend to be the most popular choice for on-course students.

Current debates about the prominence of rock and pop in Iceland have led some music teachers to question the skewed balance towards and consecration of the western classical canon in the curriculum (Bamford, 2009). Nevertheless, it is clear from interviews with both music teachers and musicians that music education plays a formative role in the lives of rock and pop musicians, not just in terms of instilling an early "feel for the game" (that is, the acquisition through formal mechanisms of the basic elements of musical competence, including rhythm, playing from memory, technique, sight-reading, improvisation and so on), but also in establishing nascent friendship networks. This latent function is evident in the tracing of enduring musical ties in the

form of bands, collaborations and jamming partners.

One interviewee, himself a music teacher, spoke of the impact of the various state and voluntary channels of education on musical literacy in general, but particularly the capacity of young people to play with others in formal and informal musical settings. It is in these settings, he pointed out, that many young bands start out and while the motivations are often prosaic (“we wanted to have a good time and hang out” one musician told me), the impact of these early collaborations is striking, for they build the grounds for “collective action” (Becker, 1974). In the case of the Icelandic band Retro Stefson, for instance, members met at a pre-school and were taught by the singer of an older and more established band at a youth centre who entered them in a competition. The band didn’t win, but by their early teens they had already compiled a set of performable songs and were forming an understanding of music as an interactional encounter and situation.

A key staging post for young and inexperienced bands is *The Icelandic Music Experiments* (Músíktílaunir), a kind of battle of the bands festival held annually in the capital since 1982. Organized in conjunction with youth clubs in the Reykjavík area, the competition comprises five heats each featuring ten acts and is seen as a good opportunity for bands to get local exposure. Many winners, including the 2010 winners *Of Monsters and Men*, have gone on to become successful beyond the local scene, and the competition is often attended by label representatives looking for new talent. For many bands, this is their first experience of playing a gig, and most are still at school, but the idea of gigging this early is certainly not unusual in Iceland. Indeed, there’s a telling moment in *Screaming Masterpiece* when a barely-formed school band from Stokkseyri (population: 428) are invited by the hugely popular American band The Foo Fighters to cover one of the latter’s songs on stage during the *Iceland Airwaves* festival to several thousand people. It was their first public performance.

Finally, on the theme of education, it’s worth mentioning that many of the schools on the island are established venues on the live circuit and provide a small income for musicians. Iceland’s most popular bands will often put on two shows: an evening show for adults, and a free afternoon show for kids at the local school or youth centre. Outside of Reykjavík, in the small villages, live music provision is less concentrated, but include the Sveitaballs (countryside balls). These are live concerts in which touring bands will play cover versions of popular and rock songs and where young people from the locality will come to dance and drink (Sullivan, 2003).

### **Collaborating: Cultural Density and Urban Networks in 101**

If music scenes are “cultural space[s] in which a range of musical practices co-exist” (Straw, 1991: 373), then at a basic level these are practices based on

interacting agents who form clusters oriented to music-related activities. As sociologists and musicologists tell us, the cultural space of the scene includes a developed or developing infrastructure of record stores, labels, venues and rehearsal rooms. It often has place dimensions based on a situated, co-present (or, increasingly online) community of music-makers and fans. And it is predicated on the collective activities of multiple actors who belong to and participate in the scene through always emergent social networks (Bennett and Peterson, 2004).

By this definition, Reykjavik demonstrates scene-like qualities with strong network properties: most of this happens in the centre of the city, in downtown Reykjavik, known by its infamous postal district 101. The main street is called Laugavegur. It's a long, narrow road littered with an assortment of businesses, retail outlets and bars. Many of the main live venues are situated on this street or within a few minute's walk of it. During the *Iceland Airwaves* festival many of the bars, book stores, coffee shops and hostels are transformed into free, off-venue locations where bands also play. On several occasions I've ended up seeing bands playing in their own bedrooms or living rooms on and around Laugavegur and the area provides a prompt for much fluid, contingent and regular social interaction.

Without exception, all of my interviewees mentioned how compact and close-knit the scene in Reykjavik is: how it has "village-like" properties, where everybody knows each other, borrows equipment from one another and supports each other. In the course of interviewing, it wasn't unusual for one interviewee to mention another whom I'd just interviewed: "he gave me my first break as a DJ"; "say hi to those guys for me"; "he owes us a margarita machine". In one interview, a DJ demonstrated how he would often stick his head out the window in his flat and shout down to somebody he knew on the street if he needed a cable or an adapter. Others mentioned the coincidental ways musicians met in 101, only to be recording a guitar line or vocal part for them the following day: "You just meet downtown. I think a lot is down to coincidence, you meet someone on the street and ask if he wants to record bass for your record the next day" (Helgi Jónsson, [sonic-iceland.com](http://sonic-iceland.com)).

In these respects, Reykjavik is more than an inert backdrop to musical practices and affiliations: the affordances of the urban fabric help to generate socio-musical connections and collectives. Reykjavik's compact centre, its densely packed and bustling downtown area and venues are intrinsic to the unfolding of inter-subjective musical affiliations and mutually-supportive clusters. The co-constitutive relations of music and its locale are heavily dependent on the configuration of the centre of the city, in this respect. The mere act of walking from one end of the street to the other can end in musical interchanges and as well as bumping into musicians on the strip, on several occasions I've ended up attending gigs I hadn't planned to by dint of chance and drift.

There's a second byproduct of these dense spatial networks, however, and that's a certain fluidity in the tasks and roles undertaken by musicians in the city: "there is a flow between the bands" as Órri Jonsson puts it in *Screaming Masterpiece*. An embodied convention in Iceland is that musicians tend to play in more than one band, as a result both of favours to friends and family and of contingent spatial interactions. Such networks also form across stylistic or sub-cultural affiliations rather than being confined within them, as Bóas from the rock band Reykjavík! puts it:

"We would rather play with our friends that play different music than to play with people we don't really know or like, just because their music is similar to ours" (sonic-iceland.com).

Here, connections within friendship groups often leads to the acquisition of a range of genre-specific techniques and a cross-fertilisation of styles, as well as a will to distinguish one's own band from others, as will be argued later. The jazz musician Thomas Einarsson speaks, for instance, of the way members of his band started out as punk guitarists but now play classical guitar (Furniss, 2007), while we might add that the formation of rough or *ad hoc* collectives in Iceland is a function of the need to source whatever and whoever is available. Observing bands play in Iceland can sometimes be an uncanny experience because the same faces invariably crop up in other musical contexts - playing tambourines, adding backing vocals or setting up the PA, for instance. And because very few musicians make a living out of music in Iceland, these collectives are heavily embedded in everyday relations. One interviewee described this as a kind of "creative gemeinschaft", where reciprocal relations between musicians are based on forms of mutual recognition and collective identifications. Another stated it more succinctly: "it all connects", he said.

### **Conflicting: Dispute, Distinction and Spatiality**

It would, of course, be wrong to suggest that the music scene in Iceland is based on collaborative networks that are entirely devoid of internecine disputes and fractures: to do so would be to replace one form of romantic harmony with another. Conflict is, indeed, endemic to all cultural fields, an insight provided by Bourdieu and his identification of the differentiating logics of social spaces (Bourdieu, 1993). Here, commitments to and battles over genre, judgment and taste are intrinsic to the relational positions and position-takings of artists. They are also a key catalyzing factor in the development of music-based identities and the personal attachments musicians have towards certain aesthetic styles. In Reykjavík's music field, two faultlines are particularly striking.

The first traces an orthodox distinction between high and low culture and finds expression in everyday decisions, structures and events, including (as elsewhere) favourable state subsidies for the high arts and the ongoing battles over the fate of music venues in the capital. In 2011, the opening of the new

flagship concert venue, Harpa, introduced a new object of dispute in the cultural field. Dogged by financial problems and the state's decision to reign in spending after the 2008 crash, the venue was proclaimed to be the home of Iceland's Symphony Orchestra and Icelandic Opera, as well as an all-embracing cultural centre that would host performances from across the musical spectrum.

Yet, the reality of this inclusive vision was immediately questioned by various influential figures in the popular music world. One musician, Bubbi Morthens ("the Icelandic Bob Dylan"), criticized the management of the venue and its associations with a self-selected cultural elite and vowed never to set foot in the place. Another, the "indie" musician Franz Gunnarsson, pointed to the restrictive policies in the management of the venue, including the refusal to let bands control their own sound and provide their own sound engineers. Other musicians voiced their discontent in the local media at the favourable positioning of classical musicians and the academies in the venue, with one summing up perceived cultural divisions between legitimate and popular music as follows:

"Academies of music hate people like us; they talk about 'real' instruments and 'real' musicians. Harpa was not made for us, it's classical music and conferences. They said it would be for everyone and then it came and they spent all the money that could have spent on music in the next 10 or 15 years" (Musician 5, personal interview).

Interestingly, Harpa's directors appear to have modified their music policy recently and the venue is now used as a set of performance spaces for the *Iceland Airwaves* festival as well as classical concerts. And yet the venue's reputation as a place for high cultural respectability continues to pose challenges for local musicians, especially those whose credibility is tied to a relation of opposition to "mainstream" or legitimized music. Here, schisms between "high" and "alternative" provide a potent set of aesthetic, discursive and spatial boundaries through which some musicians in the city orient and perform their musical identities.

Indeed, as the field has grown, so music genres have diversified in Reykjavík, and despite the existence of the collaborative networks mentioned earlier, a second set of differences have marked themselves in the spaces, habits and lifestyles of the city: between dance music and folk/rock/indie music, as the singer songwriter Svavar Knútur, notes:

"Our market is pretty limited, and very much divided. There's the electro and dance-oriented crowd, just wanting to drink and party and drive fast cars and stuff, and they would not appreciate what I do" (Svavar Knútur, [sonic-iceland.com](http://sonic-iceland.com)).

Here, what is notable is how perceived categories of taste, judgment and appreciation overlay spatial as well as aesthetic differences. Reykjavík's downtown area in some respects reflects these separations in the divisions between clubs and other spaces, with the former associated with bouncers, alcohol promotions and the "dance-oriented crowd". Age and gender are also

important markers in these distinctions and map onto the use of the city and its zones across different temporalities - typically, late night weekend parties for younger-aged female clubbers (Thornton, 1995).

But really, these conflicts and distinctions are fairly standard aspects of most fields of popular music. What's interesting is that in Iceland such conflicts and boundaries stick out a lot more because local networks and media (including the free alternative newspaper, the appropriately titled *Reykjavík Grapevine*) are that bit tighter, denser and effusive. In other words, such distinctions are spatially intensified and generate various musical and discursive practices, including subtle evasions of certain venues or even ignoring them as distinctions in rhetorics of democratic togetherness (see also Cohen, 1991).

This very density points to another set of intra-field distinctions, and this returns us to how the shape, size and configuration of the city affords certain kinds of everyday musical practices. In Reykjavík, good quality, cheap, rehearsal space is fairly limited so bands often end up sharing a space with other bands, rehearsing side-by-side. In the unfolding of these proximate spatio-sonic relations, bands often report a need for differentiation, because they want to sound distinct from one another:

"the reason why I think Reykjavík is unique is that you're practicing in a garage and there's a band practicing in the next garage and you don't want to sound like the next band...It's awkward to be exactly like your friends" (Musician 6, personal interview).

Here, distinction logics are a function of space and present in the competition between bands to outdo each other in terms of sound, technique and experimentation. Reykjavík's compact spatial configuration is a key condition for these internal logics of division and underline the importance of understanding how everyday practices both mediate and accrete into wider aesthetic styles. Indeed, rather than assume such distinctions to be the product of pre-existing differences in class dispositions or subcultural capital, it is perhaps better to see distinction as co-evolving with spatial practices and urban materiality. In short, the emergence of difference is tied to the affordances of locality, not just its precursor.

Finally, under the theme of conflict, like any small city or village, there are less favourable aspects of being so close-knit. One Icelandic journalist told me that it was hard (and possibly inadvisable) to be critical of other musicians because they often knew them personally or were even related. Overtly critical music commentary is uncommon in Iceland, although one recent article by a Scottish blogger living in the city has caused something of a stir. The blog has suggested that the recent astronomical rise to stardom of the singer Ásgeir Trausti Einarsson is not unrelated to the influence of his well-connected family and the strategizing of his two managers. And while it's easier to get away with critique if it's unlikely that you'll be related to any of the musician's friends or

family, it's telling that one rather ominous response to the blog reads: "This article has got 'you'll never work in this town again' written all over it!"

### **Promoting: Iceland Music Export and "Hipster" Capital**

Before drawing out the various theoretical threads of the paper, it would be remiss not to mention a final factor in the reputational positioning of the island's music scene: a factor which raises subsidiary questions around the commodification of creativity and acts as a counter to naïve or internalist readings of self-sufficiency. In an increasingly globalized field and with the advent of the informational economy, the business of musical reputation is an essential component of international musical networks. Getting the word out is tied to routine practices of distributing sampler CDs to showcase local talent, bending the ears of influential DJs and devising attractive press releases. It's about getting reviews in well-regarded media sites and making appearances at high-profile festivals, securing support slots for important bands and being name-checked by other musicians. In all these cases, Iceland's reputation as a location for fresh music is a function of its cultural and economic circulation in broader markets at the behest of cultural entrepreneurs and agencies.

Over the last few years, a range of such agencies, sites and industry bodies have emerged in the capital. Some, like Tónlist and Gokoyoko, comprise a largely small-scale digital infrastructure of websites which promotes Icelandic music by offering subscription and streaming services. Interestingly, iTunes was (at least officially) unavailable in Iceland up until 2011 so these websites have filled a space for subscribers to keep up with contemporary Icelandic music. Other agencies, like Iceland Music Export (IMX), are larger umbrella organisations funded by the government and the banking sector to initiate "forward thinking", commercial strategies that capitalize on the country's music. Founded in 2006, one of IMX's first initiatives was to run a business and development programme for musicians and cultural workers, followed by forums to advise on how best to exploit digital environments and increase revenue streams. Since then, the organization has been instrumental in commissioning reports on the economic impact of the creative industries in Iceland, including the "Towards Creative Iceland" report which came out in 2011. In 2010, IMX also took over management of the *Iceland Airwaves* festival, joining the nation's airline, Icelandair, in initiatives to develop the island's tourism industry.

Focusing on the specific practices of locally-embedded actors need not mean neglecting the broader picture. Indeed, what's interesting, here, is how scenes themselves and their myths are a circulating idea or commodity. They are a resource deployed by nations and cities in the battle for attention, because offering unique cultural flavours, goods and textures is one factor in the establishment of a "cultural economy" of cities, as Scott (2000) argues.



What Iceland, and Reykjavik offer, here, is a particular kind of cultural experience - one based on an "alternative" and "authentic" music culture. My sense from talking to tourists and festival goers (and so largely impressionistic) is that tourists tend to visit Reykjavik not for mass entertainment - there are plenty of other cities for that - but for an unconventional, idiosyncratic and "hip" experience. Seeing bands who are "breaking" or "bubbling under" is one of the selling points of *Iceland Airwaves*, for instance, and the island's promotional literatures regularly play on the idea that the country offers a slightly leftfield, organic scene that values experimentalism, the unusual and the progressive.

Here, it's clear that Iceland is well positioned for a particular type of cultural capital with affinities towards the "edgy", "arty" and "alternative". Indeed, these are qualities defined as desirable by so-called "hipsters" - young, educated, new media-savvy, metropolitans with a penchant for retro style and whose presence on the island is now being noted by a number of Icelandic commentators (Bollason, 2013). The hipster category is a nebulous media construction, of course. But being privy to the "latest thing" in the alternative arts scene is, clearly, a desirable good and a key resource for assembling cultural identities and it would be interesting to trace how the practices of emergent groups are both spatialised and made manifest in the circulation of the scene itself. I'm thinking, here, not just about processes of gentrification and the impact on travel routes, rents and venues but also about digital content, such as *Instagram* photos, blog posts and so on.

Still, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that the scene that Iceland exports and is consumed is some *thing* other than a mythological commodity and aspirational symbol. It is also a complex amalgam of those practices, grassroots efforts and collective accomplishments set out earlier. In other words, if the scene is a work that circulates it is also nothing without the distinctive work that comprises the scene and that materialize on the ground. Without the scene's lived practices, there is nothing to commodify. Indeed, from a cultural policy perspective, the key challenge for Reykjavik's authorities is to keep in balance the scene's distinctive qualities with commercial expansion, a point raised by some of my respondents and reinforced by Thorsteinn Stephenson, the head of the promotion company for *Iceland Airwaves*:

"We have always tried to keep our foot on the brake when it comes to growing in size. If the festival gets too big too fast we will lose control of the atmosphere. We try to keep our focus on improving the quality...we are not looking at turning Airwaves into a mass festival" (cited in Sullivan, 2006: 10).

Here, to be "mass" is to de-rarify the unique qualities of the scene itself, and to undermine those distinctive textures that accrete through the scene's local practices. From Brooklyn to Berlin, Austin to Glasgow, reputation is dependent on holding two principles (the undiscovered and the commercial) that have

traditionally been in tension. And, here, broader lessons might be learned from the Reykjavík case on how these tensions can be managed without destroying the intensity and small-scale intimacy of the scene itself.

## Conclusion

So, does Iceland “punch above its weight” musically? That, of course, depends on who the comparators are, what a punch would look like in a musical context and what weight we assume it *should* be punching at. In many respects, it’s an attractive though diversionary question. Iceland’s reputation is certainly surprising given its size, and much of this is down to how musicians and musical networks form on the island. Music, in some senses, just seems to be embedded in the city’s spaces with intensity and regularity, and this is bound up with the city’s configuration as well as the richly informed practices of everyday sociality: learning, conflicting, collaborating and promoting. In this sense, directing one’s gaze to the wonders of Icelandic nature is less sociologically instructive than keeping it to the ground - to everyday places, venues, streets and practices. But, then again, every scene is comprised of unique ingredients of people, spaces and practices; every scene has its own history and reputational goods, its own relationship to place, its own sonic colours and textures. This is the *sine qua non* of a scene, after all.

Perhaps a more relevant question is: what do cases like Iceland teach us about how best to conceptualize the social spaces of music? In other words, what do we learn, more generally, about theoretical approaches to music, from the case? In an interview with Alain Pessin, Howard Becker (2006) states that the concepts of field and world start from two incompatible positions: where the field is a spatial metaphor predicated on limits, struggles and forces, the world is a descriptive term that seeks to describe “a lot of people doing something together” (Becker, 2006: 276); where the field is an abstraction, the world consists of empirically observable phenomena; and where the field implies determining “global structures”, the world is designed to describe “real people” (Becker, 2006: 279).

Notwithstanding the rather stark separation of theory and reality, here, it seems to me that there remain good reasons to keep them both in the toolkit when examining musical collectives: not to conflate them, but to let them bring out various nuances of the case, including different scales of analysis; to recognize power and conflict but not to lose sight of the “doing”; to describe collective actions but also how these actions accrete over time into positions and broader configurations. The concepts of scene and network, in some senses, help to mediate here, because they highlight how the generative modalities of local and emplaced life build into larger formations, identities and connective structures: the spatialisation of networks and field conflicts plus the localization of scene-based practices plus the doing properties of “musicking” are all overlapping processes and tendencies that require explanation, in this

sense.

At the risk of theoretical eclecticism, then, there may still be good reasons to avoid unqualified allegiance to a single framework when the power of concepts like scene, network, field and world rests precisely in their ability to pluralize and materialize the sociological gaze. In different ways, they reveal the multi-dimensionality of how people co-operate, conflict and coalesce in time and space. Shifting concepts and scales also avoids falling into the trap of a bifurcated analysis of music spaces according to their micro and macro dimensions as if actions and positions belonged to two different and incommensurate ontological planes (Prior, 2008). If we need to know how music cultures are “in” the social then we need to attend to how they are “fused in the ongoing flow of activities in everyday life” (Martin, 2006: 9). We also need to show their concurrent activation in broader nested contexts, where scenes can be commodified and performed. Finally, in highlighting some of the urban affordances of the city of Reykjavík, what I hoped to have demonstrated is the inseparability of these questions from an understanding of the concrete settings in which musical practices are carried out, and which gesture less towards the idealism of nature than the materiality of space. For it is here, in the imbrications of physical and social space that we can witness the constitution of local musical practices and their ensuing trajectories.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> From a social network perspective, figures like Örn were and are nodal points in the local network and his activities have helped cement and spread musical

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connections within the scene, but also to the outside world (Crossley, 2008). "As an independent, it was always important for us to foster collaborations and links with other bands and artists" he says (Einar Örn Benediktsson, cited in Sullivan, 2003: 187).