

Transforming the jungle: The transition to digital labels in the world of drum 'n bass



Figure 1. Drum 'n bass comic.

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Abstract:

Since the emergence of digital music formats, it became clear in the years to follow that physical music carriers would be gradually replaced by them.¹ Therefore, music labels were forced to become digital and adapt to a whole new business model to both secure their future and to compensate for illegal music distribution. It has since this notion been argued that musicians would profit from an assumed democratization of online music,² to let them profit directly from their generated revenues without losing these to the classic label and distributor models of intermediation.³ This has resulted however, in an overflow of independently made music, resulting in a saturation where artists struggle to get noticed and listeners find it harder to obtain music of quality and distinction. The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that independent digital music labels on the Internet can fulfill an essential role in gatekeeping through the current saturation of available music online, and to provide artists with rightfully promoting them, adding value to their music, and uniting them stylistically. They can in turn also support listeners by creating online communities where both they and the artists can be united through their shared style. This will be demonstrated through the music style drum 'n bass and the argumentation will be supported through empirically researched case studies of five independent digital drum 'n bass labels. The first chapter examines the changes that labels have undergone when they were forced to switch from their old model of business to a digital one. The second chapter outlines both the origins of the independent musician and the drum 'n bass scene up to this age of the online environment, plus what labels need to consider when going digital. The third chapter describes the initial hopes that were created when illegal music distribution signaled a digital revolution where major labels would lose their dominating powers, and how artists, consumers, and labels saw their roles change. The fourth chapter discusses the outcome of this revolution, which on one side shows a bleak outcome of the revolutionary hopes but on the other shows that labels can actually still benefit independent musicians. The fifth and final chapter will demonstrate the findings from the previous chapters through five case studies of digital drum 'n bass labels, thus concluding that they still fulfill a vital role in supporting independent artists and sustaining community networks of the music style(s) they represent.

¹ Kenneth A. Hunt and Andrew Mellicker, 'A Case Study Of The Music Industry', *Journal of Business Case Studies (JBSC)* 4.3 (March, 2008): 81.

² Abhijit Sen, 'Music in the Digital Age: Musicians and Fans Around the World "Come Together" on the Net', *Global Media Journal* 9.16 (Spring, 2010): n/a.

³ Wilfred Dolfsma, 'How will the music industry weather the globalization storm?', *First Monday* 5.5 (July, 2000), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/745/654>.

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Introduction

The days of the physical music carrier seem to fade away. We see less and less people in record stores buying CD's, less DJ's using CD's and vinyl to spin their music to dancing crowds, and we get less CD's containing data and music from family and friends. In a way this is not surprising; the fast development of the Internet since the millennium has seen a couple of important changes that could render the physicality of music virtually obsolete. The mp3 file has made it possible to transfer music of high quality over the internet swift and with ease, and mp3 players are nowadays more and more converged with devices such as phones, becoming a standardized extra rather than a device on its own. So when even these playback devices are losing their physicality, then why should music stores and labels still remain physical?

As far as today's digital technology is concerned, there appears to be no reason at all. Going online and purchase music saves time, money, and physical space; one doesn't have to leave the house to purchase music, the disappearance of intermediaries and fabrication of musical carriers lowers the retail value of music significantly, and CD's become virtual by showing their jewel cases and artwork in the display of the MP3 player. This of course, is a far cry from the state of the music industry from fifteen to even ten years ago. It appears that apart from processes such as studio recording, most of its other tasks have dramatically been changed through online technologies. Where a record label used to have a key role in processes such as advertising, promotion, distribution, and sales, it now looks like most of these tasks can be easily achieved online by the artists themselves. This, however, is not suggesting that record labels are a thing of the past because of the digitization of music. They do have to compete with each other in finding new talent, where their services become most valuable.⁴ It is more suggestive to say that the whole concept of a label has and is constantly changing while the methods of listening to and buying music online are as well. Where ten years ago the debates surrounding digital music were the declining music sales because of illegal music distribution through applications such as Napster, today it appears to be how music artists can actually still make a living and produce music with the enormous amounts of music being offered available online. This abundance of available online music, as well as the rising competition between artists, calls for completely different marketing strategies online

⁴ Calvin K.M. Lam and Bernard C.Y. Tan, 'The Internet is changing the music industry', *Communications of the ACM* 44.8 (August, 2001): 66.

than in the days when one went into a music store after seeing or hearing a song on the television or radio, flipped through hundreds of CD's, and eventually took one or more to the listening booth.

This thesis will focus on the new independent digital label, with a special focus on those who represent the electronic music style drum 'n bass. This style has now been around for more than twenty years, and is still supporting a worldwide scene of fans, established artists, and many so called 'bedroom producers' who are striving to push their homemade sounds by either themselves or through a digital label upon the Internet. This is an effect of the presupposed advantages digital technology has developed, where one can make and release music with reasonable financial resources. For these types of labels, their public relations in an online network and branding appear to be of upmost importance since the great competition in the field; the ease of online distribution and access to web stores gives many artists the opportunity to set up a business generating revenues. After the emergence and shutdown of the p2p program Napster however, it was anticipated that major record labels would diminish in size and in favor of the independent artist; now these majors have gained ground online and independent artists must therefore struggle more than ever to overcome issues such as illegal file music distribution and underexposure. It has also been argued that the online environment would render labels obsolete, since its digital environment allows the disappearance of intermediaries through which artists can sell their music directly to its listeners.

This thesis will attempt to falsify this statement; through empirical research it will demonstrate that emerging artists who just publish their music themselves without consent of qualitative gatekeepers will not only endure a short-lived career, but will also complicate other artists and music listeners through the saturation of available music online. Many independent digital labels therefore find it hard to survive in an online environment, especially when they have just established and are being confronted with a vast saturation of online music that reaches far into the ever expanding online environment. A label thus has to find a way to grow beyond this 'creative noise',⁵ which will be discussed through discourses on subculture, club-culture, and post-subculture. Through seeing a music style such as drum 'n bass as a style on its own, one can use this to maximize the value of a digital label and

⁵ Martin Kretschmer, 'Artists earnings and copyright: A review of British and German music industry data in the context of digital technologies', *First Monday* 10.1 (January, 2005), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1200/1120>.

make it stand out through this noise. To get more insight into these processes, a range of key points will be discussed which the mentioned developments have raised. To support these, five independent drum 'n bass labels have been empirically researched over how they are going about their business and what tactics they use to keep existing in a digital environment. This has been done through interviews which have been transcribed to support the argumentation and its analyzed theory. Some of these independent labels will also still produce material available on vinyl and CD's; others will be strictly publishing digital material. Of importance here is that whether these labels handle digital, analogue music, or both, they attempt to exist through the Internet as an independent digital label.

The first chapter will discuss the main implications in a transition from a traditional label to a digital one in an online environment. Here, the ontology of the digitalized music format will be discussed, as well as its distribution over an online network. All this will be contrasted against the traditional labels, physical music carriers, and its distribution in our physical environment. The second chapter will look at the music style of drum 'n bass, including a theoretical analysis of the style as a subculture. Since the music can be observed as the style itself, it will be argued that a label can use this style to profile itself as such. The third chapter will look at the benefits the Internet can provide to artists and digital labels. It will discuss the option for artists to directly sell its music to the listeners, the role of digital communities which are vital to supporting the independent music scene, and how these workings influence a digital label. The fourth chapter will focus on the downsides of the digital music scene; it will discuss how major labels have proliferated despite practices such as illegal file music distribution, and how independent labels and artists are subject to the saturation of online music and its loss of quality. There it will be argued, that labels can fulfill an essential role in fighting these threats, by uniting artists under one style and stand out from the creative noise through exclusiveness and high quality. The fifth and final chapter will attempt to sustain the findings and supported theories below through transcribed interview abstracts from five digital drum 'n bass labels. It will then be concluded that the role of a label in an online environment is not just still a possibility, but essential for supporting both artists and listeners in a music culture through the processes of gatekeeping, promotion, networking, and developing distinction through style to rise above the creative noise.

Chapter 1: From traditional to digital music labels

The difference between a traditional label and a digital one involves many structural and economic changes, which can both be beneficial and disadvantageous to an independent digital label. To understand the nature of the latter, this chapter will discuss its ontology and some central aspects that underlie the phenomenon. An outline will be made of the operations of what workings of the traditional label will change when becoming digital. The most important of these changes will be discussed through an analysis of the digital music format and its distribution through an online network for a deeper understanding over this transition.

The online sale of music entails a large shift for a music label; where the labels first had the task of signing music suited to their profile, record and master music, and distribute it to stores, in a digital landscape many of these steps are changed or simply removed. A label had a postbox address where musicians send demos to; the A&R department listened to these and often gave it less than thirty seconds time before it was judged to be either adequate material or unsuitable to their brand. The chosen few were treated by the label to the right music production process by coupling them to their producers, songwriters, and musicians, whilst handling legal issues, marketing and distribution.⁶ All this involved many expenses, prompting the labels to select their artists with care to avoid a financial catastrophe. Artists, on the other hand, often had to test their luck when approaching labels, being turned down by many since they were not able to fit in with their vision, apart from being qualitatively competent to enter the music scene. Also, they often saw the disappointing leftovers from their revenues, with most of its share staying with their music label due to copyright extractions⁷ and leaving them with no other alternative than to tour or sell their music to local retailers themselves to generate more income.⁸ Often signed contracts included royalties which were recoupable from production, video, and promotion expenses, leaving the artist with little to nothing left over from these.⁹ The system of copyrights was supposed to benefit the artist, but instead provided substantial flows of income to music publishers who often were the label themselves or those who owned them such as the major music publishers (such

⁶ Lam and Tan, 'The Internet is changing the music industry': 66, 63.

⁷ Dolfsma, 'How will the music industry weather the globalization storm?'.
⁸ Kretschmer, 'Artists earnings and copyright'.

⁹ *ibid.*

as BMG, Warner, and Sony).¹⁰ In both cases, it is the artist who is at a loss and missing out on a significant amount of income.

This all changed around the end of the last century when the mp3 format started to gain notoriety. In terms of music in the digital landscape, the compressed music file or mp3 lies at its center. As Bolter and Grusin would define the phenomenon in the visual arts and cinema, it is a process of remediation at work here, where the properties of one medium are being ‘repurposed’ to another.¹¹ From this point of view, the digitally compressed music format can be simply seen as a remediated form of music, where the physical music carrier is represented through a digitalized container of audio data. Additionally, software applications such as Winamp, one of the first being able to play back mp3 files, thus represent the remediated form of the CD player, including its conventional playback functions such as its buttons (which are now clicked with the mouse instead of pressed) and novelties such as the option to make one’s own playlist. This remediation facilitates the transition from music listening played back from physical music carriers to digital music formats. Many labels also distribute other compressed music formats to consumers such as Microsoft’s wma format, Apple’s m4p format (being used in their iTunes application), and the more recent flac format which offers a lossless compression of audio data. In this way, labels can decide which format has creditworthiness with suppliers in a digital environment.¹² Since the inception of these formats they have been a constant subject of heated debate. Indeed, it shook the major labels awake and faced them with a dilemma which made their earlier concerns about recording on music and videotapes pale compared to the rise of digital media. Essentially an underground movement where students converted their CD’s into this format and spread them around online with free music players for playback,¹ the file became world news when the first p2p network, Napster, was born. As Robinson and Halle described it, Napster was a program that allowed users to exchange music files with each other directly, including chat rooms and hot links to fuel individual interests among users.¹³ Ironically, the mp3 format itself was developed with a business model in mind, until its patented encoding software was bought by an Australian student with a stolen credit card number and he put it online for free. Thus the format’s technology was illegally spread and gave birth to the equally illegal online

¹⁰ Dolfmsa, ‘How will the music industry weather the globalization storm?’.

¹¹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, ‘Remediation’, *Configurations* 4.3 (1996): 339.

¹² Sean Cubitt, ‘Distribution and media flows’, *Cultural Politics: an International Journal* 1.2 (2005): 204.

¹³ Laura Robinson and David Halle, ‘Digitization, the Internet and the Arts: eBay, Napster, SAG, and e-Books’, *Qualitative Sociology* 25.3 (Fall, 2002): 378.

distribution of copyrighted music.¹⁴ This in turn gave birth to the development of many other p2p programs besides Napster, and later to other file distribution technologies such as torrents. All these developments make the mp3 format one of the most controversial but widespread formats of music ever. Since its inception, especially the so-called “Big Five” music labels have been targeting individuals who engaged in illegal distribution of the format, but so far litigation has been proven to be little or not successful at all.¹⁵ What now appears to be more effective is making deals with streaming services such as YouTube¹⁶ and Spotify¹⁷, to claim royalties over music being played through these. This however, didn’t imply that consumers were not willing to pay for music anymore. Apple’s debut of iTunes in 2003 showed that consumers were willing to pay for digital music, thanks to the company’s success at selling iPods.¹⁸ This meant by no means the end of illegal music distribution, but it did mean the start of the consumer wanting to engage in mp3 listening rather than using physical music carriers. Therefore, labels were forced to start looking in the direction of digital music as well. The new music models did not emerge from the ‘traditional’ music industry actors anymore, but from industry outsiders such as computer firms, and telecommunication and dot-com companies.¹⁹ This made way for a few novelties for the labels that would drastically change their traditional ways of going about their business.

First off, the mp3 format is digital and of a very different nature than the physical music carrier. Compared to the music we listen to on a record or a CD, the experience of listening to an mp3 is different, but is being naturalized into a new experience which fits the current digital landscape. A traditional label used to produce music as an object; first in the vinyl format, to tape format in the sixties, and to the CD format in the eighties. Amongst labels of dance music pressing music on vinyl has been of the utmost importance, since DJ’s have been using 12-inch singles since the mid-seventies due to its sound quality and precise mixing capabilities.²⁰ Other formats like CD’s and cassettes were more aimed at the music fan who had heard the music through the DJ, who played the music from the dance label in the first place. The products that traditional labels produced were physical objects which,

¹⁴ Jacob Ganz and Joel Rosse, ‘The MP3: A History Of Innovation And Betrayal’, *The Record*: NPR, 23 March, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2011/03/23/134622940/the-mp3-a-history-of-innovation-and-betrayal>.

¹⁵ Mark Fox, ‘Technological and social drivers of change in the online music industry’, *First Monday* 0.0 (July, 2005, originally published in February, 2002), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1453/1368>.

¹⁶ YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com>

¹⁷ Spotify, <http://www.spotify.com>

¹⁸ Kembrew McLeod, ‘MP3s Are Killing Home Taping: The Rise of Internet Distribution and Its Challenge to the Major Label Music Monopoly’, *Popular Music and Society* 28.4 (2005): 526.

¹⁹ Peter Tschmuck. ‘COPYRIGHT, CONTRACTS AND MUSIC PRODUCTION’, *Information, Communication & Society* 12.2 (2009): 254.

²⁰ Simon Reynolds, *Generation ecstasy*, New York: Routledge, 1999: 271.

according to Tomasula, required imagining, observing, and representing.²¹ Tomasula also states that the digital transformation of culture, such as music, are translatable to plain old realism; ‘(...) if all the techno-jargon is stripped from *Wired* magazine, (...) the VR experience itself sounds a lot like what used to be called getting lost in a book (...)’.²² These and other notions that were anticipated at the end of last century embody the post-millennial digitization of culture. The cultural landscape has become digitized and is continuing to do so; music is no exception. Sterne has been discussing the mp3 format indeed as a cultural artifact; they are experienced as music, not as file formats.²³ Records and CD’s are objects which can be collected and touched, but the mp3 file can merely be collected. This indicates however that owners of mp3 files still refer to these as cultural objects when they discuss their possession of music.²⁴ And now that more people are converting their entire music collections into this format (and discarding their physical collection), a person’s music collection will often be completely digitalized but made out of cultural artifacts nonetheless. Although an mp3 file is of lesser quality than a CD recording, consumers prefer the digitalized flexibility over the physical object taking up their personal space. Moreover, the ease of distribution of this music format is one of the main reasons why traditional labels have undergone their transformation into digital ones.

Along with the digitalized music format comes its ease of distribution which equals another important change in the dynamics of the music marketing. Where artists back in the day often needed a label to record their music, the distribution of their work was something only a label had access to; sufficient distribution and logistics is costly and time-consuming, two factors the traditional label helped the musician with to alleviate them from these chores and instead let them play and make music. As Jones puts it, the ability to record *and transport* is power over sound.²⁵ It now appears that both the artist and consumer are claiming this power since they now have the ability to distribute as well, costless more or less. It is simply the cost of access to the Internet and the device that makes this possible which enables them to upload music to anyone and anywhere online possible. Apart from the traditional desktops and laptops with Internet access, mobile devices are taking over the former two with increasing speed. This is interesting for the music industry, not only because they are more widespread than PCs, but also because music now can be downloaded and instantly enjoyed

²¹ Steve Tomasula, ‘Bytes and Zeitgeist: Digitizing the Cultural Landscape’, *Leonardo* 31.5 (1998): 337.

²² *ibid.*: 342.

²³ Jonathan Sterne, ‘The mp3 as cultural artifact’, *New Media & Society* 8.5 (2006): 828.

²⁴ *ibid.*: 832.

²⁵ Steve Jones, ‘Music and the Internet’, *Popular Music* 19.2 (April, 2000): 217.

anytime and everywhere.²⁶ Online technologies on mobile phones such as Blackberry and Android can now seamlessly playback high quality music which is directly streamed online. Also, the real costs for traditional labels were not the manufacturing of CD's and vinyl, but getting it distributed to the stores. When distributing digital music online, a label can have a higher profit margin but still pay the artist the same per-unit royalty;²⁷ another indication that artists are still being left behind when it comes to royalties.

To understand more about this very important switch when transferring from the model of a traditional label to a digital one, a look at Cubitt's theorization of distribution is useful. He describes distribution as not only inseparable from production and consumption, but that it occurs as an abstraction in every economic act which involves intellectual property,²⁸ such as music. In other words, distribution in this sense also involves apart from objects, whether physical or digitalized, relationships between producers and consumers including any spatiotemporal flow of action between these.²⁹ The label's role of distribution and the manufacturing of music into physical music carriers have been replaced by the increased role of marketing in the age of digital music, since labels themselves have become the retailers.³⁰ Labels don't simply distribute goods anymore, but have to distribute themselves directly to the consumer without the brick and mortar store to do this for them. A label is in a digital environment forced to distribute much more than the traditional physical music carrier; it is obliged to distribute the whole relationship it entangles itself with through the consumer and to upkeep this bond. For Cubitt, both production and audiencing are political-economic activities from the point of view of distribution; it lies in a power structure where it is the critical moment of control between production and audiencing and controlled by power and commodification.³¹ The label holds the power to withhold and distribute its music to the listeners and makes it into a commodity at its best suitable state to the audience to generate as much retail as possible; in this way, labels can tie themselves to their consumers by sporadically release music and see how their sales develop. Although this was a matter of the past as well with traditional labels, digital labels open up the option of giving feedback directly to the artist or the label itself, a tool which a label can use to improve future products. In other scenarios, labels can also use negative feedback to reexamine artists they

²⁶ Fox, 'Technological and social drivers of change in the online music industry'.

²⁷ McLeod, 'MP3s Are Killing Home Taping': 526.

²⁸ Cubitt, 'Distribution and media flows': 195.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Lam and Tan, 'The Internet is changing the music industry': 66.

³¹ Cubitt, 'Distribution and media flows': 195-197.

have signed and decide whether they still fit with the profile of the label. If not, new artists can be found who both fit with the wishes consumers demonstrated in their feedback and who have the potential to generate more revenues than the former artists. Cubitt calls this a feedback loop where space-time flows of product and money are vital data where both the future of handling a current product and commissioning future products are being extracted from.³² Traditional labels did not demonstrate this feedback loop; consumers could maybe send feedback on music to a fan club of the artists, but these were mostly maintained outside the label itself and the latter would solely base feedback deciding on future developments on the sales that a product generated. In the digital era however, the declining sales in the music industry are forcing to broaden a label's expertise on distribution and adapt to the model Cubitt has theorized. Here is not simply an object distributed but a whole relationship between product and consumer. This is both beneficial to the label and consumer since the wishes from an audience can help the label to reinvent itself, fulfilling the audience's wishes and generate more revenues from them by doing so.

Thirdly, distribution happened, as the traditional label did, in the confines of a specified network. However, the network where distribution traditionally took place differs greatly from the online network, which in essence is not closed and virtually unidentifiable. To define the nature of an online network where music is being distributed, an allegory with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of rhizomes could be made. An online network can be seen as their definition of a rhizome; an always expanding multiplicity of lines that can create connections between anything possible,³³ a map with multiple entries.³⁴ Although this theory does resonate with the nature of an online network, it should however be kept in mind that it stems from the late sixties of last century. Therefore, this theorization could use Galloway's supporting theory on protocols to envision the distribution over an online network more specifically, which is partly based on Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory. Galloway stresses that the nature of an online network is essentially one of *distribution*; where centralized and decentralized networks contain intermediary hubs that are connected to each other through nodes, a distributed network has no need for the former; each entity in the

³² Cubitt, 'Distribution and media flows': 202.

³³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. and forw. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1987: 8.

³⁴ *ibid.*: 12.

distributed network is autonomous,³⁵ and therefore nodes are directly connected without any need for intermediaries.

When projecting this view upon the world of labels, we see that the traditional distribution of music was limited; a label only had a delineated set of distributors and stores where they sold their products too, which in turn made the customers buying at these stores the final destination. More customers could be reached through advertising on the streets, radio, and television, and hoping that customers would recommend the music through word of mouth. This is not ongoing and limited; before the onset of online social traffic such as e-mail and social networking, the network of consumers was limited to a set of family and friends where eventually the cycle of recommendation would end. More importantly, there would be no clear feedback loop involved where customers and producers could complete each other. This as well demonstrates a centralized approach where the label decides on the choice of music the consumer is able to buy, once again a structure of power which Deleuze and Guattari compare to roots-trees, a hierarchical structure which is finite since it can't connect one root to another.³⁶ A rhizome structure however, is its opposite in that it is always expanding and never complete. When this model is projected onto an online network, the whole concept of centralization turns into one of distribution; it is not the online network of the users that expands every day, but the whole series of connections they make between them and users, groups, and companies that expand, including all the links they visit and engage themselves with. In this way they form new bonds and relations, not just for themselves but also for others by sharing their expansions through for instance, social networking sites. A label gives any user of the online network access to the music it is selling, since only an Internet connection is needed. Thus, a label's product has the potential to reach a multitude of users far beyond the confines of a traditional distribution system which was limited to a delineated amount of brick and mortar stores. Not only does this help spread the music's popularity faster through streaming channels and social networking sites, but it goes far beyond the confines of the audiences that traditional labels had to target through a predetermined area where advertising and initial exposure of the music would take place. As Galloway quotes Deleuze & Guattari, 'a distributed network is always caught (...) au milieu, meaning that it is never complete, or integral to itself.'³⁷ Thus, music can traverse the online

³⁵ Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004: 31, 33-34.

³⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*: 17.

³⁷ Galloway, *Protocol*: 34.

network and expand it by either establishing, for instance, Computer-Mediated Communities or CMC's through its appeal or reach existing planes where it gets heralded.

Fuller sees a multiplicity as induced by two processes; the instantiation of particular compositional elements and the establishment of transversal relations between them, which makes up ecology of media.³⁸ In this case, this can be envisioned as the traditional chain of artists, labels, distributors, and customers and how they are connected with each other. A rhizome then, consists out of a multiplicity connected to other multiplicities which Deleuze and Guattari coined as 'plateaus'; a multiplicity in the middle of others that avoid orientating towards a culmination point or external end.³⁹ Feedback loops are able to not just go from a label through a distributor to a consumer and back, but through groups and institutions which are in no area connected to any of these actors at all; that is; the distribution of the music is not targeted towards a finite set of potential buyers and sellers, but is available to anyone who has online access, no matter whether they were targeted by the marketing strategies of the product or not. One user can hear background music when visiting one's Facebook page and become intrigued; although that wasn't the reason a visit to this page was made. While it can be argued that the same person could visit him or her at a party in real life where the music is played through a CD, the rhizomatic nature of the online network has instant capabilities to extent the music through someone's online profile into a new multiplicity instantly while it has the capability to infinitely traverse over these plateaus. Ultimately, music will have a much more nomadic character which will be able to reach out much further than when music was distributed before the onset of online distribution; music has more chance to get around and arrive at people by chance than when it was centralized.

All in all, Cubitt's model of distribution and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizomes as reflected by Galloway upon today's online networks explain a large portion of the shift that labels have undergone when moving to digital distribution. Although an mp3 is nothing more than a format for encoding digital data, it has the status of a thing in everyday practice.⁴⁰ Its nature is still strongly debated amongst audiophiles worldwide; first there is the analogue/digital debate which stems from the days the CD was initiated in the eighties, where yet many hold the notion that analogue media such as tape and vinyl are more accurate in reproducing sound than the binary nature inherent to CD's and mp3s. This is however

³⁸ Matthew Fuller, *Media ecologies*, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005: 16.

³⁹ *ibid.*: 22.

⁴⁰ Sterne, 'The mp3 as cultural artifact': 830.

debatable; although digital media sample ambient sound in discrete packages and is therefore less continuous, analogue sound is still more sluggishly responding than the former.⁴¹ The second problem of the mp3 however, is that it is a compressed format; it was designed to filter out the frequencies the human ear doesn't pick up while listening, reducing the space an uncompressed CD track would take up to ten times its size.⁴² While in itself this sounds plausible, partly because this characteristic is responsible for the format's ease of distribution, a trained ear can well hear the difference between a (heavily) compressed and uncompressed track. Ironically then, a consumer pays in the digital market for a piece of digital information which in essence is a low quality subtraction from a track owned on a CD. These inconveniences might be short-lived however; now that the speed and size of many online environments are getting more suited to transfer uncompressed audio and video in real time, this problem might get eliminated soon. Seen from these last two perspectives, ultimately the digitalized format has both its reasons as an autonomous artifact and its future abolition of compression to reign supreme over the physical music carrier. It does reform the older medium, and justifies itself therefore in the long run as an improvement.

The discussions above were a general outline of how traditional labels have undergone their transformation into the digital domain. Through change of format, distribution and transformation of network structures, the label has been forced to adapt to a whole new mode of functioning. Of course, these outlines of transformation sound plausible but need specification of their inner workings. The next chapter will therefore outline these in the case of the music style drum 'n bass and specify whether these changes work differently for independent labels, or that both they and major labels will have to undergo a facelift to keep themselves alive.

⁴¹ Sean Cubitt, 'Analogue and Digital', *Theory Culture Society* 23.2-3 (2006): 250.

⁴² Sterne, 'The mp3 as cultural artifact': 832.

Chapter 2: Drum 'n bass; artists and labels going digital

The focus of this thesis will be on the independent labels who are trying to go digital, or moreover which have been created in a digital environment. To be more specified into this matter, this thesis will look at dance-oriented labels from the dance genre of drum 'n bass. Of course, many subgenres of dance music could have been taken as exemplar. Drum 'n bass however, is a style of electronic music which has been around for over almost twenty years now and is still very actively represented online. Although the music's scene has undergone many transformations in the last two decades, the style's inherent structural elements have stayed the same. Therefore, this chapter will look at how 'bedroom producers' have come into existence to define the nature of artists who approach independent labels, and a closer look will be given at the rise of the music styles of music and drum 'n bass and their labels. In this way, we can understand the context of the case studies that will be discussed in chapter five, and have a deeper understanding of the concept of independent labels. Before we can analyze drum 'n bass as a music style in today's online environment however, a look at two elements which characterize the style should be considered; the electronic dance music in general and the rise of independent labels supporting these.

A good reason to choose electronic dance music as a form of music often pushed by independent labels, is that they attract a young audience which is savvy with today's digital technology; they have both in work and school become accustomed to using laptops with online access, while being able to organize their life accordingly to this degree of comfort.⁴³ They move easily with the continuous convergence of media where as much as possible can be done just by using their iPhone, such as using the Internet, call, text, and listen to mp3s.⁴⁴ The young lovers of electronic music are also being more challenged to make music themselves with the financially most minimal resources imaginable. It can be argued that an artist's dependency on the monopoly of the music industry has already started to fade since music technologies became available for home use. Just as the world of traditional labels has changed, the means of making electronic music has as well. Until the late sixties, making electronic music without access to heavy, immobile studio equipment was more or less out of

⁴³ Steve Jones, Camille Johnson-Yale, Sarah Millermaier, and Francisco Seoane Pérez, 'Everyday life, online: U.S. college students' use of the Internet', *First Monday* 14.10 (September, 2009), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2649/2301>.

⁴⁴ Edgar Huang, 'The Causes of Youths' Low News Consumption and Strategies for Making Youths Happy News Consumers', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 15.1 (2009): 117.

the question. It was only before the onset of 4-track recorders that marketable music could be made outside the confines of the studio.⁴⁵ A good example is hip hop culture in the United States, where the art of DJ performance made the combination of two records playing simultaneously at the right speed and moments in the song possible, giving birth to mixtapes being recorded. This gave the poor and needy populations of ghettos nationwide access to produce music outside the established music industry; styles were not made and marketed by labels anymore, they were born in the underground, just as reggae was born in Jamaica to shine light in the ghettos where it made people momentarily forget about the endless crime and poverty. Tapes of breakbeat music were being recorded through the DJ art, which gave birth to its own clothing, dancing, styles of graffiti and many other forms; hip hop culture was propelled by the people who re-appropriated their home music equipment. Kool Herc invented hip hop music by bringing the concept of the Jamaican sound system to New York, where towers of speakers were piled upon each other to generate as much amplitude as possible.⁴⁶ The band wasn't getting the credit anymore; the DJ playing and the MC supporting him were the center now. The growth of the underground music movement is a clear effect of what Benjamin already saw happening in 1936; then, at any moment the reader was ready to turn into a writer, gaining access to authorship.⁴⁷ In this case the latter was attained by the listener of music being able to purchase musical equipment cheaply to mimic and adapt big label productions. Recording rap music was possible with maybe only a single 4-track recorder, where a drum machine, a DJ playing and scratching samples, a rapper and an eventual keyboard and/or additional vocalist could be sufficient for creating a song.

Of course, the manufacturers of music technology saw that a market was opening up, and made way for what Goodwin described as a relative breakdown between professional and semiprofessional technologies which started to democratize pop production.⁴⁸ Samplers for instance, were able to record and manipulate any sound imaginable, which in turn could be sequenced and altered through the availability of home computers such as the Amiga and the onset of MIDI; a digital language between musical hardware which formed the basis of digital music making. Up to today, MIDI is still the general norm for communication between

⁴⁵ Stefan Goldmann, 'Everything popular is wrong: Making it in electronic music, despite democratization', Little White Earbuds, 13 April, 2011, <http://www.littlewhiteearbuds.com/feature/everything-popular-is-wrong-making-it-in-electronic-music-despite-democratization/>.

⁴⁶ Tricia Rose, 'Voices from the margins: Rap music and contemporary cultural production', in Andy Bennett, Barry Shank and Jason Toynbee (eds) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, New York and London: Routledge, 2006: 219-220.

⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, forw. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 1969: 232.

⁴⁸ Andrew Goodwin, 'Rationalization and democratization in the new technologies of popular music', in Bennett, Shank and Toynbee (eds) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*: 279.

electronic musical hardware, but it was the development of faster computers with ever growing data capacities which ultimately gave birth to the possibility of hard disc recording (rendering samplers obsolete). Already in the late eighties and early nineties, musicians could use solely an Amiga with programs installed on them called trackers, to create 'modules' or 'mod' files which contained samples and sequencing data. These tracker programs could both generate and play these files,⁴⁹ being in essence the first software-based samplers available. What is of most importance here however is that from then on means of making electronic music were over the years easier and cheaper to have access to, making electronic music production available to basically anyone with the knowledge to operate a computer. As Hughes and Lang noticed, these technologies became available at a relatively low cost, in turn giving birth to a new consumer market that consists at least out of hundreds of thousands of artists trying to make music.⁵⁰ Even mobile phones contain apps nowadays which enable the user to load in samples and sequence music, making the creation of online music available at any time and place, just like having access to the Internet.

Drum 'n bass producers stem directly from the generation which fed the underground of dance music in the United Kingdom at the late eighties and early nineties; the rave culture. Reynolds described drum 'n bass as a more 'serious' departure from the rave scene, which by 1993 was dominated by excessive drug use, violence, and persistent efforts from authorities to shut down illegal parties.⁵¹ It should be noted that during the days of rave culture many records were made in the bedrooms of DJ's, who mostly borrowed things like a sampler or synthesizer to make the happy, uplifting mixture of house- and breakbeats which were released on the new rave labels that started to emerge at the time. Other DJ's had no access to musical equipment at all, but did have a computer with the mentioned tracker programs. It was one of the earliest examples of dance music being made completely 'inside the box' with no to little accompaniment from external musical hardware. The quality of these tracks were often poor due to the limited sound capabilities, limited storage space, and weak processor power from the time, which were much lower than could be achieved with musical hardware. It would take at least until the end of the nineties before computers could be used to make dance music entirely in DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) software such as Cubase and Logic; thanks to VST (Virtual Studio Technology) plugins, both musical hardware effects and

⁴⁹ Norie Neumark, 'Random Sound and Vision', *Multimedia, IEEE* 15.2 (April-June, 2008): 13.

⁵⁰ Jerald Hughes and Karl Reiner Lang, 'If I had a song: The culture of digital community networks and its impact on the music industry', *International Journal on Media Management* 5.3 (2003): 185.

⁵¹ Simon Reynolds, 'War in the jungle', in Bennett, Shank and Toynbee (eds) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*: 82.

synthesizers could be digitally emulated. Just like in the analogue versus digital debate, many musicians still claim that these digital plugins don't come close to emulating a specific sound that analogue hardware produces. The development of VST plugins however, has been able to emulate the most famous musical hardware with high accuracy, leaving fanatics of hardware only with the sense of control they miss (turning knobs and sliders instead of clicking a mouse). So not only can mobile devices such as laptops and mobile phones run applications to make electronic music, they can also emulate pieces of musical hardware that used to take up the size of a modest living room.

The precursor of drum 'n bass, jungle, was similar to the style in that it was in essence a combination of two basic musical elements creating tension with each other; on one side fast breakbeats as used in hip hop which were mostly sampled from old funk records from the sixties and seventies, and on the other low-pitched, deep bassline melodies. The name derived from both the complexity of urban life (as the inner city of London is often referred to as the 'concrete jungle'), and the real jungles as in the Amazon and Africa with their acoustic disorientation.⁵² Eshun comments on the use of the computerized breakbeats that it crosses the threshold of the human drummer to investigate the hyper dimensions of the digitalized breakbeat; the drummer is lost and one dances to a form of rhythmic psychedelia that is impossible to mimic live.⁵³ Whilst these basslines were mostly borrowed from those earlier used in dub and hip-hop music, the core elements of drums and basslines playing together stem from the Jamaican music style of dub. At 'sound clashes' in Jamaica two sound systems would play against each other in favor of which one would spin the most 'fresh' songs, and an MC supporting the crowd would call out for 'drum and bass style' when only drums and bass sounds would play. The combination of the two gave a special appeal to the style, as in jungle the bassline seems to slow down the fast breakbeats and vice versa. A boy 'junglist' or girl 'junglette' as fans of the style were adopted, could either dance to the fast breakbeat or take it slow and dance to the bassline. Jungle music was mostly dominated by influences of the rave scene such as specific synthesizer leads and stabs, samples taken from Jamaican ragga (a popularized form of reggae) and hip hop music, giving the style a more ghettocentric, black appeal. Indeed, this style was more popular in the British ghettos of the large cities where many Afro-Caribbean diaspora appropriated the more 'white-centered' rave culture to the more black music cultures of reggae, ragga, and hip hop. Hebdige, who elaborated to a wide

⁵² Jason Toynbee, 'Making up and showing off: What musicians do', in Bennett, Shank and Toynbee (eds) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*: 76.

⁵³ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures In Sonic Fiction*, London: Quartet Books, 1998: 68.

extent into Afro-Caribbean musical culture in his groundbreaking analysis of subcultures in the late seventies, stated that reggae music in Britain amongst migrated diaspora from the West-Indies helped them to develop a style which made them express their social and economic alienation from the dominant white culture.⁵⁴ Still, although music styles such as reggae and hip hop were inherently forms of resistance against this dominant culture, the interaction between appropriating white and black musical forms are essential to the foundations of jungle and drum 'n bass. Structural elements taken from rave and acid-house which hail from the more white-centered rave culture signal this interaction between white and black musical subcultures, which Hebdige lines out as following (stressed with own italics):

The succession of white subcultural forms can be read as a series of deep-structural adaptations which symbolically accommodate or expunge the black presence from the host community. It is on the plane of aesthetics: in dress, dance, music; in *the whole rhetoric of style*, that we find the dialogue between black and white most subtly and comprehensively recorded, albeit in code.⁵⁵

Before elaborating more on the importance of the term 'style' in drum 'n bass music, it is for now important to realize that jungle music thus also signals an appropriation of white subcultural capital in a black one. The latter term, theorized by Thornton in her analysis of club cultures in the mid-nineties, is a subspecies of Bourdieu's notion of capital; it can be either objectified by clothing and music, or embodied through slang or being 'hip' or in the 'know'.⁵⁶ Thus, one's measure of involvement into a subculture can be measured by one's subcultural capital. Subcultural capital goes beyond the more 'resistant' forms of culture which Hebdige theorized in the late seventies, and more into one of distinction through style.

Drum 'n bass however left these influences behind, focusing more on other more melodic styles such as jazz, garage, and techno.⁵⁷ This is a rather post-subcultural notion that goes beyond the quite rigid demarcations of subcultures as postulated by Hebdige, where 'widespread tastes' in underground music have become a tactic for youth cultures to accumulate subcultural capital.⁵⁸ Indeed, the new style of jungle had room for hybridizing with any musical style that could accompany the still present fast breakbeats and low basslines. It often contained a simple two-step beat instead of the hectic rhythms that jungle

⁵⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subcultures*, London and New York: Routledge, 1979: 36.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*: 44-45.

⁵⁶ Sarah Thornton, *Club cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995: 11.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, 'War in the jungle', in Bennett, Shank and Toynbee (eds) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*: 82.

⁵⁸ Rupert Weinzierl and David Muggleton, 'What is 'Post-subcultural Studies' Anyway?', in David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (eds) *The Post-subcultures Reader*, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003: 7.

pushed the boundaries with. Drum 'n bass ultimately proved to be more popular and took over jungle's brief period of fame, which was in a short time rinsed by various compilation releases through labels that were often owned by the major labels themselves; a tactic also used by exploiting rave music earlier.⁵⁹ The more accessible, familiar form soon got former jungle artists to be signed to big labels and let their music be used in commercials and jingles on television.⁶⁰ This could signal another appropriation of jungle as a black form of music into a white one, where the style is expanded to appeal to a wider audience where social distinctions are more obscured, which is according to Thornton an important reason why music is privileged in subcultural worlds.⁶¹ Drum 'n bass's tension to hybridize far beyond rigid conceptions of subcultural notions makes its audience more plural, fluid and part-time instead of being fixed and encompassing, allowing it to flow between multiple signs of identity conceptions.⁶² Single members don't desire a community but using the group to their individual needs,⁶³ giving junglists the space to develop themselves in line to their preference of using the style to expand their subcultural capital. Jungle's departure from the urban suburbs into the rest of the British nation and across its borders as drum 'n bass signaled the style's expansion not only geographically, but in stylistic choice for its audience to enrich their subcultural capital due to its hybrid nature. Subcultural capital is heavily influenced by media, and its size correlates with the latter's coverage, creation, and exposure. Therefore, this expansion elevated the style's worldwide recognition and created a wider network which is crucial to subcultural capital's definition and distribution of cultural knowledge.⁶⁴ The accompanying commercial use of jungle in jingles and commercials during this expansion made the style prone to commercialization, but his process actually has also helped spreading the style of drum 'n bass worldwide without making it lose its subcultural appeal.

In protest to the commercialization of its 'easy' sound, new forms of drum 'n bass emerged with a much more dark character such as techstep,⁶⁵ and over the years drum 'n bass kept evolving into many more subgenres. By the second half of the post-millennial decade, these subgenres started to take such lives on its own that they could be described as genres in itself; breakcore seemed more a combination of breakbeats so loud an fast it seemed

⁵⁹ David Hesmondhalgh, 'The British dance music industry: A case study of independent cultural production', in Bennett, Shank and Toynbee (eds) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*: 250.

⁶⁰ Reynolds, 'War in the jungle', in Bennett, Shank and Toynbee (eds) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*: 80.

⁶¹ Thornton, *Club cultures*: 12.

⁶² Weinzierl and Muggleton, 'What is 'Post-subcultural Studies' Anyway?', in Muggleton and Weinzierl (eds) *The Post-subcultures Reader*: 12.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Thornton, *Club cultures*: 14.

⁶⁵ Reynolds, 'War in the jungle', in Bennett, Shank and Toynbee (eds) *The Popular Music Studies Reader*: 81.

impossible to dance on, whilst styles made by groups such as Pendulum seemed to sound more like electronically made rock, giving way to mosh pits on the dance floor instead of the individual dancing that seemed to characterize drum 'n bass. Newer styles from now such as minimal techno and dubstep seem to influence drum 'n bass as well, but these developments moreover signal drum 'n bass has lost its coherent character it once had; the unity of the style appears to have dispersed. This in turn, has contributed to the style's loss in subcultural capital, and its fading media coverage. Still, every disparity of the style is still seen as part of the general drum 'n bass subculture and the many labels that are still around online cling to their own audience whilst knowing their roots.

Junglists, who would fall under Thornton's overarching subcultural notion of clubbers, are happy to identify with a homogenous crowd to which they don't belong, making them seem oppositional to the 'mainstream'.⁶⁶ However, dichotomies between mainstream and subculture do not relate to how 'youth cultures imagine their social world, measure their cultural worth and claim their subcultural capital.'⁶⁷ In the case of junglists, it is music which unites them but to a less extent elements such as clothing or slang. The music *is* the style of the subculture; it is a culture of taste, where the taste for music unites people and their consumption of common media.⁶⁸ Its people recommend each other the latest developments in the music style, they visit the same websites about it and meet through them thanks to sharing the same musical passion; their degree of subcultural capital unites them and makes them grow. Since drum 'n bass hybridizes easily with other styles of music, there are multiple styles of the style identifiable through its subgenres.

The labels active in drum 'n bass have always operated in a similar way where their style within the subculture identifies them. The first labels to release drum 'n bass were already active during the rave culture years; examples are Moving Shadow from Rob Playford, Reinforced Records from Dego and Marc Mac (together better known as the producing duo 4 Hero), and Suburban Base Records from Dan Donnelly. Other labels which emerged in the early jungle years were Metalheadz from Goldie, Good Looking Records from LTJ Bukem, and RAM (standing for Rapid Ass Movement) Records from Andy C. Drum 'n bass labels have always distinguished themselves from each other through style as well; most of these labels had their own distinct sound to add to the style of drum 'n bass, which was possible

⁶⁶ Thornton, *Club cultures*: 99.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*: 96.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*: 3.

through the style's flexibility; since the core elements of the music were fast, broken beats and heavy, low basslines, it could be mixed with many music styles such as ambient, techno, pop, jazz, reggae, and dub. Good Looking Records always had a dreamy, ambient sound to its releases, whilst Metalheadz choose for a more dark sound; labels such as Moving Shadow released drum 'n bass from any kind, making them a drum 'n bass label of the more general sort. The specializations of these labels all correspond to their distinction in drum 'n bass itself; their level of subcultural capital all serve the style's audience to their own degree of subcultural distinction. To market themselves to their targeted audience within the subculture, they used their brand and logo to distinct themselves from the rest. As Lury quotes the founder of jeans brand Diesel; 'Brands and their values are a way to 'feel' the product as part of their own personalities.'⁶⁹ In other words, labels use their own sound, style, and branding of drum 'n bass to enrich the audience's subcultural capital and attach them emotionally.⁷⁰ They are creators of the style which makes up the whole subculture of drum 'n bass. More about the relations between labels and branding will be discussed in the fourth chapter. For now it is also important to realize that before the onset of digital labels, drum 'n bass had, apart from its short commercial periods in the mid-nineties, always been exploited by independent labels. These mostly specialized in vinyl releases for the DJ's, and CD compilations for the more casual drum 'n bass listener. While around the turn of the century these labels were still doing fine, it looks apparent that many of these experienced losses of sales during the course of the first decade of this century. Labels that once stood at the top of the drum 'n bass scene were forced to go out of business or drastically shorten up their output of releases; when looking at the most complete and up-to-date website on drum 'n bass releases available online, 'Rolldabeats',⁷¹ many of the classic labels had their last releases years ago.

Today, labels have a number of things to face when looking at marketing their music online. These issues will be illuminated later with the case studies, but for now the following things must be clear: First off, the change of format from a physical music carrier to the mp3 format calls for an expertise on digital distribution. In the case of the independent label, this should be beneficial on the surface; the costs of distributing music and manufacturing the products are lowered considerably to almost zero, leaving only the artist that needs to be paid, costs for mastering and eventual promotion. On the other side, having access to distribution

⁶⁹ Celia Lury, *Brands: The logos of the global economy*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004: 73.

⁷⁰ *ibid*: 72.

⁷¹ Rolldabeats - online dance music discography resource, <http://www.rolldabeats.com>.

was a privilege for traditional labels. With everyone with online access having the power to distribute music, Goldmann points out a great dilemma: ‘A digital download has no costs at all. The logical outcome was distribution that granted any piece of music total availability, with the downside of being the most inefficient way of distribution ever: what should I download when there are five billion files to choose from?’⁷² As will be discussed in the following chapters, this signals a serious flaw in the democratization of music; a flooding of the market.

Second, labels need to find an online audience and take over the role of the store that used to promote their music. They need to delve into social networking, getting their name out on forums, and know how to sell their brand online. These promotional capabilities are of utmost importance since the ease of distribution and networking signals a potential surplus of digital labels ready to suffocate any others that are not capable to be ‘out there’, as is expected online.

Third, labels have to choose in either fighting illegal music distribution or support it. As studies have pointed out, many participants in illegal file distribution use the system for sampling, before they decide to buy it. This is an argument for labels to support rather than fight this practice.⁷³ On the other hand can the small size of independent labels already generate such a small revenue on digital downloads that the ease of illegally obtaining a digital copy could hold no reason for the downloader to pay for something which is exactly the same as was just obtained; the mp3 file might be regarded as an object of value in its right of the music it contains, while its digital nature might lack the physical value one would ascribe to a CD or record. Digital music lacks certain important attributes that a physical CD possesses, such as artwork, lyrics, and liner notes.⁷⁴ Although these can be digitally included in a download, it does look more defragmented than having all these traits combined in a single, physical jewel case.

Fourth, another important process of the new forms of distributing digital music is what Elberse has coined as unbundling; because transaction costs are low to practically nil in online distribution, the Internet gives companies the opportunity to offer individual products

⁷² Goldmann, ‘Everything popular is wrong’.

⁷³ Robinson and Halle, ‘Digitization, the Internet, and the arts’: 380.

⁷⁴ Jesse Bockstedt, Robert J. Kauffman, and Frederick J. Riggins, ‘The Move to Artist-Led Online Music Distribution: Explaining Structural Changes in the Digital Music Market’, *hiccs* 7, pp. 180a, Proceedings of the 38th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS’05) - Track 7 (2005): 8.

that were previously bundled.⁷⁵ Amongst most genres of dance music, including drum ‘n bass, the album concept is rather uncommon; instead a label mostly contracted two tracks from an artist which were pressed on a twelve inch record, which used to be the standard format for its primary consumer target, the DJ. Albums were mostly more focused on the non-DJ fans and made by the most successful artists of the label. There also were DJ mixes which often functioned as promotional material. The traditional method appears to have leaked into the new digital environment as well; digital releases on a digital label of independent dance music still consist in most cases out of two tracks profiled as an A and B side (plus additional artwork), or four tracks which is considered an E.P. Albums seem to be not very popular with these labels, as Elberse noted; ‘(...) the more people switch to consuming music digitally, the fewer albums they purchase, and thus the lower are the album sales per bundle.’⁷⁶ Selling music online stays close to the formats which used to be sold in the old brick and mortar dance vinyl stores, where a consumer now can purchase the ‘A-side’ of a release instead of both. Although this is beneficial for the consumer, the reason the central artwork is still used as well as including 2 or more tracks in one release is creating uniformity to induce more purchases from consumers (as when they were forced to, for example, purchase two tracks on one vinyl). Elberse explained this as ‘(...) in deciding how many items are worth buying, sharp differences in the attractiveness of items make it easier for consumers to choose which subset of items to purchase, while a relatively even distribution in attractiveness across items makes it more difficult to decide where to “draw the line,” thus stimulating bundle purchases.’⁷⁷

And fifth, what will still be the value of a digital label? They need to select artists and develop their talent and image,⁷⁸ but what if an artist has the capabilities to do it by him or herself? Especially in a not too big a scene such as drum ‘n bass, it is important to realize what a label needs to keep itself alive and credible in an online environment. All these elements have to be taken into consideration when departing from the traditional model of a label into a traditional one.

This chapter has thus tried to outline how both the rise of independent artists and a musical subculture as drum ‘n bass come into being, and what it needs to consider when starting a digital label. The next chapter will discuss what the options are for both artists and

⁷⁵ Anita Elberse, ‘Bye-Bye Bundles: The Unbundling of Music in Digital Channels’, *Journal of Marketing* 74 (May, 2010): 107.

⁷⁶ Elberse, ‘Bye-Bye Bundles’: 117.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*: 111.

⁷⁸ Martin Peitz and Patrick Waelbroeck, ‘An Economist’s Guide to Digital Music’, *CESifo Economic Studies* 51.2-3 (2005): 363.

consumers in a digital environment where traditional channels of distribution and formats have become digitized. Therefore, the implications of these changes and the need for using CMC's will explain how the actors surrounding a digital label can be organized at a sufficient level.

Chapter 3: Decentralization, interactivity, and freedom

The shift from physical to digital distribution was already outlined through theories of Cubitt and Deleuze and Guattari, as well as the medium itself was theorized by authors such as Jones and Sterne. But what are the effects of this decentralization and how will this help develop both artists and independent digital labels in the future? After all, as an artist has no more need for a label to distribute his or her work and the costs of promotion and distribution can be practically zero, is the concept of a label then still needed? If electronic music has no more need for hiring a studio and being pressed on vinyl since music is being sold and played out in a digital format in clubs, is the independent artist now winning and will everybody have a chance to let their music shine without the older ways of marketing through a label? In other words; is the democratization of music at hand through the decentralization of music, possible interactivity between producer and consumer, and freedom to distribute and market one's music in any way possible online? Fox has noticed that 'downloadable music and its associated technologies have brought about a redistribution of power from major record companies to music consumers and, arguably, artists.'⁷⁹ This chapter will therefore look at the benefits that independent digital labels will have from the shift to a digital platform.

The presupposed democratization of online music entails the power for musicians to distribute their music online to their desired audience without the intermediary position of a label, thus without any fear of being exploited through royalties and copyright agreements, getting contractually bound for uncertain periods of time to a label, and letting a label decide on the artist's worth to a consumer. Sen noted that many artists such as Radiohead, Public Enemy and the Beastie Boys have already embraced these new distribution modes by spreading their music in mp3 format outside the traditional supply chain, making their copyrighted music available to win back their fans. He also argues that there has been a power shift in favor of independent and relatively 'unknown' musicians and their fans due to the convergence of communication technologies.⁸⁰ Of course, the online network is more or less boundless and every artist has the ability to showcase music through forums, social networking, websites, and stores. However, it is of importance to question whether the former intermediaries also can still have a productive and guiding role in an online environment, and

⁷⁹ Fox, 'Technological and social drivers of change in the online music industry'.

⁸⁰ Sen, 'Music in the Digital Age'.

whether they can still be desired as gatekeepers. According to Bockstedt et al. we can see intermediaries in this process as economic agents that facilitate transactions between suppliers and buyers,⁸¹ which can be a label as well as distributors and stores. Online distribution can be done by labels and digital stores, but also by artists themselves. Many labels for instance, see the websites of their artists as their property where they can exercise a say in its content, a phenomenon which can complicate in the artist's own interests of what content they want to put up.⁸² Artists who are independent and selling their music under their own license, have the freedom to post up any music on their website they wish. The only thing they need to do is to construct an online space where their music is showcased and have a certain transactional system such as Paypal⁸³ attached to it. An artist can also link music through to digital stores where the music is hosted. These prospects promised to be some of the first liberations of musicians since the emergence of the digital distribution of music; artists were unable to gain access to wide distribution without the consent of label, and consumers had no access to the artist's music that the label chose not to promote.⁸⁴ Thus the artist obtained the freedom to spread the music online that he or she thinks is meant to be heard by fans, leaving the label's concern, about releasing music that maximizes the most revenue, behind. Access to production and distribution to the artist would give them more than 85% more revenue than when they had to share this with labels and distributors.⁸⁵ This implies a two folded effect; on one hand, one might expect that an artist would make much more money than before, but on the other hand it can be argued that the label's traditional role of promotion and career stimulation could undermine these sales. After all, labels hold the role of being specialized in getting music to the consumer through having the right networks, knowledge of marketing and promotion, and facilities to make the music sound as good as possible. To have these traits, it should take a label many years of expertise and knowledge of the music business to bring these to perfection. Still, the musicians mostly believe that they know how to find and produce the kind of music that the audience wants.⁸⁶ Whether they know this better than the label thus depends on their experience in performing the tasks a label does to generate a large fan base. But also of importance is the process of branding that a label can exercise to attract

⁸¹ Bockstedt, Kauffman, and Riggins, 'The Move to Artist-Led Online Music Distribution': 13.

⁸² Michael Pfahl, 'Giving Away Music to Make Money: Independent musicians on the Internet', *First Monday* 0.0 (July, 2005, originally published in August 2001), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1454/1369>.

⁸³ Paypal, <http://www.paypal.com>.

⁸⁴ Hughes and Lang, 'If I had a song': 182.

⁸⁵ Eric K. Clemons, Bin Gu, and Karl Reiner Lang, 'Newly Vulnerable Markets in an Age of Pure Information Products: An Analysis of Online Music and Online News', *Journal of Management Information Systems* 19.3 (Winter, 2002-2003): 21.

⁸⁶ Pfahl, 'Giving Away Music to Make Money'.

customers, since it can uphold a reputation of knowing what artists and music to bring to the listener. This subject will be discussed more in-depth in the next chapter.

Consumers have also been getting an increase in bargaining power in an online environment, due to using p2p programs and building networks and CMC's.⁸⁷ Although buying mp3s and streaming music through services such as iTunes and Spotify now has become very common, illegal music distribution is still an ongoing practice where the music industry is losing revenue from (just like the movie industry). Sen demonstrates that amongst younger audiences there has been a shift from an acquisition model to an access model.⁸⁸ Music doesn't need to be sought after anymore; it becomes common sense that it is online and can instantly be streamed or downloaded. Today, streaming is about to become more popular than downloading where transferring data from one computer to another can be a time-consuming and messy process.⁸⁹ With broadband Internet access on smartphones now being widely available, seamless streaming is of high quality and users have no more concern about their data capacities and waiting time before a music file has been transferred. This seemed to be a new threat to the music industry at first, after the emergence of forms of illegal music distribution such as p2p programs and torrents; anyone could upload copyrighted music videos to YouTube which had to check every video for copyright infringement. However, YouTube has now incorporated a system where music videos which were protected by copyright were not removed from the site, but instead were analyzed and given a percentage of the generated advertisement revenues to anyone with a stake in the song.⁹⁰ This system helps compensate the revenues normally lost to copyright infringement to such an extent, that a free service such as YouTube generates more profit on a well-known music video than a paid service such as iTunes.⁹¹ It is also being argued that people who used to share music illegally are now resorting to these streaming services.⁹² These changes are not automatically implying that illegal music distribution will stop soon, but do show that the owners of large streaming services and those of major labels did find ways now of regenerating revenues from activities they used to be firmly against at. Whether independent digital labels profit from this system, is still questionable and will be discussed in greater detail during the case studies.

⁸⁷ Bockstedt, Kauffman, and Riggins, 'The Move to Artist-Led Online Music Distribution': 20.

⁸⁸ Sen, 'Music in the Digital Age'.

⁸⁹ Fox, 'Technological and social drivers of change in the online music industry'.

⁹⁰ Eliot Van Buskirk, 'You Tube Search-and-Delete Code Makes Money for Rights-Holders', *Wired*, 21 August, 2009, <http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2009/08/how-copyright-holders-profit-from-infringement-on-youtube/>.

⁹¹ Eliot Van Buskirk, 'Free Music Can Pay as Well as Paid Music, YouTube Says', *Wired*, 2 February, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/02/free-music-can-pay/all/1>.

⁹² Sen, 'Music in the Digital Age'.

Furthermore are consumers also making their own CMC's where they share and discuss their love for the music, which are vital components for digital labels. These are essentially clusters of fans of the music style, a subculture that can be nourished and supported, even kept alive by the labels themselves. They are often one of the primary sources of support for the labels and the places where the newest releases and events are being reported; they are the new digital fan bases. If this concept of community breaks down, people will stop supporting its musicians and other artists,⁹³ including the label they derived from. If we view drum 'n bass as a general music genre, the latter appears to function in order to authenticate a work within a distinct cultural space, as was outlined in the former chapter through defining a musical style as subculture. Therefore, these communities represent the style of the genre, their proof of the music being alive, as a central hub where all actors gather according to their interests in that scene. Sen even argues that the creation of communities leads to an increasingly fragmented audience, where pop culture keeps on being divided into finer and smaller niche markets.⁹⁴ These markets can also be created with the right means of promoting the music on a site to a broad audience, which in turn will start to disperse itself.⁹⁵ Indeed, it appears there is a correlation between the forming of communities in drum 'n bass and its fragmentation; listeners were before the growth of these communities already preferring a specific style of drum 'n bass, where some preferred the lighter side of the music such as ambient, jazzy drum 'n bass, and others the more loud and dark material. Since the onset of digital music distribution, there are now many drum 'n bass fans that tend to cling to their own community of preferred drum 'n bass style. For example, a fan of the more commercially viable, rock-focused group Pendulum would rarely be grouped with a fan of experimental, minimal drum 'n bass, just like a fan of breakcore drum 'n bass isn't likely to be a fan of liquid (funky, ambient) drum 'n bass. Where before the millennium and onset of network cultures these were all junglists and junglettes, they now have found their peers thanks to the possibility of creating their own CMC's. As Ebare stated; '(...) online environments are in many ways a safe refuge for the expression of identity and self-concept (...).'⁹⁶ It enabled the drum 'n bass scene to diversify its broad nature because of the many kinds of music the concept of the style can merge with, letting it consist out of fast breakbeats, a deep bass and the freedom for an artist to fill in the rest.

⁹³ McLeod, 'MP3s Are Killing Home Taping': 530.

⁹⁴ Sen, 'Music in the Digital Age'.

⁹⁵ Hughes and Lang, 'If I had a song': 181.

⁹⁶ Ebare, 'Digital music and subculture'.

Artists are believed to form communities in this sense to achieve success as well, as Pfahl states:

These communities will have the freedom to become entertainment sources unto themselves with the only limit being the creativity of their members. These communities will be able to align the interests of the artist with the interests of the fans, enlarging in turn the fan base. The independent musician will no longer have to search for an audience; instead the audience will search for music that meets their preferences, thanks to new technologies that will be increasingly efficient. These changes will induce an important behavioral shift as the relationship between musician and fan is a strong emotional one.⁹⁷

It can thus be argued that the relationship between an artist and fan can be strengthened through a label that supports the artists and fans as one, where the love for the music stands upfront and not maximizing revenues, such as the case is with the major labels in the music industry. For independent labels this holds an important strength where the label consciously chooses to let the music and their fans always come first. These CMC's can be formed on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, forums and messenger applications. Through these CMC's, fans can be directly addressed by the label and the artists, and the labels can receive instant feedback on their music. Sen quotes a CEO of a music website which adequately describes the power of this process; '(...) the industry is returning to the most basic and exciting element of all, the raw ability of an artist to communicate with their audience on their own merits and not as the subject of colossal media hype.'⁹⁸ Therefore, these CMC's strengthen the ties between artist and fan more than ever was possible in the days of the traditional label. They can also be used to notify fans of live performances, to showcase promotional material such as DJ mixes, and recommend likewise artists to support the whole community. Tepper and Hargittai noticed that cultural consumption serves as a means of distinction and that liking the right type of culture can bring status and prestige.⁹⁹ It is then up to the artists running the label to acquire the right type of culture, or style for their fans and to listen to their feedback to uphold their status. This does not imply simply conforming to any wish a consumer desires from the label; a label needs to know their fans and have the capacity to stay fresh and renew itself according to its style. In other words, a

⁹⁷ Pfahl, 'Giving Away Music to Make Money'.

⁹⁸ Sen, 'Music in the Digital Age'.

⁹⁹ Steven J. Tepper and Eszter Hargittai, 'Pathways to music exploration in a digital age', *Poetics* 37.3 (June, 2009): 228-229.

label needs to be an opinion leader and use their social networks to preserve its status¹⁰⁰ by practicing its reputation of connoisseurship¹⁰¹ to the right extent.

Another very important element of the CMC's is associated with the nature of the digital format which has become liquid according to Hughes and Lang. Since it is no longer a single artifact, it enables the consumer to use its digital nature for remixing, sampling, looping, in short use the music to its own extent, making the consumer in turn into an artist as well.¹⁰² These users usually begin with consumptive audition of music and move into serious musical production practices within a short period of time, making different, digital technologies blend the boundaries between producer and consumer.¹⁰³ From this perspective, the CMC can easily create new artists who can be signed under a label where they got the inspiration to get creative in the first place. This is another example of a feedback loop where the label inspires the consumers who now can bring their own vision of the music back to the label. It can thus be argued that this process has the capacity to expand a community of niche music, in turn expanding its territory and the size of the represented genre.

It is also important to note that digital labels are often if not always ran by the artists themselves, for instance those who produce and DJ. They are not necessarily a product of the decentralization of music in a digital environment itself; independent dance labels have mostly been run by artists, who have the access to a network of other artists who appreciate their music and an audience where they play for in clubs. If however, more artists decide to skip trying to tie their music to a label and sell their music straight to the consumer, Clemons et al. see only two strategies for labels to overcome the artist-lead selling of music; by offering artists longer term contracts, and to improve their value propositions by offering more exclusive promotional services and active battling of illegal music distribution.¹⁰⁴ Whether these tactics are practical for networked dance subcultures like drum 'n bass labels is debatable; artists usually sign with a digital label for a one off deal, rather signing up for the brand the label carries than depending on them for a prospering career. Artists who get signed often exploit their own network of labels, fans, DJ's and promoters through social networking sites such as Facebook or messenger programs such as AIM. The proposition of Clemons et al. is nonetheless interesting; tying an artist to a brand on a long term basis strengthens the

¹⁰⁰ Tepper and Hargittai, 'Pathways to music exploration in a digital age': 230.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*: 244.

¹⁰² Hughes and Lang, 'If I had a song': 186.

¹⁰³ Ebare, 'Digital music and subculture'.

¹⁰⁴ Clemons, Gu, and Lang, 'Newly Vulnerable Markets in an Age of Pure Information Products': 23.

artist's reputation through the label's branding and the labels' reputation through its association with the artist. On the issue of illegal music distribution, it is generally assumed that this practice can be both a disadvantage and beneficial to a digital label. In general it is already taken for granted that the war on illegal music distribution cannot be won, which means that labels have to look for alternatives to get compliance from the majority of consumers.¹⁰⁵ Musical superstars signed under major labels do of course suffer from the losses coming from illegal music distribution, but it is more the label that loses money than the artist, while small independent labels can benefit from the implied 'free' promotion that it causes. Moreover, p2p networks have been responsible for creating CMC's which are dynamic and self-organized.¹⁰⁶ In essence, this is another example of a feedback loop at work: a label sells music that gets spread illegally through a network, and the music's popularity generates CMC's who in turn show interest in the label, artists, and the music they bring forth. This is derived from a phenomenon on the Internet that has been around since the dawn of p2p networks; the view that music can be obtained free and that since it is information, all information should be free and the music encoded as information as well.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, labels can benefit from this thought by offering certain of their songs for free as well; this then would act as a bond-creator between producer and consumer. An obvious analogy to this practice is offering a free snack in the supermarket to consumers, hoping they like the taste and will continue to purchase the product in the future. According to Pfahl, providing music for free online may be the only way for independent musicians to take control and achieve success.¹⁰⁸ This could be the case for starting independent labels as well; giving one a free taste of the music lets the potential future consumer to not only get to know the music of a new label, but also build a sense of respect for the label by appreciating their generosity. All this creates a bond between label and consumer.

A lot can be said for the liberation of artists from the dominating positions traditional labels held, and they seem to have many resources to bond with their audience in a direct way and gain one through social networking and CMC's. That the Internet empowers independent artists might be true, but it lacks in argumentation to say that they will prevail over the oligopoly that the major labels have sustained for many decades. The following chapter will show that there have surfaced many problems in the decentralized, digital environment which

¹⁰⁵ Hughes and Lang, 'If I had a song': 187.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*: 184.

¹⁰⁷ Fox citing Sylva (2000), 'Technological and social drivers of change in the online music industry'.

¹⁰⁸ Pfahl, 'Giving Away Music to Make Money'.

could problematize an artist more than it could benefit them, calling once again for the need of a label to support them.

Chapter 4: The dystopian digital democratization and persistent use of the label

After almost a decade of the commercialization of digital music which was initiated by applications such as Napster and brought to global proportions by Apple's iTunes, what needs addressing is the question whether the anticipated democratization of music had the expected impact. After the big boom of attacking the major labels through spreading copyrighted music for free and its presupposed crumbling of the established music industry, there are many actors and signs these days which show that although major labels are still suffering more losses each year, they still prevail as the dominators in the music industry. Their power was supposed to diminish in favor of the artists who would play their role themselves, but instead the opposite appeared to have happened. The revolution of digital music has suffered a dramatic turning point along the way, so where did this go wrong? Also, why did small independent music labels still have to battle illegal music distribution just like the major labels, whilst it was supposed to protect them? And how is it that the market of digital distribution is being flooded with music where the listener has no point of reference to start searching for any independent music which suits his or her taste? This chapter will outline the failure of musical democratization in an online environment, how artists must struggle to gain attention in a surplus of musical material, and how digital independent labels can profile themselves to not succumb in the oversaturated market of digital music being offered.

Cubitt claims that a market in information, such as the digital music industry, takes part in practices such as stockpiling, delaying and selective releasing, rendering it as an unequal one.¹⁰⁹ This is a notion that counteracts the previously presumed democratization of online music; when a music label decides to divide its audience by certain music tastes, age groups or gender they can decide to hold certain products back while pushing others fitting more into their generation of maximum revenue. As a market strategy this looks obvious, but it also upholds the power of the big, dominant labels; independent labels often lack the ability to expand into multiple market segments while being able to generate sufficient consumer feedback to construct these accordingly for a greater profit. Although distribution has become more versatile online, it also entails that labels with larger market segments have the power to reach more consumers than independent labels who are often only able to generate a few at most. Of course, these labels themselves often are niche and specialized in one segment to

¹⁰⁹ Cubitt, 'Distribution and media flows': 206.

supply their music to, but lack the financial and temporal capacities to grow and expand their expertise which could expand their own business. From this point of view, the democratization of online music has caused its fragmentation and diversity into certain kinds of niche markets, but leaves the players in these markets immobile to grow beyond the confines of their audience's size.

It was also mentioned earlier that it is often independent artists themselves who will try to distribute and sell their music directly to their fans, keeping total control to themselves and turning into makers of the market.¹¹⁰ This in turn would have many benefits for the artists, such as keeping their own copyrights for the music,¹¹¹ which used to be a function of the bargaining power of market intermediaries¹¹² such as labels. They would sell straight to the consumers, and rather be inspired by the financial rewards in general without concern over the exclusive rights to reproduce and distribute their music.¹¹³ Not only financial rewards of their music, but the revenues of live concerts would be their principal source of income,¹¹⁴ as well as non-artistic activities;¹¹⁵ many independent artists have a normal day job on the weekdays and try to spend their free time in the best way possible to sustain their musical careers. This is where Goldmann, artist, DJ, and label owner himself, makes his first statement in a recent essay that takes a rather sobering, hopeless look at the presupposed wonders the Web 2.0 was supposed to bring to independent artists; '(...) the core economic feature of the independent music culture (was) no riches, but still sufficient funds to avoid wasting time on activities not related to music. Anyone busy generating income from 9 to 5 wouldn't be able to gain the deep skills necessary to sustain a career in music and hold an audience for long.'¹¹⁶ He contrasts this view to the days when the scene of independent musicians was of a size that it could sustain a musician in a living. Digital distribution, however, made the amount of music sold in the independent music scene drop to a minimum, because of the abundance in available choice online.¹¹⁷ This problem will be illuminated later on in this chapter. For now, it is important to note that the independent musician does not seem to win as much as the major labels were supposed to lose. Some artists who had already been established in the pre-digital era seem to sustain themselves; when they were first supposed to sell a half million

¹¹⁰ Sen, 'Music in the Digital Age'.

¹¹¹ McLeod, 'MP3s Are Killing Home Taping': 528.

¹¹² Kretschmer, 'Artists earnings and copyright'.

¹¹³ Raymond Shih Ray Ku, 'The Creative Destruction of Copyright: Napster and the New Economics of Digital Technology', *The University of Chicago Law Review* 69.1 (Winter, 2002): 308.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Kretschmer, 'Artists earnings and copyright'.

¹¹⁶ Goldmann, 'Everything popular is wrong'.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

copies of a record to break even, they can now sell about 20,000 units to provide themselves a living.¹¹⁸ Unfortunately it is the musicians who had not been able to gain from this era who miss this exposure which is hard to build in today's digital environment. On top of this, major labels have found other ways to compensate for their losses due to illegal music distribution and lower music costs; apart from the earlier discussed YouTube system where they are able to claim copyright money back through sharing advertisement revenues, they now employ cross-marketing opportunities for artists, such as letting them appear in films, magazines, commercials, and showcase them on various paraphernalia.¹¹⁹ These so called 360-degree-deals which are under control of one company are even being practiced by the smallest labels these days;¹²⁰ in essence, this can be a good thing for independent musicians since that does leave them again with more time to let them develop musically while the label takes care of live gigs, publishing rights, promotion, and other tasks. Although independent labels probably are not able to support their version of these deals with film roles and commercial appearances, they can promise to take care of these other three tasks.¹²¹

Another development which was supposed to support independent musicians in the post-millennial era was the distribution of music through p2p networks, which later expanded by the emergence of torrents and file sharing sites such as Mediafire.¹²² As a central aspect of distribution, Cubitt stated that 'every stage of commodity distribution is prone to mishaps. Backfiring projects and criminal actions disenable any attempt to erect a watertight system for controlling what is by its nature the infinitely fecund generation of human communications.'¹²³ Illegal music file sharing was also supposed to form a danger to the distribution of online music which, as explained before, partly was responsible for starting the sale of music online as a means of keeping people from participating in this process. But many used to see these practices as liberating since only the major labels would suffer from these practices, and would not be bad for the independent musicians because they would help promote and distribute their work¹²⁴ (although the initial sharing of the digital format would not generate revenues, name spreading would eventually generate revenue from those who downloaded material for free). However, this statement now looks dated in terms of the

¹¹⁸ McLeod, 'MP3s Are Killing Home Taping': 528.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*: 530.

¹²⁰ Goldmann, 'Everything popular is wrong'.

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² Mediafire, <http://www.mediafire.com>. These sites enable a user to download files uploaded by another user, which in the practice of illegal music sharing are mostly compressed files which are named to an unidentifiable extent, that contain licensed music.

¹²³ Cubitt, 'Distribution and media flows': 208.

¹²⁴ Kretschmer, 'Artists earnings and copyright'.

disappearance of the physical music carrier; normally consumers would buy the CD or vinyl from the music they illegally downloaded, but because of their continuing disappearance it appears that the next generation of music listeners does not value the digital music format as much as the physical one anymore.¹²⁵ However, the voices stating that illegal music sharing is beneficial seem to vary, as the case studies in the next chapter will show. The supporters of illegal music distribution argue that it broadens the audience for independent artists since their music, which was mostly hard to come by in brick and mortar stores, is generally easy to find on the Internet. Their willingness to pay for this music however, appears to be determined by factors such as risk, quality issues, ethics, and time.¹²⁶ Chiang and Assane found that the degree of income and risk substantially influence this willingness, with the former being the most prominent.¹²⁷ It could therefore be argued that reasonable pricing and packaging of digital music as a qualitative product (such as having a high quality sound and included artwork) could reduce the persuasion to indulge in illegal music sharing. Curien and Moreau state that downloading music from a p2p network creates incentives to attend live shows, where they quote Liebowitz who coined this as the “exposure” effect.¹²⁸ When illegal music sharing would cause an exposure effect, users would find it easier to find niche music such as drum ‘n bass, and therefore be more likely to attend live performances from the musician. On the other hand, this effect is believed to benefit the lesser known musician when this takes place in a light and not too pervasive form¹²⁹, but it does threaten the labels who miss out on sales of their music; it does not imply that illegal music distribution also elevates the revenues of the label’s music.¹³⁰ Goldmann adds to this that DJ’s get rapidly replaced by another after short periods of time due to their short longevity,¹³¹ thus many musicians in this sector will have trouble to gain a stage presence and hold on to this before they profit from this effect.

The earlier mentioned surplus of digital music available appears to become problematic for both artists and consumers. The latter has to sift through the online material to find new independent music of distinction and quality, a job that used to be done by the radio stations and A&R departments of labels. Vignoli researched the retrieval, navigation, and organization of music amongst collectors of digital music, and concerning retrieval it

¹²⁵ McLeod, ‘MP3s Are Killing Home Taping’: 529.

¹²⁶ Eric P. Chiang and Djeto Assane, ‘Estimating the Willingness to Pay for Digital Music’, *Contemporary Economic Policy* 27.4 (October, 2009): 513.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*: 519.

¹²⁸ Nicolas Curien and François Moreau, ‘The Music Industry in the Digital Era: Toward New Contracts’, *Journal of Media Economics* 22.2 (2009): 105.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*: 109.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*: 111.

¹³¹ Goldmann, ‘Everything popular is wrong’.

appeared that general music listeners use the concept of genre when searching for music, although the term's inconsistency makes it more appropriate for classification of music not known to users.¹³² So if the direction of genre is known, but for the rest little about its context, how does the majority of the audience know what to herald in the world of digital music? The traditional label had the job of having an ear for quality, gatekeeping and selecting the quality they have known from their degree of qualitative knowledge. The earlier discussed lack of time for professional development with independent musicians can produce an error rate that saturates the market of digital music with products of poor quality in content and execution.¹³³

It is an effect of the Internet that has been theorized by many academics as inherently problematic in general; Virilio and Kittler discuss this issue as a treat inherent to their theorization of what Einstein coined as “the information bomb”, which uses the interactivity of information as a threat to mankind just like the atomic bomb did.¹³⁴ Information technology is in their view the only one capable of being radically reprogrammable, and thus able to constantly turn out new things.¹³⁵ Seen from the perspective of digital music, this manifests in an accumulation of not only new music, but also new sites and technologies of digital music distribution. The danger here would be that there is no limit being put on these developments, since according to Virilio and Kittler the people who devise these programs are merely program-slaves in charge of corporate propaganda who program what they're told to get paid.¹³⁶ It therefore looks like gatekeeping is being complicated because of the expansion of corporate interests in the growth of these sites and technologies to yet unknown proportions. Although this view looks inherently apocalyptic and missing out on the ideal thinking of giving every artist a chance, it does stress the fact that many of the larger distribution channels for promoting independent music such as YouTube and iTunes, are in the hands of large corporations who support this saturation in favor of their profit. They have no interest in the growing complications of gatekeeping, competition, and oversaturation of digital music, which affects both their artists and listeners. In case of the effects on the latter can be resorted to Berardi, who concerned himself over the effect of panic which can be exercised over online users who are being subjected to the infinite velocity of the expansion of cyberspace and

¹³² Fabio Vignoli, 'Digital Music Interaction concepts: a user study.' *Proceedings of International Conference on Music Information Retrieval ISMIR 2004* (October, 2004): 3.

¹³³ Goldmann, 'Everything popular is wrong'.

¹³⁴ Paul Virilio, *The information bomb*, trans. Chris Turner, London and New York: Verso, 2000: 63.

¹³⁵ Paul Virillio, Friedrich Kittler and John Armitage, 'The information bomb: a conversation', *Angelaki* 4.2 (1999): 83.

¹³⁶ *ibid*: 88.

exposure to signs.¹³⁷ Panic is a feeling one gets when being confronted with the infinity of nature, which overwhelms us to the degree that one is unable to consciously receive the infinite stimulus that the world produces in us.¹³⁸ Berardi speaks also about the Internet having gone out of control since its utopian inception in the nineties, and that its continuous expansion and stiff competition can lead to collapse and depression after too much exposure within the user.¹³⁹ If we take Virilio's view of unstoppable expansion of cyberspace and Berardi's resulting panic brought up by this process together, the clouds indeed seem very dark. As the overflow of online music has now been signaled and is very unlikely to reverse on the short term, both the musical content, its artists and its listeners are liable to succumb to this overflow; every party is therefore negatively affected.

This flooding of the market was sometimes expected to be advantageous; Dolfsma noted that volatility in demand for music products would increase when more firms and authors would enter the market;¹⁴⁰ although this has significantly lowered the costs of music compared to the pre-digital era, it is doubtful whether listeners find the prices adequate enough to pay for instead of sorting to illegal downloading. Goldmann also argues that the widening of the digital gates where any musician can enter the competition beside the major labels has generated an overflow of musical availability, leaving the consumer with the dilemma what music to choose from. He sees the disappearance of economic barriers to distribution hitting the financial status of the independent labels, decrementing their income.¹⁴¹ The commercial intermediaries used to take on the role of selector or gatekeeper since there were more products trying to enter the market than could be consumed,¹⁴² but now anyone creating music and spreading it digitally can claim this role with the possible shortage on needed expertise. It has therefore become difficult for individual artists to get noticed amongst what Kretschmer calls the "noise" of creative ambition.¹⁴³ This form of noise is present in Berardi's discourse on overflow as well, now tying more in with Virilio's concern over corporations; 'The infocratic regime of Semiocapital founds (...) its power on overloading: accelerating semiotic flows which let sources of information proliferate until they become the white noise of the indistinguishable, of the irrelevant, of the

¹³⁷ Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The soul at work: From alienation to autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia, forw. Jason Smith, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009: 98, 101.

¹³⁸ Berardi, *The soul at work*: 100.

¹³⁹ *ibid*: 101-102.

¹⁴⁰ Dolfsma, 'How will the music industry weather the globalization storm?'

¹⁴¹ Goldmann, 'Everything popular is wrong'.

¹⁴² Kretschmer, 'Artists earnings and copyright'.

¹⁴³ *ibid*.

unintelligible.’¹⁴⁴ Goldmann adds to this; ‘What used to be done by professional enthusiasts now becomes the domain of the artists – turning them into designer, PR dude and distributor. It all subtracts from the time spent actually creating music.’¹⁴⁵ When we tie this notion to his earlier statement that independent musicians lack the time to professionally develop themselves, the outcome is of course that the musician who tries to run things by himself but has no full-time access to this process, runs the risk of both lacking expertise in music making and commercial development. These are two tasks which could be better handled by a label that does have the time to support an artist and giving them in turn time back to develop, taking some load off their shoulders. Since a label has the task of creating credibility with an audience through the musical products it provides them, it keeps up its role as gatekeeper because they are capable of controlling the process of cultural production from the production of a creative impulse to its distribution, leading to controlling the consumer demand.¹⁴⁶ If an artist can only develop itself to a level of professionalism which makes this marketable under the brand of a certain label the music fits to, they can enjoy exposure being handled by a label and grow with the growth of the label’s brand and artists. Consumers like to look for music based on the association based concept which finds music based on the similarity of another song, and the uniformity of a label’s sound can give artists a better chance of being found by consumers through this concept.¹⁴⁷ Plus, consumers can then look for a central brand which promotes the music of the kind of genre and niche which is preferred, instead of looking through hundreds of thousands of artists who all claim to have invented a new level of originality and sound. It should also not be dismissed that Berardi when discussing panic, speaks about the online environment in general, and that he acknowledges that artistic forms (such as music) form an antidote to the process. Indeed does he see a solution for online users to get around being lured into panic; the development of concepts, artistic forms, and friendships.¹⁴⁸ These can be adapted to an online label in favor of both artists and listeners, where a label concept creates unity to halt continuous disparity of music, and friendships in forms of CMC’s which let listeners assist in gatekeeping and judge over the available artistic quality.

It becomes therefore clear that the label and its brand are vital for both the artist and the label itself to survive in the noise of creative ambition. In the appendix of his essay ‘Artist

¹⁴⁴ Berardi, *The soul at work*: 183.

¹⁴⁵ Goldmann, ‘Everything popular is wrong’.

¹⁴⁶ Tschmuck, ‘COPYRIGHT, CONTRACTS AND MUSIC PRODUCTION’: 253.

¹⁴⁷ Vignoli, ‘Digital Music Interaction concepts’: 3.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*: 126.

earnings and copyright', Kretschmer makes some very important statements about the wishes of artists which shows that a label can be fundamentally essential to them. A creator has four main interests; to see their work widely reproduced and distributed, to receive credit for it, to earn a financial reward relative to the commercial value of the work, and having the ability to engage creatively with other works.¹⁴⁹ As this chapter has shown so far and the case studies will demonstrate in the next chapter, an artist working independently has little prospect of a wide distribution of his or her work without the right channels of promotion and networking contacts. Since the competition amongst independent artists is very high and financial resources are limited to most of them, they will struggle to claim the appropriate rewards for their efforts due to underexposure and illegal music distribution, and won't have the time to build upon expansion of a network or musical promotion. For independent artists working in a niche market, there is another notion according to Kretschmer that shrinks the possibilities of their interests; a creator has little to gain from exclusivity since it prevents widest distribution.¹⁵⁰ However, if artists can be recognized through a label, the latter can make sure that they get the widest distribution possible within the market's niche they're operating in.

One very important aspect of a label is that they contain a brand; this makes their product recognizable for their listeners, who associate its logo with the brand, making it a medium between producers and consumers. According to Lury, these logos organize a process of identification, where the consumer associates it with the brand's value;¹⁵¹ an artist carrying this brand with its music has therefore a higher probability of being noticed amongst the noise of other artists. It guarantees the consumer a certain sound which they value high, because they know where the brand and logo stand for. Brands are defined by the providers of the goods, the artists themselves, as signals of quality, which people cannot reliably judge before consumption.¹⁵² This is a marketing process which is preferably carried out through the expertise of a label to maximize the musical value of their artists through their own face value. The notion of brand signifies a unity¹⁵³ which in this case forms a collective of artists who share a collective identity. The image of this brand holds the associations for consumers, and its positioning lets them tell it apart from others.¹⁵⁴ Thus apart from an style's niche status as a genre, like drum 'n bass, a brand can ascend the hierarchical place of the genre it represents;

¹⁴⁹ Kretschmer, 'Artists earnings and copyright'.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Lury, *Brands*: 62-63.

¹⁵² Elberse, 'Bye-Bye Bundles': 112.

¹⁵³ Lury, *Brands*: 64.

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*: 67.

since a musical genre is merely a classification and a brand creates a product with a certain value attached to it, an artist is not simply ‘another drum ‘n bass musician’ anymore. They become the representation of this brand and part of its value, thus substantial for consumers; these start to feel the label’s music affectively and in turn start to see its brand as a part of their own personality. These emotions in turn lead to action, where they resort to acquiring more of the brand by buying more music;¹⁵⁵ its logo serves as an iconic personality to establish an ongoing relationship between producer and consumer.¹⁵⁶ Through the digital network the logo will in turn spread itself, not necessarily just by the music anymore; logos are signs of liquidity which make them able to move beyond its frame,¹⁵⁷ referring back to the plateaus which Deleuze and Guattari described. Through the seemingly endless rhizomes of an online environment, they can travel anywhere from one multiplicity to another and its conspicuity can attract online users far beyond a mere niche market. In this sense, logos have to power to get a distribution beyond the genre conventions it carries with its brand.

Except for branding and logos there are more ways in which a label can help an independent artist to rise above Kretschmer's creative noise of ambition. If labels could have access to p2p networks and give users access to their music at a very low cost (such as a fixed price per song model for sporadic downloaders and a subscription fee for high intensity consumers as in the Napster model¹⁵⁸) they could accommodate illegal music sharing practices.¹⁵⁹ Another method which has shown to be effective is a voluntary payment system, as was researched by Regner and Barria for a label with rather unknown artists. The results of this research showed that if a customer could choose to pay for music between a minimum and a recommended price, they would pay an amount that exceeded the recommended price. They state that if the psychic cost of guilt of paying less outweighs the material gain, consumers pay more to alleviate this guilt.¹⁶⁰ Thus, independent labels could use this model instead of setting a fixed price if this proves to generate larger revenues. Finally, although Goldman’s discourse appears to be a giant shattering of the hopes for the democratization of music, even he has some arguments for independent artists to still make it online today; since the old channels are jammed, some are still open to those who possess endurance,

¹⁵⁵ Lury, *Brands*: 72-73.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*: 77.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*: 78.

¹⁵⁸ Francesco D. Sandulli and Samuel Martin-Barbero, ‘68 Cents per Song: A Socio-Economic Survey on the Internet’, *Convergence* 13.63 (2007): 76.

¹⁵⁹ Curien and Moreau, ‘The Music Industry in the Digital Era’: 112.

¹⁶⁰ Tobias Regner and Javier A. Barria, ‘Do consumers pay voluntarily? The case of online music’, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 71 (2009): 404.

individuality, and substance.¹⁶¹ In other words, artists can rise above the rest when they keep themselves active amongst the CMC's, makes themselves to stand out above the rest, and have music that is different from any that is out there.

Digital labels in the light of Kretschmer's creative noise and Goldmann's plead for having substance and identity could be illuminated through the work of Terranova and her theorization of information and culture. From her perspective, we can describe digital labels as an informational culture; if contemporary culture such as drum 'n bass has an informational quality to it such as the digital label, it could be because 'cultural processes are taking on the attributes of information – they are increasingly grasped and conceived in terms of their informational dynamics.'¹⁶² These informational dynamics stand for the relation between noise and signal, which are constituted into informational cultures as an informational milieu with an environment of information, which she describes here as massless flows.¹⁶³ Within this milieu meaning is generated, through producing culture within information, but has also an inherent problem as characterized by Shannon and his mathematical theory of information from 1948; when the informational signal travels through a channel within this milieu, it produces a characteristic background static which can be identified as noise.¹⁶⁴ This noise can be linked to the creative noise of other labels obscuring its meaning, in this case style; when signals are imagined as labels, the latter experience trouble communicating its style to the receiver (the audience). A technique is needed to encode this signal, or the label, in such a way that it would suffer minimal loss of quality, or an encoding of the label's style which makes it stand out from the noise, making it an entity that stands out through quality.¹⁶⁵ In other words, if we understand music labels as an informational culture, its internal informational dynamics will have signals resonating which will be the strongest when they are encoded in such a way that their communication will produce the littlest noise possible; a label needs a style of high quality and exclusivity that drowns out the creative noise of influential, stylistic similarity to become strong and have a chance of survival. In this way, a label will clear the space within its informational milieu from this noise and serve subcultures by bringing a new style (a new meaning of music rising above the creative noise) online. The noise should be reduced by the label to benefit its audience; the former should get its music above the creative noise through distinction and high quality, so the latter can distinguish it

¹⁶¹ Goldmann, 'Everything popular is wrong'.

¹⁶² Tiziana Terranova, *Network cultures: Politics for the Information Age*, London: Pluto Press, 2004: 7.

¹⁶³ *ibid.*: 8.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*: 12.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*

and not get panicked by Virilio and Berardi's schemed overload and saturation of information. And if we return to the discourse surrounding the logo as proposed by Lury, it is important to understand that the power of communication is determined by the overall dynamics of the informational milieu, where what counts is the *preservation* of the signal through all the different permutations and possible corruptions which it is liable to undergo.¹⁶⁶ This is why the short slogan or iconic power of the logo is favored by labels to survive all possible corruption by creative noise;¹⁶⁷ it is more direct, easier to remember, and has more chance of reaching a potential target than when its complicated, unclear, or cryptic (three basic elements of noise itself). When Lury's notion of repetition of the logo is added to this, it will be found that this process creates semantic autonomy and a force of memory transforming itself in a self-signifying name, which can secure a label's brand familiarity through style.¹⁶⁸ Thus is the branding of a label's style of utmost importance to clear space in the creative noise.

In essence, labels should take the same approach to both inspire its artists and keep its profile valuable and original, so it can hopefully stand the test of time. Goldmann further argues that over-advertising might not be beneficial; labels could be better off by lightly advertised work that is really special rather than mediocre, unoriginal, "over spammed" music. And finally, he argues that an independent label is never safe, and holders should always keep an independent income. In this way, creating and promoting music is more rewarding than pushing music all day to forcibly produce a paycheck for a living.¹⁶⁹ So despite the looming dangers of limited reach for independent labels, illegal music distribution, and the saturation of online music resulting in the creative noise, this chapter has tried to explain a label's use within these exposed problems. It appears that the label can have guiding role in this process, can become a gatekeeper through emphasizing quality and distinction, and have the power to clear space in the creative noise. There are many more benefits apart from these examples why artists could still need a digital label to get the most out of their productions, which will be illuminated in the following chapter through the case studies of five digital drum 'n bass labels operating today.

¹⁶⁶ Terranova, *Network cultures*: 16.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Lury, *Brands*: 66.

¹⁶⁹ Goldmann, 'Everything popular is wrong'.

Chapter 5: The transition of digital drum ‘n bass labels through five case studies

To support the previously discussed observations and theories concerning independent digital music labels, this chapter will try to support this with empirical research done through observing and speaking with the owners of five digital drum ‘n bass labels. All these five labels are active today and mainly retail digital music formats, although some of them also release material on vinyl and CD (one of them only sells vinyl). They agreed to respond to a set of questions that were compiled according to some of the key assumptions which have been discussed in this thesis (for a reference to these questions, see the appendix at the end of thesis). The key elements of the conducted interviews lay with brand value, distribution, consumer behavior, marketing, networking, formats, and illegal music sharing in the independent label scene of drum ‘n bass. All these elements will be outlined in this chapter through each label owner’s stance on the issue, and eventually be supported by the earlier discussed theories and observations. All participants were presented with sixteen questions, although depending on the answers and the nature of the label; some were altered, added, or removed. The interviews were conducted over Skype where the conversations were being recorded, through messengers, and one through e-mail.

The five researched labels are Tongue Flap Records¹⁷⁰ and Blue Cheese Records¹⁷¹ from the United Kingdom, Alphacut Records¹⁷² and Hidden Hawaii¹⁷³ from Germany, and Break-Fast Audio¹⁷⁴ from the Netherlands. Tongue Flap Records is being owned by Pete, who started his label in 2009 and which is specialized in drum ‘n bass and dubstep music. Alphacut Records could be called the most unique of the five, since it is the only one, and one of the few worldwide, who don’t sell digital music online but strictly vinyl. Its owner, Alex, works at a vinyl cutting station himself, R.A.N.D. Muzik in Leipzig, and is thus all day surrounded by the presence of this format which for many has endured a considerate decline since digital music entered the scene.¹⁷⁵ The label releases ‘contemporary jungle and experimental drum ‘n bass for more or less imaginary dance floors on 12” artist-split

¹⁷⁰ Tongue Flap Records, <http://www.tongueflap.com/>.

¹⁷¹ Blue Cheese Records's sounds on SoundCloud, <http://soundcloud.com/blue-cheese-records/>.

¹⁷² Alphacut records, <http://www.alphacutrecords.com/>.

¹⁷³ Hidden Hawaii, <http://hiddenhawaiiirec.blogspot.com/>.

¹⁷⁴ Break-fast, <http://www.break-fast.nl/>.

¹⁷⁵ Ed Montano, ‘The Sydney Dance Music Scene and the Global Diffusion of Contemporary Club Culture’ *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 4.1 (April, 2009): 50.

singles.¹⁷⁶ Blue Cheese Records is being run by Michael Hayden from the United Kingdom and has emerged in 2009. Although its website is not up and running yet, it does have pages on Soundcloud¹⁷⁷ and YouTube where its listeners can listen to forthcoming dubs, and listen or download promotional mixes. Dutch digital label Break-fast Audio has been online since 2008 and has been ran by Fre4knc, his real name being Bertran, from the Netherlands. Although the crew behind the label has been running the local drum 'n bass scene in their Dutch hometown Groningen since 2004, they have been outputting a steady stream of digital releases which they combine with their own weekly live event to promote its music. Hidden Hawaii from owner Felix Krone is just like Alphacut Records German, and is also friends with them and sells vinyl along with its digital releases.

The first issue evolved around the presence and need of digital drum 'n bass labels, or the reasons why one starts a digital drum 'n bass label. All owners essentially do it for the love of the music; they all have normal daytime jobs, and run the labels in their spare time. Therefore, they all have essentially no interest in the revenues they gain or lose, since it remains pretty much stable. Pete from Tongue Flap Records states that he got the idea of starting a label mainly because of the abundance of mediocre drum 'n bass available in terms of poor quality and mastering, which shows that he wants his label to improve the quality of online drum 'n bass and recognizes an overflow. He had little idea where to start, so he researched solid for six to seven months before starting off. Alex from Alphacut Records states about the need for labels:

Labels are still needed. (...) For a DJ or music lover it is very comfortable to have a style guide in form of a well-done label's catalogue. Further, you can make offers for other related acts you wouldn't find if there wouldn't be the label. (...) A label is also very helpful to concentrate the "business" part. An important information point for other artists, promoters and fans as well.

He thus sees value in the label in that it brings distinction in style, creates opportunities for concentrating artists and business, and in being a social meeting point for people involved in the music. Michael from Blue Cheese Recordings started his label because of his involvement in the drum 'n bass scene and his wish to expand this:

HANS : Why specifically start your own digital label? As, what was your motivation?

¹⁷⁶ Description as stated on the Alphacut records website, <http://www.alphacutrecords.com/>.

¹⁷⁷ Soundcloud, <http://www.soundcloud.com>.



Figure 2. Tongue Flap Records logo.

MICHAEL: Well I've been producing drum 'n bass for about 6 years now, I have had a couple of releases. I spoke to a lot of labels so the in's & outs were easy to find out. I also know a lot of very talented producers who were unsigned at the time and so I definitely wanted to create an output for the kind of drum 'n bass I like plus a little bit of dubstep. I also really wanted to be involved in the scene more in-depth and build up a brand name that will hopefully be quite recognizable within the scene.

It again appears that online artists have a need to group other artists under one brand to obtain recognition in its informational culture. This process will also accumulate subcultural capital by bringing these artists together under the central style of the label. Again, in the drum 'n bass scene the grouping of actors appears to be a central part of rising above the creative noise. Bertran from Break-Fast was inspired to start his label when he also noticed when people started distributing music online that some material got didn't get signed, although he thought it should. Thus a label also functions to gather music which doesn't fit under one style of a label but can under another. He thinks a label is needed because it invests time and money in artists, and thus gives it more credibility and value to the music. Mutually, this would then add value to the label as well when it gets recognized through the artists; its value and consistency in style therefore become important. For Bertran, this is exemplary; around the time he started out he had to look for producers who provided material, but now, eighteen releases further, he gets flooded by people sending him material. This goes to the extent that he sometimes can't reply to these producers anymore, making him feel arrogant, but he simply has no time to reply to all material he gets. Felix from Hidden Hawaii also started his

label to give artists the chance to release their music and because he had the vision to achieve a distinct label sound. He thinks the label is still needed in that it's helpful for listeners to find their special style of music. Thus so far, a label is started and needed because of the need for bringing online music under one brand with its own style, to achieve distinction and support artists, listeners and promoters in getting clarity out of the creative noise. Labels also gather and receive music which was first inconspicuous through this noise and obtains recognition; labels strengthen artists and vice versa, giving each other value and credibility which in turn strengthens their subcultural capital.

The next issue that was discussed concerned how these digital drum 'n bass labels handled their promotion online. This concerned how they get their artists noticed through their label, how they promoted the label themselves, and what is most important to keep a digital independent label alive. Pete tries to make Tongue Flap as cost-effective as possible, and looks for other ways to promote its music, such as their podcasts. This medium is used to play music outside of what most DJ's play (which they need to keep doing to keep up the size of his audience), such as unreleased music that is obtained from certain labels and artists to promote new names which are potentially equal in quality to established artists. These shows sometimes host guest DJ's as well to appeal to a broader audience. In this way he can make his label stand out by promoting the music of his artists under the label by spreading mixes online which are free to download. He admits that it takes a lot to create a following, which he did by posting as much as possible on forums and getting his podcasts promoting Tongue Flap to rank on Google as high as possible; the reason this method works, can be found when looking at the amount of people who subscribed to his podcasts (around 35.000). Outside PR companies such as Full Effect Promo,¹⁷⁸ which promotes a lot of big names in the world of drum 'n bass, can also help to promote the label; a small label can thus still benefit from intermediaries when they start to grow and want to keep on doing this. It appears hard to find out whether people who buy their music are DJ's who spin it in the clubs or just casual listeners, although he knows that contacts and DJ's he gives his music to make them appear in other mixes, further extending the label's popularity. Michael's label practices a range of online facilities to promote his label, including social networking and his own radio show:

We have our Facebook page (from) which we send out regular updates, mixes, (and) we also have a weekly radio show on dnbradio.com¹⁷⁹ which we're only on our third show and have had between

¹⁷⁸ Full Effect Promo - Drum & Bass and Dubstep Online Marketing , <http://www.fulleffectpromo.com>.

¹⁷⁹ DnbRadio: Drum & Bass + Jungle Music 24/7, <http://www.dnbradio.com>.

500 & 600 listeners each week. I do also once the tunes are ready for release, hand them to DJ's/labels who I speak to within the scene. We've had a lot of good support from some very big names in the scene which we're always grateful for and very happy about.

Bertran's efforts to promote Break-Fast Audio also consisted out of spamming many forums, which is according to him old-fashioned and not very successful, but still makes some people aware of the label. To make the brand of Break-Fast visible, he always puts the same artwork of their logo with its releases. He argues that people wouldn't recognize a brand with different artwork with each release, and in this way would start to notice the association, resulting in bonding with the label; this refers back to Lury and her notion of the logo serving as an iconic personality to establish an ongoing relationship between producer and consumer.¹⁸⁰ Felix finds that to make a digital label stand firm, he prefers a combination of everything that is available, such as a website and store plus proper promotion through the rights social networking sites and forums. He sees the way of reaching an audience for his label as a process of trial and error. What to them really is the key to keep their label alive are releases. A label's output needs indeed to be steady and of quality to keep an audience interested, especially in an online environment of high competition.

Chapter three discussed the option of artists skipping using a label and distribute and sell their music by themselves. Do the owners of the digital labels find this a smart way of promoting music, where their role as intermediary is left out? The opinions are rather unanimous over the fact that artists rather benefit from still using a label. The only one who actually thinks different is Pete, who remarks:

Say if the artist has got the knowledge to put the music out, than that's fair enough. For example, Dubba Jonny has just created their own label to release their music on and it's called Lion Records. That's a brand new imprint, and I believe that at the moment it's just for his own music, just to put it out. But without the help of other labels and things like that, it takes a lot to start a label. If you don't know about things like distribution, you don't really stand a chance. You could spend hours and hours on research like I've done previously, but the artists just kind of make the music and they think; 'What shall we do with it? Send it to a label.' So there's always going to be this middleman-process of getting it to the shops. There is an online thing called CD Baby¹⁸¹; I think more bands use it and it gets your music on iTunes and they think; 'Oh, now people can buy our music.' And it's fair enough if you want to do it that way, but then you need other shops like Beatport, Juno, the specialist dance music shops which we use. So it kind of helps to have a label I guess, and there's

¹⁸⁰ Lury, *Brands*: 77.

¹⁸¹ CD Baby, <http://www.cdbaby.com>.



Figure 3. Blue Cheese Records logo.

more promotion if the label is plugging you as well, and sort things out which you might not be able to do as the artist.

Although Pete sees the possibility, he does concur that having a label for an artist brings significant advantages, such as giving one access to specialist stores where a music style such as drum ‘n bass is frequently being searched for by the members of its subculture. Often only a label with a large reputation can have access to these stores. Alex is however much more direct on the subject:

We think that releasing your own music is like jerking off in front of a mirror. Artist-labels are around (...) such as Astrophonica for instance. But in the end it will always be a breed of itself, inbreed if you want.

Here another flaw in artist-led distribution is spotted; the one of not getting discovered and being valued by a label and to not get established by a credible and valued channel upon a music scene, which would undermine the label’s role of creating a unifying style for artists. Instead, it would only illuminate one, and not free up space in the creative noise if only one voice gets valued. Michael appears in turn ambiguous on the subject as well:

It depends really, as a new artist starting out its best to try and be released on an already established digital label. If a label has a decent reputation and people like their stuff then people will pay attention to the releases more than an unknown new label. Most labels will put a lot of effort into the marketing of the release and the artist themselves which is always a big boost for a new artist. You start to see that most of the

established artists have their own label in one way shape or form whether it be on their own or with several other established artists.

He also finds having one's own label a possibility, but only when one is established through other labels. This again shows that although artists can maneuver on their own, they will still need labels. Bertran also finds people who are putting their music online without a label makes them look like they couldn't get signed, and just decided to do it themselves on their own. This partially concurs with Alex' point of view, in that it makes them look unappreciated. Felix thinks that the label is helpful for their artists who want to use their time for producing music instead of distributing and promoting their music themselves. A good label would give musicians the chance to reach a bigger audience than would be the case if they released their music themselves. On a whole it looks like although an artist could do without a label, it wouldn't get far without their help of promotion, which requires connections with them. Without these connections, one can be frowned upon and look incompetent of producing quality music since no label has taken interest in the artist before; this stresses the label's role of endowing an artist's name with value and quality.

Another important aspect that was previously discussed was that of distribution. Digital labels have the luxury to get their music straight to their customers and receive the full revenue, although in reality, it can sometimes benefit a digital label to still outsource certain tasks when distributing and selling their products. As Pete remarked about selling music:

There's people like Databeats¹⁸² who provide online shops; (labels like) Technique use it, RAM has just switched to it, but then you've got to be able to afford the hosting and things like that. I did try out an online shop which was powered by Wordpress; I just edited the CSS to make it look the way I wanted it to look. The shop did work, apart from occasionally the server found where it wasn't designed for selling music, so I just kind of got rid of it and now I just try and direct people to Juno or something like that. I mean, it's obviously making Juno money and things like that, but when I've got someone paying for a download that has not worked, it's just longwinded.

It often appears to be cumbersome for independent labels to set up a web store and maintain it all by themselves; intermediaries who sell online music as a store, in the case of drum 'n bass music often sites such as Juno and Beatport, are often used to sell a label's music. A label rarely sells through one outlet which is their own shop on their website, despite the fact that these stores keep a percentage of the revenue on any of their sold products. These stores are

¹⁸² Databeats, <http://www.databeats.com>.

also important because many music fans look specifically at these for new music. From all this does Alex stand apart from the other label owners, since he still sells physical goods through a distributor; the reason he can do this, was thanks to his first vinyl release in 2002 on the breakcore label Phantomnoise, who had contacts in independent distribution. He used these connections to start his own label, and as of today these independent distributors still work for him. He actually also distributes the music he presses on vinyl for free in mp3 format from his website; this will be later illuminated when discussing illegal music distribution. Michael likes the new digital distribution purely because of how easy it is for someone to buy music at any time without having to leave their home; to him this made a big difference. He uses his own digital distributor to get his music to the stores:

When it comes to the releases I arrange the mastering, artwork and then the distributor puts the tunes on all the digital download stores. I already have a lot of things to do with running a label so it would be easier to let the distributor take care of that side of things and then account to me. It's not a huge fee and a lot of the established digital labels I know also use distributors. It also will help greatly when it comes down to putting a vinyl release out there. The people who run the distributors are also very well involved in the scene and have been for some time so it's always good to be associated with them. The distributor also does my mastering for me and does a very good job, so I can keep everything all with the one company. I spend more time on things and put a lot more effort into those things rather than trying to do a million things at once. I can spend more time promoting the artists and the releases and still have a lot of time for the family, well equal amount of time at the very least.

Michael shows that online distributors can take a considerable amount of work out of the hands of the independent digital label owner, who often has, due to the small size of the label, a job to run and a family to support. The great amount of time a digital label can take up to look after can therefore be cheaply outsourced to an online distributor, especially when only one or a few people are involved in running the label. Ironically, in such a case a distributor in an online environment thus can still prove to be vital for independent digital labels. Bertran also uses the new emerging mp3 distributors; they save big amounts of time for label holders for tasks such as uploading music and signing contracts with digital stores. They can also sometimes get labels easier onto larger stores such as Beatport and iTunes. Although they do charge a percentage of the revenues, the exposure they generate can compensate for this. The time they take out of hands can be invested back into making the label stronger. Distribution as an intermediary thus seemed to be a thing of the past, but appears in an online environment to still be able to fulfill a versatile role, especially for smaller labels. Where distribution with



Figure 4. Alphacut Records logo.

traditional labels used to be very costly and often a main reason artists had to resort to labels to get their music around, now their digitalization keeps their old effect but at a (still) affordable price. However, Pete also pointed out that one should make sure an online distributor is to be trusted:

I self-distribute now, because I don't trust some distributors. (laughs) I don't know, I won't mention any names, because there was one distributor recently who completely collapsed. They owed me some money, but I don't think I'll ever see it again. It was a couple of hundred quid, so it would be nice to get it back one day. But it is never going to happen, because they went bust, so that's why I now distribute my own music. (...) It's one of those things, it's a learning curve. Shame it cost me money, but never mind. We move on.

This demonstrates that leaving monetary business into the hands of these online distributors is not free of risk, and should be approached with caution. Like many online companies, they can disappear in the blink of an eye to be never heard of again, including invested money from their customers.

The role of distribution which has become digitalized is however not physically played out yet; with Alex as foremost example, there is still a market for vinyl in drum 'n bass and his label and for Hidden Hawaii as well. This makes one wonder what the stance from a digital label is on whether there is still any future in selling their music on vinyl, and why. Has vinyl in drum 'n bass still got a future altogether? Tongue Flap's first release was on vinyl and was around 500 presses, but since it's costly to manage Pete will for now focus on

digital releases. The vinyl pressing alone was around 800 pounds which is still much to invest for the size of his label, and with selling one piece for two pounds fifty he wasn't getting back much revenue (making a profit of ninety cents on each piece). Pete admits that since the days of the traditional label, a lot of things have changed;

I don't know if you have noticed now, but compared to a year ago even some labels are skipping the promo releases to shops now, they're going straight for full release. Promo releases used to be sold out in a couple of hours. I remember last year I was trying to get hold of something and it was gone in a couple of hours and I missed it. But now, I mean, sometimes the labels are even putting out the mp3's first, and then releasing the vinyl. So in a way, it kind of reversed.

His statement confirms the rise of the digital format over vinyl; DJ's are resorting more to mixing with CD mixers and laptops, preferring it over the heavy, physical music carrier that vinyl is. Alex in contrast, had the opportunity to start a strictly analogue label, a rarity in these times where digital media continually gains more prominence. He tells a similar story:

Upcoming artists are reaaaaally pleased with the vinyl opportunity, as everyone is doing "MPThrash" only anymore. Me & Morphy invented mpthrash. So, it is TM (laughs). (...) Back then (in 2002), a 500 (set of pieces of vinyl) was easy to sell in 2 weeks. (...) They buy 40 copies of Morphy nowadays. All went down in 2004ish. Since then it is like that. 2004 was the year when I was set up with the label and ready to take off, then the market died, haha. Digital dominating the market, what the fuck? Have you ever seen any digital sales numbers? I know people setting up a release and selling 30 copies. Sometimes less. That's quite far from dominating eh! Whatsoever, there is absolutely NO USE in comparing both. It is two totally different worlds.

Here Alex points out that although the digitalized music format is becoming a more widespread format than vinyl amongst DJ's, this gives no guarantee that mp3s automatically will generate more revenue. Especially for the smaller digital labels with smaller audiences, revenues remain small. More about this will be discussed later when tackling the subject of illegal music distribution. Furthermore is Michael also aiming for a short first vinyl release at the end of this year, but is still waiting for the right music to put on it. He believes vinyl will stay strong, especially since the big labels are still pushing it and will continue to do so. Here it is worth noting that indeed the big drum 'n bass labels, who have always released their music on vinyl, have the capacity to do so while many, young digital labels are more suited to do a limited edition release from around 300 pieces (such as Alex does with each of his releases on vinyl). It however remains tricky for digital labels to handle the distribution of these physical goods, which requires a completely different approach than the digital

distribution they are used to. Bertran has also considered releasing music on vinyl in the past, but wouldn't risk it today. Even vinyl lovers he knows mix with CD mixers now since turntables at venues have become too old and impaired. Other music scenes such as techno do still generate an audience that buys vinyl, but for him the drum 'n bass scene has become too small for being economically viable to vinyl releases; it forces DJ's to start using digital formats, and to him the latter will become the next generation where the physical music carrier disappears. Hidden Hawaii however, still releases vinyl as well. This makes Breakfast the only one not having faith anymore in releasing its music on vinyl, meaning that especially the charm of vinyl is still a reason for labels to have (limited) vinyl pressings. But as Bertran pointed out, venues and clubs will start to adapt more to DJ's handling digital formats, which will further diminish the role of the medium in the dance scene.

As earlier the audience of drum 'n bass was described as a subculture through the music's style, it was also noticed that this subculture finds their peers in specific, music-oriented places online. So where would the music fit in with the new upcoming streaming services, which seem to focus more on the commercial types of music? In other words, is there a place for a subcultural style such as drum 'n bass in this upcoming phenomenon, and could these services generate revenues for independent digital labels?

HANS: I was wondering, if you are on Spotify, do you get money out of it?

PETE: You're supposed to, but I haven't seen any (laughs).

HANS: But you don't! Oh, that's not good...

PETE: I know you're supposed to get some form of royalties, but I couldn't see any come through from Spotify. (...) The music we put out is for, you know, you got to be in the know to kind of understand what it is. It's not like the new *Take That* CD, or is it? Where people go to Spotify they're not intending to DJ it, so they just want to listen. But I guess the music that I put out is for DJ's who are mainly playing it, and then you get your occasional listeners. So I guess Spotify is kind of skipped.

Pete confirms that only those with a certain amount of subcultural capital reach his music, as a part of the style. Despite its dubious reputation for not compensating the artists Spotify streams, the issue of not attracting the crowd that would listen to drum 'n bass appears to be the main reason to not get too involved with these channels. Alex used to upload Alphacut's music to last.fm, but is also skeptical about whether it promoted his label. Spotify was at the



Figure 5. Break-Fast Audio logo.

time of the interview not (yet) available in Germany. Michael is supposedly dependent for streaming of his label's music on his digital distributor:

MICHAEL: I'm not sure if our distributor adds the tunes to those sites. To be honest I don't use them myself though. (...) Luckily for the drum 'n bass scene, a huge amount of its main consumers are DJ's and they like to own the tune to be able to mix with whether it be vinyl or mp3, at home or in a club. So I have faith that there are still a lot of people who will keep the scene strong.

HANS: You don't think in the end it will just be the DJ's consuming and not the fans, or do you presume they'll be both?

MICHAEL: I would hope there is still the appeal of owning the music itself, regardless of the format. There are a lot of people I know who aren't really involved in the scene; however they will still happily buy the tunes just to have on their iPods, so I think there will still be a market for it.

The lack of the digital label's fans on streaming services also signals that they mainly exist for a DJ audience as a primary target. Still, as stated above, the audience with the right subcultural capital knows where to find their peers (the labels). Break-Fast Audio's is not yet on Spotify as well, but he doesn't expect any revenues from it; he just expects pure promotion for the label. The label does have its own YouTube channel which is rather used for promoting their parties than the label's music. Hidden Hawaii rather uses Soundcloud, which is more a CMC for musicians than a streaming site. It can thus be concluded that streaming sites for digital drum 'n bass labels are of little interest; because of their subcultural appeal

they do not receive the attention on the streaming channels which they do get through their established channels of their subculture. It is therefore not problematic that these streaming sites don't provide revenues or even access to them; the exposure they do give is simply a treat, and the labels know for now where to get much more exposure.

If digital independent labels don't necessarily need streaming facilities, then social networking ones appear to be something hardly anyone can get around these days. Earlier it was drawn out that a subcultural movement such as drum 'n bass, and especially labels, are heavily dependent on these for survival. Most of all the label owners see CMC's as a vital source for building a network for them, with Facebook as still the most widely used CMC, as Pete emphasizes:

Facebook is the big thing. I mean, I plug through Facebook which then gets posted to my Twitter. And whenever I post something like a (sound) clip, I'm trying to get people to share it. And so it gradually builds up, and there's a promotional kind of awareness around Facebook through different fans. It does work, I think. If I didn't had Facebook I would have been a bit stuck for telling people about new information, even though I hate Facebook. (...) I only kind of use it to promote across, and that's the only reason.

Facebook is by most of the cases used purely as a promotional tool to get as many people linked up within their network as possible. While most of the owners don't like Facebook as a whole, they can't dismiss its popularity and essential role for "being out there". Pete sees Twitter as less important than Facebook:

Twitter I don't think is popular. It's either-or, either you got a lot of Facebook fans, or you've got a lot of Twitter fans. Unless you're really famous or something, it's hard to get a following. I got a couple of hundred people on Twitter which I post to a lot. (...) I don't really use it that much and I don't really understand it, so it's a weird thing; I just recently learnt what the hashtags meant. It's strange but, you know, people use it so I have it. (...) I try and provide for all of the people on the kind of social things, apart from MySpace. I don't bother with that. It died off.

It again looks like the popularity of a CMC such as Twitter makes digital labels use it for sheer expansion of their network. The social network Soundcloud appears to be a very important resource for especially networking with other artists and labels in the scene. Its vital component is waveform display based playback, where the waveform of a song can actually be seen and there is the option of clicking through this wave to skip to or highlight certain parts of a song which can be commented on. These "timed comments" enable both artists and

listeners to pinpoint a moment in a song which appeals to them. More importantly however, can these waves be converged with applications such as Facebook and Twitter. All of the label owners are active on this CMC, including Pete:

Soundcloud is the big one now. It's so good being able to comment on the tracks. You post a new track and someone can tell you what they think exactly on the waveform as well, and tell you whereabouts; this is crap, this is good. (...) There's that MySpace kind of thing where you can't do much apart from follow, but Soundcloud is different. You can follow, comment, ask comments, comment on the waveforms, so it's pretty good. You can put it onto Twitter, and it goes through Facebook, (...) it allows you to give the DIF and CSS so you can pop it into your blogs as well.

Conversely, is Alex not a great fan of Facebook or CMC's like it. As he puts it:

(...) I'm also wondering about the web 2.0 every day! But you know what? It's nonsense! The Facebook numbers are pretty much the other way around then the real life reactions. I mean, a mega-liked thing in Facebook doesn't sell well on a record and a tune nobody responds to sometimes reach a lot of hard-die fans.

This demonstrates again his earlier pointed out statement that the environments of digital and vinyl none alike, where a digital release can traverse a very different path than a release on vinyl. The digital nature of the mp3 is part of its digital environment such as Facebook and Twitter, since the other label owners apparently are more dependent on online reactions than real life ones. This includes Michael, Bertran, and Felix, where Bertran finds Facebook especially important for promoting Break-Fast Audio's new releases and parties. He marks Soundcloud for generating strong notoriety as well, and also notes the convergence of these applications; one person visiting their website can use a link to their Soundcloud, leave a comment, and then become friends with them on Facebook. He believes that the combination of these three make a good setup for reaching an audience. He also has to admit that people are getting lazier; instead of visiting websites they go to music stores such as Beatport. Therefore Break-Fast is building a new website, with applications such as Soundcloud and Facebook more tightly integrated and containing other new facilities such as selling merchandise. This demonstrates that the social networking facilities are getting more integrated with each other and form a vast unifying, converged network where a digital label tries to reach as much potential fans on any potential CMC that can be found. Denying these CMC's is simply not an option for a digital label if it wants to acquire an ever expanding network to support their style; representation on Facebook, Twitter, and especially Soundcloud for digital labels, is essential to online survival.



Figure 6. Hidden Hawaii logo.

One of the greatest dangers to the proliferation of a digital label is illegal music distribution, where any label who gains notoriety will have to deal with sooner or later, as the following statements about it by the label owners will show. However, the opinions about whether this is beneficial or disastrous for a digital label seem to vary into extremity, leaving the debate with an ambiguous stance at best over its practice. Pete is especially worried about the phenomenon as it is practiced in Russia:

The Russians must have a team of trained monkeys who watch out for new releases, and as soon as they're out they upload them to their site and make them available for download. I don't know how they do it, they're so fast! (...) I can remember my first vinyl release, when I was a bit naive and I didn't know what I was doing, I was just sort of going with it and hoping for the best. They torrented it within two hours of it being out, and I couldn't believe it. And I was just like 'how do I get it off?' Of course you message these people and try nicely say; 'Can you please remove this?', and they just ban you from their site. (...) You can't do really anything unless you try and go for a proxy, and then they ban that.

He doesn't understand why they torrent so much when you can get Tongue Flap's music for a small price, but supposedly it's still too expensive to some people. The problem with illegal music distribution for independent digital labels appear to be especially that they already make little money, and that this practice can steal away the already little money that was hoped to be made on the digital product. Labels still have to make expenses for mastering of the music and eventual artwork, which makes the chance of making a profit slim if people decide to save their money and opt for downloading it illegally. So how can these digital

labels benefit from illegal music distribution as was outlined in chapter three? Pete admits that there is a beneficial side to the practice:

PETE: They obviously like the music to promote it and post it, but yeah, they want to give it out for free.

HANS: Did you ever get anyone buying music from you, saying; ‘Oh man, I bought your tune because I first got it from a torrent site and I thought it was so good that I had to pay money for it?’

PETE: I never had that. (laughs) I don’t think people are that honest, really. (...) I think Soundcloud eliminates a bit of the piracy, because people can listen to the music on Soundcloud and also to DJ mixes.

Indeed, does Soundcloud fulfill an essential role in diminishing the practice; in most cases is the material being posted of high quality and can be streamed (sometimes downloaded as well) and thus saves the effort of (illegal) downloading, which has made streaming popular in the first place. DJ’s are in this way getting more familiarized with the label through the option of easy commenting on the material, thus creating an instant bond between label and listener. CMC’s such as Soundcloud thus seem like a compromising solution which at least can give the label the publicity which it might need more than financial revenues. Alex doesn’t mind illegal music distribution for his label, and is even one of the few who doesn’t see it as harmful at all. People would leech whole back catalogues of his label on a p2p network and buy it completely on vinyl a day later.¹⁸³ Of course, since Alphacut handles strictly vinyl, these people might prefer its niche character and wouldn’t buy it if it was for sale as digital only. Not only can people download the mp3 versions of the releases from his website for free, but he used to upload Alphacut’s music to file sharing sites himself since the “illegal” releases were of a bad quality. As he describes a message when trying to contact the illegal music distributors:

‘Dear ripper! I would like to thank u for promoting the label to nerds in front of a DSL who will never appear on a good party ever, *BUT* can u PLEASE buy yourself some proper needles? Why do our own 128k previews sound so much better than your "scene rip"? lol! Gosh, email me when you feel like "promoting it" next time, I'll send them over, so you don't have to upload this mess! U know, that i know who u are! Cheers.’

¹⁸³ Tommy de Roos, ‘Interview LXC’, The future of vinyl, 26 June, 2010, <http://futureofvinyl.wordpress.com/2010/06/26/interview-lxc/>.

It is thus safe to say that Alex not only supports this scene, but wants to help them do things right since they can spread it to thousands of people. Moreover, file sharers would think his records are of a bad quality, thus making him not popular again through the practice. Michael in turn, is however not happy with illegal music distribution:

MICHAEL: We have had a few of our releases up on random mp3 sites. We have emailed several and had a few taken down. It will be a never ending battle; however it's the result of the digital market making so easy for high quality mp3s to be shared so easily. We do a few searches every now & then to see if any of our releases or dubs are up online

HANS: Some labels argue that piracy helps them promote their music. You're not in favor of that point of view?

MICHAEL: I think that allowing people to download high quality full mp3s for free is definitely not positive. However things like people posting clips on YouTube and streaming sites can only be good publicity as long as they are only low quality clips. YouTube channels that post up high quality full 320s (mp3s encoded at a 320 kps bitrate) are basically just as bad as the sites that give away the tunes for free.

His statement shows that there's a difference in consent whether providing material in high quality for streaming is a form of illegal music sharing or a justified form of promotion. Providing low quality clips can misjudge a listener's opinion on the material in that it's low quality is part of the music; fading a song in, play it for a couple of minutes, and then fade it out appears to be a safer option, and also the one Michael practices on the Soundcloud page of Blue Cheese. Bertran also noticed that releases with popular artists are mostly posted up on illegal Russian sites within a day. He pities this, but says he can't do much about it. He does see the benefit of promotion of the name of his label and artists, but would rather have it didn't happen for the time and money he puts into making releases and wanting to give something back to his artists. Bigger drum 'n bass labels mostly pursue these sites themselves since they have the capacity, and often succeed. One of their digital stores however, Trackitdown,¹⁸⁴ is now advertising to pursue illegal activity from all the music they host on their site, but there is still illegal distribution from p2p sharing which can't be shut down very easy. For every one of these systems that gets taken down, another one springs up. To see how illegal music distribution influenced his label, Bertran has undertaken a small experiment. For his latest release he decided to promote it just very little, to see how this would affect his

¹⁸⁴ Trackitdown - Dance Music MP3/WAV/Merchandise Distribution Centre, <http://www.trackitdown.net/>.

sales. Although he is still waiting for the final results, he can already state that although he does sell less, he won't see it appear on Russian piracy sites either. This might suggest a link between promoting too heavy as Goldmann suggested,¹⁸⁵ and suffering less from illegal music distribution. Felix in turn is also bothered by illegal music distribution, and asks websites who offer their music for free to stop doing this. One time this happened a website was kind enough to erase their music when he asked them. It thus looks like the ways of experiencing this practice and the ways of dealing with this vary extremely per label. Some of its offenders respect the music makers who approach them asking to remove the music, while others simply don't care and ignore them. Whether a label owner tries to see its benefits, actively underexpose their output, actively pursue them personally or through an intermediary, it still appears to be evident that illegal music distribution for digital labels can be quite as troublesome as it is for the commercial music industry. The labels providing digital music however, thus far seem to gain more struggle than noteworthy promotion from it.

The last issue that was discussed was the creative noise in online music, and how style could be used by a label to rise above this phenomenon. It was earlier stated how important it is for a label to distinguish itself from others through uniqueness in style and quality to stand out, make a chance of existence, and for creating a solid, reliable network. The question here is then how these digital labels see themselves and others in providing for this mission. Pete therefore thinks that sufficient interest in the label and continuity of it will make it proliferate, but he does acknowledge the lack of innovation in a lot of drum 'n bass:

PETE: Like all music, you get your good stuff and your bad stuff. As long as my releases are up production quality, someone is going to like it. There's a big enough audience for it. (...) There are loads of people who do start their own label and you see them on dnbforum¹⁸⁶ like; 'Yeah, our new label, bladibladibla...', and then you don't hear anything of them since that post. (...) it's difficult for small labels, especially to go for something different.

HANS: Yes, exactly. Because they also try to find the audience who are looking for a new sound in drum 'n bass, since a lot of people say the style has gone a bit static.

PETE: Yeah, it's hit and miss really. (...) Labels, I think, they just put out kind of fillers, just to keep their releases up. There's nothing different, it's just a variation from the last release.

HANS: Yes, but not much innovation in the whole sound you mean?

¹⁸⁵ Goldmann, 'Everything popular is wrong'.

¹⁸⁶ Drum & Bass Forum, <http://www.dnbforum.com>.

PETE: Yeah, you can guess who the producer is and there is some really good stuff, but a lot of rubbish in between. That's like with any music and any releases, I mean, look at the actual commercial playlist, and it's full of rubbish really.

Of course, this points out that some labels that breed success do not perpetuate their efforts of bringing their sound further, but instead use their established sound and recycle it. This brings style into a zone of static, and with many producers copying this style; it brings down even more creative noise. A lot of these labels who do not establish a style of their own from their inception on however, will not proliferate for long; they lack the expertise and originality to stand out and won't get the needed feedback and networking to survive. Michael agrees to this as well:

I think there are a lot of labels who don't really have much quality control, with how easy it is to start. A lot of people with not very much experience jump straight in at the deep end. However I always have faith that there are still a lot of committed DJ's like myself who will happily sit there on Trackitdown and listen to all the new releases, waiting to find those gems.

The ease of starting a label online is, as mentioned before, troubling gatekeeping and keeping quality high. Bertran also thinks that it's hard to find music in the abundance available, but thinks most people will decide after about two seconds listening to an unknown track on Beatport whether it's good or not. He does sporadically find good material, but is saddened by the amount of poor quality music which can be found there. It points out another big worry which is due to the creative noise; a listener's span of attention could be shortened to the extent that songs rarely get a close listen anymore. This could be seen as an effect from the anticipated panic from Berardi; music is then not received consciously anymore through its surplus, and therefore gatekeeping remains vital for the labels who do try to stand out from the creative noise. Felix stands the most untroubled over the whole subject, since he doesn't think that listeners would have trouble today to find Hidden Hawaii's kind of music in the abundance of digital music available. He thinks it's much easier nowadays to find what one is looking for; the Internet is a helpful function for this process. He also doesn't think that there is currently an overflow of digital drum 'n bass labels on the Internet, and that he likes its variety. So of course, there is the option to just look more optimistic at the whole phenomenon of creative noise as well, in that it may not be as bad as it may seem.

Conclusion

Here is an interesting thought; if it wasn't for the Internet and its ability to provide practically costless distribution of mp3 files and give access to CMC's, a scene such as that of drum 'n bass could have been disappeared a long time ago. It could even be argued that many forms of music we know today would have never existed without the possibilities the Internet can offer independent music. It is the reason that drum 'n bass labels are still emerging and trying to survive between the many other drum 'n bass labels, which is of course a contrasting view to that of the earlier discussed creative noise. But what if this noise in a music subculture such as drum 'n bass wouldn't exist at all? It would then be nothing but a thing of the past, a style of music which is dead and long gone. Through the Internet people are able to find people who can find the time and effort to move music forward instead of letting it die, and many forms of independent music are thus perpetuated or getting forged into the new dance sounds of the future, right at this moment.

The physical music carrier is continuing to disappear with the casual music listener and is transforming into a digitalized form which hides in one's phone or mp3 player. The DJ's are meeting the same fate, but it appears to prolong itself more; the labels which still have the capacity to press vinyl will try doing this, if only out of sentiment and the sheer beauty of seeing music being etched into a tangible medium, which dies a little with each play. Music styles in a digital environment seem to have the power to keep the past alive within their own subculture, that is, for as far as the future will still allow this. People like Alex and Felix will keep on pressing their music on vinyl for as long as is possible, but others like Pete, Michael and Bertran will put their fate into the digitalized music. The physicality of labels, stores, and their media will continue to fade and become more digitalized until the point where old vinyl and cd's are simply taking up space in our houses and we, albeit under pressure or not, get convinced it is finally time to remove it.

The rise of the digital labels has gone hand in hand with the disappearance of the physical music carrier, and thus is a logic outcome of the remediation of music into the digital realm of our tablets and phones with online access. While these media are still expanding worldwide, it is just as logical that the amount of 'bedroom producers' will continue to grow and the creative noise will continue to expand as the distribution channels will keep on expanding in the interests of online corporations who are more than willing to serve them.

Virilio's feared detonation of the information bomb will then draw closer, and the panic amongst the listeners and artists will continue to rise. This is where digital labels might have the power to become a prophecy in this scenario; they have the power to practice gatekeeping through professional eclecticism and outstanding style to keep those who do not contribute to keeping music original, novel, and of high standards down in the noise. They will, as Berardi advocated, unite the true musicians, create bonds and friendships through meeting in CMC's and be a resort to those who are being overcome by panic. A musician must understand that it can't just start on its own and profile him or herself as a product without the right knowledge; proofing this means stepping into the online communities and show what one has to offer, upon these will decide upon the music's worth. If it is worthless, the time of learning has come again and for the failed artist to retreat until sufficient skills are developed before trying again. Maybe that time a digital label is willing to take the qualitatively and stylistically evolved artist under its wings and present them as music the whole community can be proud of. Thus, the digital label can make itself distinctive through proper branding of its style, attach people emotionally through a logo which is connected to this, and choose artists that both fit its style and are either established or ready to work on a professional musical level. Only in this way will they shine over the creative noise and hopefully inspire those in there to continue to work until they have developed their own style and quality, to give themselves and all other artists and listeners the value that their culture deserves.

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Figures

Figure 1. Fonik, taken from his signature at Dogs On Acid. ‘Drum ‘n bass comic.’ 12th of August 2011. <<http://www.dogsonacid.com/member.php?u=76625>>

Figure 2. Courtesy of Tongue Flap Records. ‘Tongue Flap Records logo.’ 15th of August 2011.

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Figure 3. Courtesy of Blue Cheese Records. ‘Blue Cheese Records logo.’ 15th of August 2011.

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Figure 4. Courtesy of Alphacut Records. ‘Alphacut Records logo.’ 15th of August 2011.

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Figure 5. Courtesy of Break-Fast Audio. ‘Break-Fast Audio logo.’ 15th of August 2011.

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Figure 6. Courtesy of Hidden Hawaii. ‘Hidden Hawaii logo.’ 15th of August 2011.

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Appendix – Question list for digital drum ‘n bass label owners

The following list of questions served as a rough guide line to questioning the five owners of the digital drum ‘n bass labels that have been researched in the case studies of chapter 5. Due to the retrieved answers and the nature of the labels, questions were sometimes altered, added, or removed.

1. Where did you get the idea to start your own digital drum ‘n bass label?
2. Why do you think artists could still need a label for their music if they can distribute their music digitally themselves?
3. How do you think your label succeeds best in finding the right audience for its sound?
4. Do you think the listeners have trouble choosing their kind of music of the abundance of music digitally available?
5. Do you think your digital label stands firmer with its own website and store, rather than just use proper advertising through the right social networking sites, external stores and forums?
6. What do you think is important about the social networking abilities of a digital label?
7. What do you think is needed for holding up the longevity of a digital label?
8. Do you think there currently is a surplus of digital drum ‘n bass labels on the Internet?
9. Does your label supports you financially sufficient in your living, or do your run it with another job on the side?
10. If you also release tunes on vinyl, do you think this will lessen or happen more in the future?
11. Do you think the DJ scene will ultimately be dominated by digital music or that vinyl will still hold its position, as in a smaller form?
12. What do you think is the most crucial difference between a traditional label and a digital label?
13. Do you use streaming services to promote your music? If so, which ones and why?
14. Do you think that in the future digital downloads or streaming services will prevail online?
15. Does your label suffer from any noticeable losses through illegal music distribution?
16. If so, do you take measures to minimize these activities?