Muse:forward
Enabling Emergent Music and Culture

BY CHRISTOPHER CORBELL

The People's Renaissance

There is a loosely shared outlook among many performers, creative artists, and cultural stakeholders in Portland: we are onto something big. I don't mean big in global-market buzz potential, nor in imitable stylistic novelty, nor in academic methodological influence. What we've got is bigger than those well-worn culture channels, in at least this sense: we're all feeling grown-up enough to step over them, to define what our culture means for ourselves. We seem to be legitimately deciding that the next "big thing" may in fact be more of what we already have here: keeping things small, intimate, idiosyncratic, inventive, DIY/DIT, local, personal — and if you don't mind slogans, WEIRD.

I've been saying for a little while now that I think Portland is in a golden age of creative expression; I also believe we are still at its beginning. There is a community-immersed, individual-vision-focused ethos that many people "get" but that nobody has to preach or impose, threaded through completely different (but often overlapping) scenes: indie music of all genres, independent art, experimental and improvised performance arts, and a host of other circles in what would be a spirograph-like Venn diagram of creative activity. It's amazing to be here now if you have time to get out and take it all in.

If we can look at Portland emerging music and culture from a number of viewpoints I believe we will see what is most unique and powerful. The aim is not to draw hasty conclusions, hype shallow buzzwords or make facile prescriptions, but rather to reflect on what we have, to invite many thoughtful voices to the discussion, and to distill meaningful and actionable discoveries that will enable and accelerate what we've begun, this unscripted 21st-Century People's Renaissance.

As a think-tank Muse:forward will work in a variety of ways to capture and convey the thoughts of artists and stakeholders on Portland music, arts, and related topics. We'll grab drinks for informal discussions and interviews, mine posts from local blogs and journals, host casual salons as well as prepped symposiums, present emerging-music performances, and provide an online discussion and networking environment. While Muse:forward is primarily concerned with music, I feel many of the topics we will tackle could be applied to any local creative activity.

Artistic Individualism and Community

In his essay The Subject and Power, Michel Foucault made this observation on the way individualism and community are connected in response to alienating power structures:

> They are struggles which question the status of the individual: on the one hand, they assert the right to be different, and they underline everything which makes individuals truly individual. On the other hand,

they attack everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way.

There are at least three immense complexes of cultural power we've received from ye olde 20th Century, which have in common exclusive paradigms that isolate individual artists and require them to vie against one another for coveted power positions. They are 1) the traditional entertainment industry with its commercial gatekeepers and hierarchies, 2) the professional arts world with its rigorously competitive gatekeepers and hierarchies, and 3) the academic institutional domain with its discursive/bureaucratic gatekeepers and hierarchies. But do we need these power complexes in order to enrich ourselves through artistic creation and enliven our communities with participation?

The Portland answer seems fairly clear: we celebrate the artist developing a vision and bootstrapping it locally and collaboratively, without big power structures and without arbitrary barriers to entry. We welcome a variety of business and performance models for such artists, from local entrepreneurship to non-commercial experimentalism and social commentary. We seem to usually prefer the idiosyncratic vision to that which imitates a paradigm from one of the three power complexes. We love having our expectations surpassed but we are also tolerant of different paces of individual artistic development. Most of all we seem to instinctively affirm the right of emerging artists to *not* be alienated; we actively form micro-communities to support them and consider that to be rewarding activity for its own sake. Even artists who might be seen as competing against each other often tend to instead collaborate and build audiences or communities together.

How do we share and protect this ethos? What are its drawbacks, and can we address them without diluting its essential value? What success stories can we collect to convey, for those not in the know, the reasons we love this environment?

Wealth and Variety

The word wealth tends to bring to mind accumulation: having lots of money, power, stuff. In his work *The Origin of Wealth* Eric Beinhocker makes the point that the most remarkable delta between modern wealth cultures and subsistence cultures is not mere amount of disposable possession, but variety of options. (Beinhocker is careful to state this is not meant to be an implied superiority; one could look at things like living in accord with the environment, pace of life, etc. and argue that subsistence cultures have advantages.) Comparing the Yanamamö economy to the New York economy, Beinhocker estimates that if you live in New York you have on average about 400 times the quantitative wealth than if you live among the Yanamamö. But he goes on to estimate the number of options you have in spending that wealth, and the difference is staggering; if the Yanamamö organized all of their products and variants into SKU's they would have hundreds or at most thousands of choices. His New York estimate is around 10^{10} different choices available to the average person, of ways to spend one's money — billions of different products and services.

When I reflect on cultural options in a similar way I am not sure that any society in history has furnished, *per capita*, more cultural products to its citizens than Portland offers today — or more opportunities to be a self-defining cultural creator or curator. Every day's event listings in media run to multiple pages, and there's more that doesn't get listed than does. There isn't a night of the week that I can't find a number of events I'd like to attend, and it isn't uncommon to have to

miss nearly a dozen events I'd really enjoy checking out on a given Friday or Saturday night. Our neighborhood coffee shops are decked with art that turns over each month. The neighborhood bar is as likely to host a song circle or poetry reading as karaoke — and even our karaoke scene can be creative. Conceptual and experimental art can pack rooms. Prices are low and many events are free, donation, or sliding-scale. Artists tend to be approachable and appreciative, and it seems every third or fourth person you meet has some creative project going.

When one considers that Portland has never been a gateway to those immense 20th Century cultural power-complexes like New York or Los Angeles, and that our population count is an order of magnitude less than either metropolis, one may recognize that something very special is going on here: a level of emergent artistic abundance distributed through neighborhoods and fostered largely by individuals rather than by states, corporations, or academies. That's what is meant by The People's Renaissance.

What we don't have, alas, is as fluid an economic base as many would like for these cultural activities, particularly in the realm of independent music. Sometimes this is celebrated; a few years ago I saw my first "Real musicians have day jobs" bumper sticker in southeast Portland. But though I too have a day job, I've recently joined the local musician's union chapter to gain a better understanding of the needs of full-time and freelancing professional musicians. I'm learning a lot about the supportive strategies which the union and groups like Fair Trade Music are encouraging. There's no denying that the indie music economy here is deflated. A typical band member take for a show — two drink tickets and $10 or $20 — is a ridiculously paltry amount to earn for a performance that one might have spent weeks preparing, a performance that might have brought a number of paying patrons into a venue.

Can we develop the local music economy without resorting to exclusive, pyramidic mechanisms like yesterday's entertainment industry, and without fostering more competitive values that ultimately would deny public performance opportunities to a larger percentage of self-starting musicians? Can we improve compensation and encourage a return to consistent monetization of art, while also preserving the wonderful inclusiveness and little-guy-supply-side impetus that has created so much cultural abundance here? But also: where would such an effort intersect with deliberately non-commercial projects and artists? Are we glad to be funding free/low-cost performances other ways, through small nonprofits, hard-to-win grants, and tentative kickstarters, or would it be more efficient to get in line with groups like Fair Trade Music and advocate solidarity for better pay and more consistent, sustainable pricing?

Each stakeholder in the scene will make an individual decision on these issues, but what I hope Muse:forward can do is bring many different viewpoints and brainstorms together for a better shared perception of our local economic reality and options. This may support shared strategies for a better cultural economy, to sustain this remarkable scene in a bottom-up way.

With Knowledge and Resources for All

To return to Foucault, again from The Subject and Power:

> [These struggles] are an opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification: struggles against the privileges of knowledge. But they are also an opposition against secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people.

The requirement of expensively-acquired credentials by arts-organization gatekeepers is an obvious case study for what Foucault goes on to call the *régime du savoir*. Nobody ever asks a punk rocker how much postgraduate work they've done, where they studied, or with whom; it's about what happens on stage, after all. But a less formal, highly competitive subculture can still be deliberately obscurantist; I've known musicians in other cities who would be highly reluctant to share press or booking agent contacts with one another, and I've dealt with venues elsewhere that would keep their criteria or expectations for booking close to the vest. Such scenes have a tendency to form cliques of insiders and masses of struggling outsiders. On mystifying representations: as a young music student I was dismayed when I realized that some of the less compelling pedagogy I encountered seemed to deliberately dole out incomplete knowledge to me, painfully slowing the intellectual progress I could have been making — did the teacher not recognize my capacity, or was it to keep me going at a slower pace so I would pay for lessons/tuition longer? As Foucault would point out, not all power relations are exercised overtly by huge institutions; as often, they're relations between individuals practiced by received patterns of discourse and behavior — patterns of power that individuals absorbed from the media, the conservatory, the exclusive clique.

In the open-source internet age we've become accustomed to ready knowledge and resource access, learning at one's own self-driven pace. This seems to have a lot of synergy with the Portland cultural ethos. A recent example I encountered was the RECESS Emerging Tactics programs last year at PNCA, which included a sampling of Portland free education platforms. For another view on knowledge-sharing, open-source culture, and classical music, check out my essay A Tale of Two Conferences on Oregon ArtsWatch.

A local music-maker's knowledge-base is in Muse:forward's future, initially focused on things like press, venue booking, performance production, and networking. When needed we'll look to create resources, but more commonly we'll attempt to aggregate sources of information already available online or through other local organizations.

What kinds of knowledge do we need to share more readily in the local scene? What are effective ways to refer emerging artists to the resources they need for production and community-building? What can we learn from local creative-resource-providing groups?

Genre Collider

The variety of indie sub-genres in Portland is fantastic, but it's genre-crossing that really winds my syncretic clock. I'm hoping to see this hub of common interests spark unpredictable collaborations, inventions, and genre collisions. The average Portland live music fan does not tend to stick with one sub-scene or genre in a purist way; we are an eclectic community. I don't see Portland as prone to the kind of stylistic bandwagon fog that blanketed the Seattle scene in the wake of grunge. We seem to be happy to remain for the most part free of both the formulaic next-big-thing mandates of the music industry and the cerebral-groupthink mandates of academia. We love the different.

There are some specific local trends which interest me, which seem to have plenty of burgeoning musical energy and growing audiences but which tend to be needlessly isolated from the more media-buzzed indie music scene. These include: experimentalists, electronic music makers, ambient sound designers, improvisors, and local composers. I personally want to work to facilitate more cross-fertilization between these communities, and more traffic between them and the indie music scene as well, so for the near future that may characterize the direction of Muse:forward's more tangible presentation and production activities. If you're in between projects, let's talk!

Get Involved!

If you've read this far I hope you're interested in Muse:forward's potential as a Portland think-tank, networking hub and all-purpose emerging-music-enabler. There are some fairly easy ways you can help us build the Muse:forward network, participate in discussions, and stay in the loop:
• Sign up on our Groupspace (discussion and mailing lists)
• Like us on Facebook
• Follow us on Twitter
• Invite your friends and colleagues to do the same, and share this paper!

Currently everything Muse:forward does is free/donated, but eventually we'd like to do things like help promote emerging music and present funded, genre-crossing shows. If you'd like to contribute to those ends, you can make a donation through Fractured Atlas.

Also feel free to send a personal message to info@museforward.org if you want to introduce yourself, ask any questions, offer suggestions, or volunteer.

Christopher Corbell, Portland, Oregon, 7 January 2014