

Examining Collective Spaces and Behaviors in DIY Albany Music

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1 Introduction

Within the Capital Region of New York State lies a community which is reminiscent of others around the world. The Albany DIY community (ADIY), hosts events which are done in a self organized and grassroots fashion. Oftentimes, these events will be oriented around live music with vendors and other acts contributing. Event types include farmer's markets, disco nights, queer nights, and many other specialty gatherings. It's not often that ADIY events are well funded or backed by major organizations, which is partially why they are highlighted as do-it-yourself. Due to ADIY's *modus operandi*, many pieces of scenes overlap rather than having individual actors for each. This entails collective attitudes towards various aspects regarding space curation, assistance and preservation. These spaces are always dedicated to being safe havens for queer people, people looking to learn, and people wishing to create. These spaces cannot be labelled as just spaces for one person and one type of art, but are an amalgamation of various ideas and contributions. Since all of the ADIY works together, it creates a network of various multifaceted individuals who all excel in the creation of space and art. Furthermore, this network expands to a larger community on a regional and national scale, connecting community members from places like Massachusetts to Florida. The ADIY maintains an active practice which connects a large span of individuals, providing spaces to seek safety, partake in self expression, and receive aid when needed.

2 My Experience in Albany's DIY

In the fall of 2023, I began my undergraduate studies at the now closed College of Saint Rose. While there, I studied music theory, ear training, studio production, and composition. The program which I had entered was under the title "Music Industry", and very much exhibited that environment. Performance was a large component of studying within the program, and I oftentimes spent my evenings in rehearsals. I performed piano and saxophone in a group titled "Superbird" which was a four piece jazz-oriented group playing various standards

from the discographies of Weather Report, Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, along with our own original pieces. Coming from a dual background of classical training in saxophone and experimental composition with piano, modular synthesizers, and tape machines, I oddly fit into this program.

Having initially gained a small amount of notoriety within the program, Superbird had begun performing outside of concerts put on by the institution. We had made contacts with members of the ADIY, and invited to perform at local events. Of our first performances, we played basements, farmer's markets, and bars. Having performed in these spaces with Superbird and other acts, I began to understand the "spots" which hosted the music I liked. While filled with many singer-songwriters, experimental and odd-ball groups would often perform in the ADIY. A group called "Anthill Annihilator" is a favorite of mine; another being "RONG", who are from Massachusetts, both of which will be further discussed later in this paper. Through all of these experiences over the course of about a two years, I learned how these spaces are managed, how events are organized, and the acts who frequently perform in the ADIY. I'll apply this knowledge while examining the space, keeping in mind the literature previously laid out in (Boucher 2018) and (March 2020), as well as others who will arise.

3 DIY Attitudes in Music

Boucher has laid foundations for discussing and describing DIY attitudes within music scenes (Boucher 2018). Boucher specifically argues that "As long as queer experiences are perceived to be excluded from the mainstream, all queer feminist music scenes will necessarily originate as do-it-yourself(DIY) types scenes.". Boucher's arguments on queer music scenes is absolutely applicable to the ADIY specifically, as many key actors within the space are queer. Additionally, the ADIY oftentimes hosts events which are designated as safe events for those who identify as transgender, non-binary, gender-queer or other non-conforming identities. Boucher later argues "The creation of queer feminist spaces, activities, arts, and music, are by nature political acts.", explaining that due to the lack of queer thought and representation within mainstream media, culture and politics, it is inherent that queer feminist activity of any kind, maintains a political argument. Oftentimes, these spaces wear such defiance with pride, providing an open and safe space for those who are not safe in cisgender, heteronormative spaces. Boucher importantly outlines that these attitudes are defined for spaces meant for all acts of self expression, including music.

Even in non-queer spaces, non-commercial live music tends to manifest via DIY methods. Common examples include singer-songwriters on a street corner singing and playing guitar, or neighborhood bands rehearsing in a garage. Many would argue that to enjoy and create meaningful music, stadiums and professional sound systems are not needed. That is why I must make a distinction, queer DIY music is inherently politically charged, while non-queer DIY music is not always politically charged, but absolutely can be.

Due to the lack of major label backing, DIY music scenes often produce their

own physical media. I myself have produced packaged cassettes of my music to sell in a "name your price" manner. Additionally, I have purchased cassettes and CDs of local performers which I see in the ADIY. Within organized DIY spaces, these practices are found constantly. The ADIY creates flyers, physical media, zines and various paraphernalia. All of which tend to be handmade, touched by a human whose main goal is not profit. In (March 2020), March details spaces for DIY making in the section titled "DIY workspaces: Facilitating labour under the radar". March specifically notes "Many spaces are located in practitioners' homes, an unglamorous and often underappreciated or delegitimised site of labour...", a point very much applicable to the ADIY. I can name a few local studios ran by a single person in their living room, and many who create physical media within their own home. It is no radical idea that home spaces additionally serve as venues when needed. In an interview with Anthill *Annihilator* by Radioradiox, the founder of Anthill mentioned "Conor Grocki recorded, mixed and mastered *Bic Dolls* (Anthill's 2023 album) all by himself in exchange for some speakers and a few bags of coffee. He's a local audio producer making films with 518 Film Network." (*Anthill Annihilator – Interview – Thanks for Asking!* N.d.). It is often that the labor of DIY is one of love, not capital.

4 Photography and Dedication to Being

After almost every performance I was part of in the ADIY, a question would often begin to bounce around the crowd: "Who got pictures??" This was not a question asked by audience members, but oftentimes myself or those I performed with. Photos and video are key documentary media for the ADIY. Photos are reused for future flyers, archival purposes, and frequently circulated through the community. Actors working towards organizing media within queer communities are often times amateur and passionate (Kirste 2007). Any image posted by venues and bands of the ADIY is almost always by a fan or community member. Through my time in the ADIY, I collected hundreds of photos picturing various acts, and received nearly a hundred of myself performing. While I have described photography in the ADIY as "amateur" this does not mean it lacks quality. After performing on a bill, a friend of mine would often send me a Google Drive link of many photos she took on her professional grade camera. The scene acts not only as a space for amateur musicians, but also photographers.

Upon my entrance to the ADIY, almost all bands and venues were responsible for the collection or curation of photographs showcasing events. Most of the time, this meant the courting through of many many photographs, and parsing out those which looked the best for social media. One special case was a community member named Miles Mentis, a photographer who changed the game for the ADIY. My first encounter with Miles was when I played a venue called "Son of Egg" with my band Superbird. Our first interaction was when he tapped me on the shoulder during the pre-show and asked me something along the lines of "I'm a photographer that's going to take pictures of the performers. If you end

up being in one, would you be comfortable with that?" to which I responded "Yes of course, take as many as you'd like!". After that interaction, I saw him after just about every show I went to. Miles quickly became a treasured member of the community, supplying professional grade photography *pro bono publico*. I meaningfully make note of Miles' dedication the public, as he comes from and is still actively involved in commercial photography work. A *pro bono* attitude is not exclusive to Miles (but worth noting due to his industry work), performers often take what they can get with ticket sales, and venues aren't demanding of high house fees (if any).

Thrown in with the thousands of concert photos and videos are hundreds of flyers produced by organizers within the ADIY; a key organizer is a group called CZR Entertainment. CZR is what keeps the ADIY's fire lit, providing many services to the community. It is a not so well kept secret that CZR is made up of just a few folk from the area, doing their best to bring music to everyone. A quick look at CZR's Instagram page shows their plethora of flyers, concert footage and community events. CZR describes themselves as a "Music Community Conglomerate", a likely joke at the capitalistic attitudes of American industry while still providing a literal definition of what they do. Through the year 2025, CZR has documented and organized 53 shows, hosting 132 artists and bands, across 9 venues (*@czt.entrainment on Instagram.com* n.d.). They are an absolute powerhouse of the ADIY, and their Instagram stands as a testament of the community's work and love.

5 Security in Hiding, the Intimacy of a House Show

Attending performances and shows in the ADIY typically requires the attendee to have prior knowledge of the venue's location or personally reach out to those involved in the show to get the address of the venue. I did this a few times when beginning my time there, and it's somewhat of an embarrassing feeling, almost "exposing" yourself as a newbie. I never felt judgement asking though, bands and organizers always kindly sent me addresses and information, everyone is happy to see another member of the crowd. I once played a very popular ADIY venue called the Rat Den, and a few hours before that performance started, I was texting organizers asking for the address and carrying a hunky keyboard up the stairs of the house. Addresses are not posted as a way of hiding, and only attracting community members who are aware of the space. Looking at flyers from CZR's page and bands themselves, you might notice some variation of "at the Rat Den" and never "at 1234 Nowhere Ln.". Regularly attending and performing shows in the ADIY requires insider knowledge, but this knowledge has never been hard to retrieve. This word-of-mouth routine is required to maintain the safety of community members, especially any who may face attacks due to their identity. As previously mentioned, the ADIY very much adheres to queer values, and is made up of many queer individuals. Therefore it is no

surprise that this space and its members could be at danger when gathering in large numbers, as their existence has been made political by colonial and imperialistic governance (Boucher 2018).



Figure 1: Iconic ADIY act SurfnTurf playing the Rat Den.

The Rat Den is a venue located in a classic two story Albany townhouse. It's one of the smallest in the scene, but one of my favorites for that reason. Oftentimes performers play in one half of what is the second floor living room, with the audience standing in the other half. A photo showing the arrangement can be found in Fig 1. One can see from the image above that the Rat Den is quite the intimate space, keeping audiences and performers very close. Behind the viewpoint of this photo is the kitchen of the unit, where performers usually set up any merchandise that they are selling. The Rat Den has also become quite recognizable for the iconically placed transgender flag which can be seen behind SurfnTurf's "NOISE MACHINE". Nearly every photo of performances at the Rat Den contains this flag, it has become a symbol of the venue itself.

Spaces like the Rat Den have a uniquely comforting quality to them. The restroom that is for audience use is oftentimes also for performer and organizer use. That same restroom is typically the restroom the owner uses everyday. As mentioned previously, common spaces like the kitchen of venues is oftentimes a place to exit the listening space if needed. Kitchens and back porches create spaces to discuss, take photos and just relax. To attend a house show like

one at the Rat Den is an experience, you're not entering a stadium that hosts events every night. You gain a familiarity with someone's home, and see it in a context that is unlike many living spaces. Whether you are attending a rave in a basement, or a hardcore show in a living room, you have a unique and detailed experience.

6 Oh How Much We Love You, Mutual Aid Networks in the ADIY

I attended a show at the revered Rat Den in 2024 where I saw a band called RONG. RONG holds an incredibly strong grip on audiences through their intense, aggressive sound, all the while maintaining purpose and meaning. When RONG first began their set, I was plunged into loud, ringing guitar, drumming that felt like running a marathon, and their vocalist screaming commentary on media literacy. I thought to myself "Holy shit, this is awesome."; that night I bought a tape of theirs in the Rat Den's kitchen. I was incredibly happy to see that all profits RONG made that night were going to funding eSims for Gaza. It's not uncommon for RONG to be performing for the benefit of others, they've played benefit shows for Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC) and the Atlanta Solidarity Fund. Ever since then, I've kept my eye out for RONG, trying to support them in any way that I can. This is because I've appreciated RONG's approach to assisting those in need as mutual aid rather than charity. Scholars and theorists have emphasized the importance and effectiveness of mutual aid as opposed to the West's common practice of charity (Spade 2020; Kinna 1995). RONG has consistently maintained a method of support which assists organizations dedicated to direct support to all who need it, preventing what Spade describes as "the use of eligibility criteria that cut out more stigmatized people;" (Spade 2020).

The much discussed Anthill Annihilator have also done their part in regards to communal support within the ADIY. In January of 2025, a benefit concert was organized to assist a woman named Deb Cavanaugh with paying her hospital bills. Deb is the grandmother of an Anthill member, and teaches music classes for young children. She is a clear staple in the community, being awarded an Eddie by the Capital Region Thomas Edison Music Hall of Fame. The concert put on for Deb contained over four acts, all assembling to assist her in her recovery process.

It is almost necessary that community networked assistance in DIY spaces is done in a manner similar to mutual aid. The organizational structure required for the conventional idea of charity is not only a burden on community organizers, but also ineffective when implemented. As Spade emphasized,

"The charity model encourages us to feel good about ourselves by "givingback." Convincing us that we have done enough if we do a little volunteering or posting online is a great way to keep us in our place. Keeping people numb to the suffering in the world—and their

own suffering—is essential to keeping things as they are."

Seeing the method in which Deb was assisted, it is clear that community members recognized her need for aid, and provided it in a way that brought direct support. Financial assistance was not provided by a third party which fundraised on the message that their donations would be used to assist individuals who have a common need, it was provided by members of the community who recognized Deb's needs, and provided for her because she was a member of (and contributor to) their spaces. Through these practices, communities like the ADIY grow closer together and are able to directly assist those in need rather than through a third party organization. Not only does this speed up the process of assistance, but it enables direct communication between those who are in need and those who are assisting.

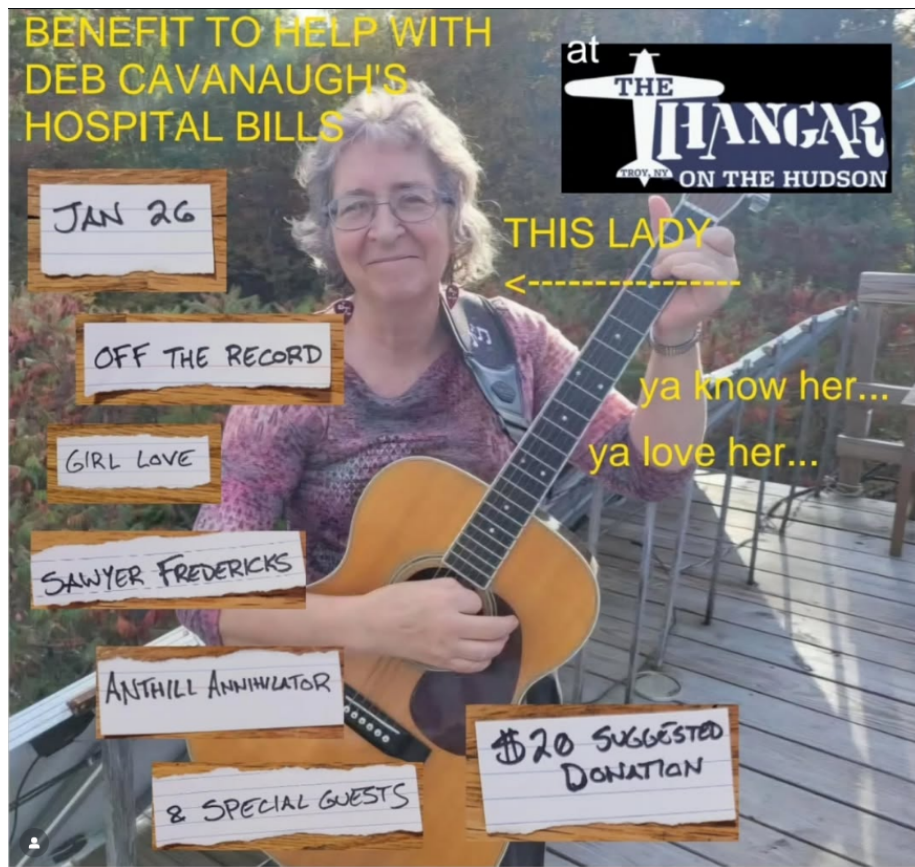


Figure 2: Flyer for concert assisting Deb Cavanaugh in paying her medical bills.

On June 25th, 2023, an ADIY community member named Benjamin Rowe shot and killed in Albany. Ben was a key member of the community, assisting

the organization of performances and tours, and ran the Rat Den with his roommates. The ADIY had lost an important figure in their community and wanted to honor all that he did for them. On June 28th of 2024, more than six groups came together to perform at Empire Live and promoted the "Ben Rowe Memorial Compilation Album Volume 1". All proceeds of the event went to the Benjamin X. Rowe Project (BXR), a 501(c)(3) started to assist musicians in the Albany area. An incredibly important component of BXR is their "Sound Library" which works to provide PA equipment as well as instruments to community members in need. The BXR Sound Library operates on a loan basis where community members can check out and return items. The BXR also hosts a webpage that promotes bands' releases, all that is required by bands is to submit a form providing information to post on the page. These community practices of promoting and assisting each other are part of what allows the ADIY to function so well.

7 The Necessity of Collective Attitudes in DIY

As can be seen through the collective behaviors exhibited by the ADIY, that community practices such as mutual aid, space curation and media recycling allow for the cultivation of spaces which provide community members with spaces to express themselves. These collective practices allow for the ADIY to succeed in their mission. Community members have recognized that working together benefits all, rather than a single actor. This is how bands have been able to record and produce records on highly limited budgets. Photographers' photos are used not just to document performances, but reused in flyers for future events, and promotional material. Venues provide intimate spaces for performers and audience members, enabling the intermingling of artists and fans. When fellow community members struggle, their surrounding artists provide aid through benefit concerts and direct assistance. All of these practices are what make the ADIY a space of promotion and action. The ADIY is not just a group of twenty-somethings beginning to find their voice, it is an organized and intentional community supporting those within it.

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