

Dreaming of Music After the End of Facebook *Groove Cafe, March, 2018*

We have been disgruntled about Facebook for a long time.

It seems like there are two reasons we've used it for this long. The first often rings as an exhausted regurgitation of Facebook's current marketing campaign, that it connects us to our high school friends, people from camp, so on and so forth. Leaving Facebook, we'd be exiting a community.

The second is, simply, Events. You'll rarely hear someone more exhausted by the internet than when you hear a music lover, musicians, and organizer say they're only on Facebook for the events.

In neither of these cases is being happy with Facebook any part of the equation. Imagine if you heard a friend say, "I love Facebook." You'd probably check their pupils and make sure they knew what day of the week it is.

Of course, Facebook just has to keep us unperturbed enough to stay on its platform so it can continue mining our data. Anyone who has used the platform for this long has continued to be begrudgingly on board with that.

Yet the past week's leaks and exposés on Cambridge Analytica have underscored that Facebook is indiscriminate with how it doles that data out.

But now we've learned that Facebook would rather not know what happens with that data once it's sold — including if that data is then peddled second hand, surprisingly — and will quickly turn around and tell users we agreed to give the data in the first place didn't we?

It's as much a pillar of contemporary American life as McDonald's, Jordans, or Marvel movies, yet is widely considered a terrible product with strikingly limited upsides. Facebook doesn't look good, doesn't taste good, and isn't even particularly entertaining. At least when you go to Target, you complete a necessary transaction and never have to talk to anybody. Facebook just smugly fucks us over.

Accountability may be anathema to our budding techno-libertarian elite (will anyone at Uber fall on the sword for the self-driving car that killed someone last week?), but it's nauseating all the same to see a company with so much greedy power over our data shirk responsibility so, so, so flippantly.

Worse, when it comes time for the official public statement, the brass more or less shirks culpability with song and dance about how the company really tried our best, you guys, implying for the billionth time that it has little control over any ill use of the platform whatsoever, such as, say, its algorithms creating anti-semitic ad categories.

A few hours later, Zuckerberg went to the NY Times with hat in hand, saying he was really, deeply sorry. As Facebook watchdog Max Read put it, though:

No Zuckerberg statement or interview is going to be remotely satisfying if the thing you're mad about is "the way Facebook works"

— Max Read (@max_read) March 22, 2018

If there is one promise Facebook delivers on, it's organizing. The West Virginia teachers' strike earlier this month really benefited from Facebook's groups features. As ghastly and depressing as they are in the first place, GoFundMe pages for medical expenses quickly reach the people who care most via Facebook sharing.

And, of course, Facebook is an effective way to get people to find out about the show you booked, and therefore a necessary promotion tool if you had to rent equipment or guarantee fees to artists. A lot of people use Facebook, and therefore a lot of people will see events posted there.

But as anyone who has booked enough events using Facebook knows, it fucking sucks for promotion. If you post events with any sort of frequency, Facebook will cap the number of friends you can invite, and sometimes outright ban you from inviting people to events for a probationary period.

Yes, Facebook wants those people frequently throwing events to pay for promotional services, and Facebook is clearly imposing those invite limits for ransom.

But consider a recent report from BuzzFeed about how Eastern European propaganda agents can hack Facebook groups with massive membership counts to push disinformation at shocking scale, or how pro-gun trolls and far-right agitators use Facebook groups to orchestrate mobs for harassment campaigns.

This reeks. To state the facts plainly, Facebook creates fewer obstacles for orchestrating harassment campaigns than it does throwing relatively low-attendance shows and dance parties. If we want to extrapolate just a smidge, we could say Facebook is better structured for fostering far-right violence than it is for enabling community-based music scenes.

(Side note, there are more reasons why Facebook is terrible for events, but those this is not an article about how a trash product could be fixed.)

Consider, for a moment, a trope that's been appearing in sci fi since the '70s, some state or corporate apparatus neutralizes dissidents and countercultural types by giving them some space or some thing they can use to exhaust all of that revolutionary energy, leaving the oppressive status quo undisturbed.

We see it mentioned by Stanislaw Lem in *The Futurological Congress*, where he briefly mentions an architect designing a bunker inside of a city-as-a-sky-scraper where counterculture types can live separately than the rest, and in Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* where former hippies and agitators get hooked on a drug that allows them to tune out completely.

The idea was updated in an especially clever way by David Cronenberg in the '90s, wherein Jude Law's character in *eXistenz* gets to stage a successful coup against a corporate conspiracy pushing a dangerous VR game, only to realize the coup took place within the VR game.

It's important that this trope developed in the '70s, when the revolutionary spirit of the '60s was crossfading into the the purest version of a neoliberal order that would remain unvarnished until the global financial crisis in 2008.

Now, I'm not saying that the underground music scene being left to fight for scraps in Facebook's events section is exactly some pacifier. Far from it. Facebook events give us the opportunity, once again, to organize. And that's not just for concerts and dance parties, but for teach-ins, community forums, political rallies, and volunteer efforts with grassroots social organizations.

But it is clear that there will always and forever be a space for us within the most insidious, totalizing structures. We will always get thrown just big enough of a bone to stick around. Facebook is not unlike the Lem's skyscraper, or Dick's Los Angeles, or Cronenberg's eXistenz in that it effectively finds a way to keep a disgruntled counterculture within its walls.

Is this maneuver inherently anti-revolutionary as these examples imply? Probably not. Again, Facebook has some sort of revolutionary potential, for the fascist fringe and labor movement alike. Do we feel like we can never really escape? Well... yeah.

How does Facebook do it? By standing as the self-evident fact that it's the only game in town. There isn't a good alternative. If I quit, I won't find out about all the shows I love going to. Worse, I won't find out about the shows my friends are playing. Even worse, if I'm booking a show that's two miles farther than where people are used to traveling for DIY shows, how am I even supposed to reach all the people that would travel and convince them to get there?

What comes to mind here is a foundational quote that Mark Fisher uses in *Capitalist Realism*, borrowed from Frederic Jameson, who himself borrowed it from some mysterious source, "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." It rings so true it's piercing.

Fisher uses it to frame his own idea of capitalist realism, that neoliberal capitalism very effectively defines what is and isn't realistic in our sociopolitical landscape — say, privatizing parking meters that previously benefitted the municipality versus reigning in corporate carbon emissions — in turn justifying its own existence as some natural state of order where alternatives are unimaginable.

Let me suggest a twist for the situation at hand: "It's easier to imagine the end of music than the end of Facebook." It just isn't realistic that we could get off Facebook and still find out about all the good parties that all our friends are going to!

We are always stuck with the extent reality that there just isn't an alternative to Facebook for finding out about music happenings. I get it. Ever since I started going to DIY shows in 2008, Facebook is how I found out about events. It seems monolithic.

Except that it's not, really. Truthfully, the way I really found out about the good events was by friends telling me to come with them to shows, or even just showing up at the Silent Barn in Queens on a Thursday and randomly getting my mind blown. Similarly, word of mouth still works 10 years later. For that matter, a good flyer goes a long way. Email lists for venues tell you literally everything happening at that venue.

Yeah, duh. I write that and I feel like I'm being some patronizing dick. Obviously people find out about shows through word of mouth, flyers, email lists, and whatever else. Yet we still act like we need Facebook.

Something really struck me when I was re-reading Capitalist Realism recently. It's the bit about how capitalism continues to function because people are aware of exactly how terrible it is yet do nothing about it. We say we oppose it, but we just act in accordance with what it demands anyway.

That's how we get Christopher Wylie — a dude you'd fully expect to see dancing in the fog at an illegal party — working alongside "Steve from America" at Cambridge Analytica.

The converse of this logic is what the Facebook corporation uses to excuse its appalling behavior. Facebook has historically — and is presently — made it clear that users agree to a terms of service and, on top of that, have access to a bevy of privacy options. We, as users, have agreed to those terms of service and just have been too lazy to toggle anything.

We internalize that. Yeah, Facebook uses data collection practices that are not just amoral but should be illegal, but I agreed to use Facebook in the first place so whatever. Alright, Facebook should be fined out of existence by the FTC for gross negligence with a hoard of data collected on tens of millions of Americans, but here I am using it so oh well.

It's not like we all continue to participate in these structures because we're all nihilists (the Christopher Wylies of the world are, though). There's some level of coercion.

The implication of Facebook's public response to these crises always boils down to, "if you don't like it leave." And it seems like we have to imagine the end of our lives on Facebook, and therefore the end of our lives enjoying music with our friends. It does not have to be that way.

We live our lives tangled in this big fishing net of damned if you do, damned if you don't choices imposed on us by contemporary capitalism. This is one of those rare cases when even though we're all knotted up by this hulking corporation that mediates our entire music community, we can wriggle our way out.

A good place to start is asking, frankly, where'd this binary come from, enjoying music versus quitting Facebook? The alternatives will literally never exist until we start putting in the work to make them exist. Then we can make an actual choice about whether we want to use this fucking thing.

(As a quick aside, this applies to so many facets of our lives under capitalism, not just Facebook Events.)

The fact of the matter is that there are so many technologic tools we can use to find out about and inform about happenings in our music communities. Angel Marcloid used to send mass texts to promote her shows. Situations in Chicago, which doesn't make Facebook events for its shows at all, relies on its own mailing list and great looking flyers that promoters make to plaster on all sorts of other social media.

And for that matter, anyone who books shows will tell you Facebook events don't guarantee a damn thing about attendance.

This is why I started a Chicago show calendar for Groove Cafe, and have been working on getting people to post on it more. We just need to start creating alternatives. If enough people who go to shows

and parties start spreading word about some resource, and enough people who put shows and parties together start funneling energy into that resource, we might just end up with The Big Alternative to Facebook.

But is there a need for A Big Alternative to Facebook? Do we really just need one? It would be really nice if all of these things can use the same framework, just like they do with Facebook Events now. But that's a tall order and chances are we're going to be trying a lot of smaller alternatives that serve different purposes — planning political actions versus planning gatherings of friends — for a while before we hit that motherlode.

Either way, The Big Alternative is never going to come if all we do is continue to begrudgingly use a terrible platform run by an inept and morally vacant corporation.

I'll mention Fisher's book one more time. Towards the end of the first chapter in *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher quotes Margaret Thatcher's political doctrine. It goes "There's no alternative," as in no alternative to a neoliberal capitalist order. I wouldn't call us right now lucky per se, but we are living in a moment when it's clear that exact system is rotting and that there must be alternatives because this late capitalism thing just isn't working. In fact it may collapse.

Looking for alternatives is not some exercise of a utopian impulse, but a pragmatic one. There's nothing utopian about saying, "I have to move because my landlord refuses to fix the gaping hole in my roof." It's literally the only safe option.

Now is as good a time as any to point out something that has likely been obvious all along. You are not reading an article decrying, "Music lovers, leave Facebook!"

From what my friends who understand this situation more intimately either in professional or academic capacities tell me, you can probably make Facebook freak out harder by just cutting down your usage and logging in sporadically (meaning yeah, you can check your events once every two weeks).

If you jump off the platform, now you're just another fish to catch. If you stop using it as much, you actually hurt some of their key retention metrics, and therefore Facebook's marketability to these ghouls like Cambridge Analytica buying that precious Facebook ad space.

That's one take, certainly not the only one. Quitting bad things does feel good, after all.

The unfortunate and genuine reason I'm not preaching that we all delete our accounts is because we will never escape Facebook for as long as Facebook is around.

A major component of its business model is based on tracking your movement around the web. Any website that has a Like button, Facebook will know if you were there. You have a little token that Facebook attaches to you, and effectively uses this to surveil your movement on the internet. It's not clear if this really goes away once you delete your Facebook account.

Even if you never joined Facebook, it has created a shadow profile for you. It will mine your phone number, email address, physical address, and whatever else when a friend of yours gives Facebook

permission to scan her contacts. Facebook also collects your biometric data — as in what your face looks like — based on your appearance in photos that people have posted to you on Facebook.

Makes your skin crawl, right? Facebook, effectively, is a private data collection agency. These practices exist in a legal grey area and some are the subject of class-action privacy lawsuits. Of course, the current legal landscape is one where civil liberties are eroded to the point that the NSA and domestic law enforcement agencies can, say, conduct dragnet data collection or, as recently reported by a Raleigh, NC television station, demand that Google hand over cell phone data of anyone who was in the radius of a crime scene.

To me the simplest reason for developing an alternative to Facebook events is also the most profound: we can identify something rotten and begin to work on a solution that suits us. We are aware of the problems and we, as a vast chain of music communities — a network of networks — produce an alternative that suits us. Hopefully it can suit those other people who need new platforms for planning ways to gather people too.

All that surveillance, all the sickening police state data collection, all of Facebook's indiscretions, they when they are hidden. The threat that those agencies are working to mitigate is a public that knows exactly what's going on and refuses to let it continue. We are fortunate regarding this specific Facebook issue, and I mean that, because we know exactly how we are being antagonized.

Frankly, by going to underground shows, by booking touring acts who need a stop in our city, by playing DIY venues every once in a while, we're already participating in a functioning alternative to corporate capitalism. It's not that we didn't want to play Bowery Ballroom — or for that matter never play at amazing, above-the-board venues like the Empty Bottle — but that we just do this underground thing anyway.

Yes, DIY culture and music communities have one billion issues, but as far as alternatives to corporate capitalism go, this is a pretty good one. Maybe a national, ad hoc system more or less free from a profit motive and generally operating outside of the law doesn't need to be shackled to some fetid corporation that helps fascists hijack an election.

The Private Sale of Guns Online is Virtually Lawless ***Hopes and Fears, October, 2015***

Buying a gun at Walmart is not the easiest way to buy a gun. The easiest way to buy a gun is to personally know someone who will sell you his or her gun. There's no waiting period, you can avoid a paper trail by paying cash, and you may even be able to acquire something uncommon, like a World War II antique or a foreign assault rifle. But maybe you don't know someone who will sell you a gun. Enter the internet, and its network of loosely regulated private gun sales.

A quick Google search for “buy guns” will lead you to eBay-like auction sites for firearms such as GunsAmerica.com and GunBroker.com. But still, you have to wait to receive the shipment and you can only pay by check or credit card. Even more convenient is Armslist.com, a Craigslist-style site full of classifieds posted by firearms owners looking to unload. The service has been running since 2007 when it was started by two friends who met at the United States Air Force Academy, Jon Gibbon and Brian Mancini. There are currently well over 100,000 listings on the site for a variety of firearms and firearm accessories.

Buying a gun on Armslist is about as easy as it gets. Purchasing a couch from someone on Craigslist ends up being a bigger hassle because you need to find a vehicle that can transport it. Click on your state, browse the active listings, and get in touch with a seller. Above all else, it is the sole responsibility of the buyer and seller to conduct safe and legal transactions, as Armslist states that it "is purely a service provider that allow sellers to list items. As such, Armslist can not and will not be a party in transactions." And Armslist is not only a boon for buyers, but the vendors too. As Zak from McHenry, Illinois—who I found selling a Smith & Weston pistol issued to Atlanta police—put it over email, “Armslist appeals to me because it provides the ability to resell weapons to private party buyers for the same price or very close to what I paid for the weapon new at a dealer. Dealers would never pay the prices Armslist buyers do for used weapons.”

One of the more prominent arguments against gun control these days is epitomized by the National Rifle Association's axiom. “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” It was first espoused by the organization's head, Wayne LaPierre, at a press conference seven days after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut that left 20 children dead. It's an argument in favor of getting guns into the hands of Americans, implying that responsible gun owners will keep the irresponsible ones in check in crisis situations. (Successful interventions like this are very rare.)

Of course, this idea doesn't sit well with a large proportion of Americans, particularly following Dylann Roof's white supremacist massacre of nine black victims at the historic Mother Emanuel church in Charleston, South Carolina in June, and Christopher Harper-Mercer's slaying of nine Christian students at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg earlier this month. (Over 300 mass shootings took place on the US soil in 2015 alone.) Most vocal among this contingent of Americans is President Barack Obama who, in a speech following the Roseburg atrocity, noted that there is a gun for every man, woman, and child in America. Obama's officials have proposed a major gun control overhaul "that would establish new guidelines for who is legally defined as a licensed gun dealer and therefore required to conduct background checks on potential buyers" but has yet to see any firm action.

The implication is that America is on the business end of a massive domestic firearm proliferation. A site like Armslist is so well trafficked because, simply, there are lots of guns to go around in America. Some statistics seem to suggest that we're seeing the largest proportion of Americans ever who are not

happy with the current state of gun control, according to a long-running Gallup poll showing that, since 1990, more Americans than not have been in favor of stricter gun regulations. (The percentage in favor of stricter regulations has sunk drastically to somewhere between 46% and 49% since 2008, the year the economy plunged and Obama took office. Support for regulation peaked at 58% following the Sandy Hook massacre.)

If you are curious why a site like Armslist exists, you have to ask how so many guns got into the hands of Americans in the first place. While the Department of Justice has conducted extensive research on how guns get into the hands of violent criminals—outlining practices as “straw purchases,” in which people ineligible for permits hire eligible people to buy guns for them—there is a scant research on gun ownership in the average American household. The last study was conducted in 1997, when the Department of Justice found that about 35% of households owned guns, and about 60% of purchases were made through dealers.

This means that about 40% of purchases were private ones, made outside of the purview of regulatory laws. Buyers in those transactions were potentially able to skirt the background check and waiting period process. While there aren't reliable numbers on how many guns are sold privately today, the regulatory framework hasn't changed on a federal level since 1993. That's the year the last major gun control act was passed: the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, named for Ronald Reagan's press secretary Jim Brady, who was permanently injured during John Hinckley Jr.'s attempt on the president's life. The Brady Bill mandates that licensed firearm dealers need to wait five days before delivering a firearm to an unlicensed customer, giving that dealer the chance to conduct a background check. The law made no provisions for private dealers, who vend firearms at gun shows and on internet venues like Guns for America and Armslist. This is what's colloquially known as the “gun show loophole.”

The current provisions under the Gun Control Act of 1968 (GCA) to “keep firearms out of the hands of those not legally entitled to possess them because of age, criminal background or incompetency” apply to online firearm transactions, but legislation is slow to catch up. In her 2012 “Internet Firearm and Ammunition Sales” report, Legislative Attorney Vivian S. Chu credited the internet for its “ample opportunity for abuse of the existing firearm regulations or an increased potential for violations of federal law.” Current firearms provisions for Federal Firearms Licenses (FFLs) apply to the online sale of guns, but for private gun dealers, the only main provision is not selling a gun out of state to a non-FFL purchaser. Meanwhile, there are essentially no regulations on the private sale of ammunition. A bill prohibiting unregulated online sale of ammunition has been introduced to Congress in 2012, and has yet gone nowhere.

Less publicized than the “gun show loophole” and equally crucial to Armslist's existence, are specific interpretations of the Second Amendment during Obama's tenure as president which have nudged the constitution in favor of private gun ownership. These were both 5-4 rulings by the Supreme court: the 2008 decision in *District of Columbia v. Heller* that the Second Amendment protects a citizen's right to own a handgun for self defense, and the 2010 decision in *McDonald v. Chicago* that Chicago could not ban private ownership of handguns.

In an op-ed for *The Washington Post*, former Supreme Court justice John Paul Stephens explains exactly what kind of revisionist reading happened in both of these decisions. He points out that the Second Amendment protects the right to hold firearms for the purpose of “a well organized militia,” which is why the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in 1939 that Congress could ban sawed-off shotguns—they have little utility in battle.

Stephens then goes on to quote his own dissent in *McDonald v. Chicago*: “Even apart from the States’ long history of firearms regulation and its location at the core of their police powers, this is a quintessential area in which federalism ought to be allowed to flourish without this Court’s meddling. Whether or not we can assert a plausible constitutional basis for intervening, there are powerful reasons why we should not do so.” Ironically, critiques of federal power are more typical of the conservative justices, especially in matters like affirmative action and women's reproductive rights.

Between these Supreme Court rulings and the Brady Bill loophole, the political climate is ideal for an unregulated, easily accessible gun market to bloom. When unregulated from the outside, the market must watch after itself, making Armslist and other sites of its ilk a libertarian's or free-market capitalist's dream come true. When I asked Zak from McHenry how he would pose an argument in favor of Armslist to a regulation activist, he was quick to admit that he was “aware of cases in the past where Armslist has been used by criminals to procure weapons and commit crimes—this fact sickens me.” But he revealed himself as the model of the NRA's good guy with a gun, writing, “What I have done, and will continue to do, is report illegal requests and strange behavior. I always verify potential buyers using Illinois [Firearm Owners Identification] check system. I always file transfer papers, and abide by the waiting period. I make sure that every sale ends with a good vibe, and I would not complete a sale if someone is underage, does not have a FOID, or comes across as unstable.” Users are encouraged to follow ATF guidelines, but it depends on the user the level to which they follow this protocol.

Indeed an America in which all gun owners were as responsible as Zak from McHenry would be a safer one. But one of the most notable Armslist-enabled crimes occurred just 50 miles due south of McHenry, IL, in the affluent village of Oak Park, IL, a Chicago suburb that mainly houses office buildings, national chain stores, and the headquarters of McDonald's. A Chicago Tribune article from the time recounts the story of Dmitry Smirnov, a 21-year-old from British Columbia who purchased a gun in a private sale in Washington state then drove to Oak Park to murder Jitka Vesel, a Czech translator 15 years his senior who he shared a brief romantic relationship with after they met via online gambling. Mother Jones reports that the private sale was enabled by Armslist. The site steels itself against culpability with its Terms of Use.

Chicago comes up again and again in the national conversation about gun violence, thanks to the harsh reality that gun control is more or less a fantasy in the city. In July, DNAinfo Chicago reported that there had been 12,000 shootings in the city since the beginning of 2010—which averages out to about 6 shootings a day—resulting in 14,000 injuries and 2,000 deaths. September 2nd of this year held the dubious distinction of the deadliest day since April 5th, 2010. Nine people were shot dead. Chicago is my own city of residence and I can attest to the fact that on the Fourth of July, one of the city's most consistently violent days, you tend to hope that the rapid fire booms coming from down the street are firecrackers.

Some conservatives, such as presidential candidate Chris Christie enjoy skewering gun control by claiming that Chicago has some of the strictest regulations in the country. Indeed, there are tight regulations on purchasing guns in Chicago, but the majority of weapons confiscated by the Chicago police come from out of state. Earlier this month, the Chicago Tribute reported that 19% of those come from Indiana, whose border is just about 10 miles from Chicago's southern city limits. That state has lax gun laws, making it easy for customers to purchase weapons in bulk, something that Chicago street gangs regularly exploit in those straw purchases researched by the Justice Department during the Bush administration. When Chicago gangs are using their out of state firearms to self-regulate the drug black market, you begin to wonder where the good guys are, and what they would even do with their guns.

The World of Psychedelic Mushrooms Online *Hopes and Fears, March, 2015*

Robert McPherson never felt he had anything to hide.

On Halloween in 2003, at 9:30 AM, McPherson and his wife, Margaret, stood before a Seattle judge for sentencing. Robert had plead guilty to a felony charge of growing psilocybin mushrooms, Margaret to a misdemeanor charge of possessing psilocybin mushrooms. Yet, as evidenced by a court transcript posted online by Robert, his defense attorney wasn't too concerned with the growing charges: "When Mr. McPherson was first arrested by the agents, he completely admitted his involvement in the spore distribution scheme, admitted ownership of the few mushrooms that were found in his house. He operated the business for several years and never tried to conceal it."

This "spore distribution scheme" which caught the eye of Johnny Law was not, in 2003, and is not currently, expressly illegal in Washington. Since the early '90s, Robert McPherson had assumed the noms de guerre, alternately, "Psylocybe Fanaticus" and "Professor Fanaticus" to sell magic mushroom spores and mushroom cultivation kits through High Times and, later, through his website fanaticus.com. The professor tag is warranted, as McPherson made major innovations in the PF Tek, or Psylocybe Fanaticus technique, a simple and popular method for cultivating mushrooms at home without any equipment more specialized than some mason jars, a stock pot, and a clear storage bin. Excepting California, Georgia, and Idaho, it is perfectly legal throughout the United States to buy and sell psilocybin mushrooms spores, as they do not themselves contain the controlled substance psilocin, or the "magic" in the mushroom. It is also legal, naturally, to spread information about how to cultivate mushrooms; it just so happens that the methods for growing shiitakes work equally well for growing, say, the popular Golden Teacher strain of psilocybe cubensis.

But the Professor's folly was indiscretion, not infraction. The story goes that law enforcement agencies throughout America started fielding calls from enraged parents that their teens were receiving grow kits in the mail from this PF character. After a period when the Postmaster General's office was tracking mail to and from the McPherson residence in Amanda Park, Washington, the couple was visited by "[the] D.E.A. swat team, the FBI, the US marshals, the olympic national park rangers, Greys harbor drug task force, a road block, a battering ram, machine guns and a "black" helicopter," as written on the Professor's personal website. What law enforcement found was a small operation growing just enough mushrooms to produce spores for the Professor's business. Directly owning up to the growing operation and pleading guilty to manufacture of a controlled substance, Robert McPherson was put under two years house arrest and fined by the courts for, essentially, all he had. In 2011, he passed away from complications related to Hepatitis C.

Yet the rise and fall of Professor Fanaticus is not so much the shadow that looms over the modern-day internet-based spore trade as much as one of the various cautionary tales which guides its survival. That trade is an arm of a wider internet community of amateur mycologists focused on hallucinogenic mushrooms and, much like shrooms growing on cow shit in an Alabama pasture, this community sprung up thanks to copacetic conditions and flourished through swift adaptability.

The Hawk's Eye

While the recent press surrounding the deep web drug market Silk Road and the indictment of its founder Ross Ulbricht may lend the impression that the internet's status as a drug resource is a relatively recent phenomenon—and, for that matter, one relegated to the internet's dark alleys—the

most venerated resources for psychedelic mycology have been easily reached by common search engines since the late '90s. Take The Hawk's Eye, a spore depot which doesn't seem to have been redesigned since it was launched in 1998; the cosmic motif and shimmering animated GIFs of a mushroom and the word "E-MAIL" should render it Geocities-era catnip for the net art set. The Hawk's Eye is the longest running spore depot on the web, yet it was the second to launch, following Robert McPherson's own fanaticus.com. The proprietor—operating under the pseudonym Ryche Hawk—learned well from PF's follies making sure his website focused exclusively on the heritage and sale of spores, with no information about or even links to cultivation methods. As far as Hawk is concerned, consumers are purchasing spores for research purposes, and he even sold microscopes for examining them.

Hawk tells me that his initial motivation to collect and disseminate psilocybin mushrooms spores, "was spiritual in nature. I find shrooms are [an] enhanced link up to God." Talk to enough inveterate trippers and you start to realize that the type who finds real value in hallucinogens does not conform to the stereotype of a drug user getting a fix. Even though the scaremongers like to paint this picture that taking hallucinogens compels people to jump out windows or go on joy rides, such users are generally less of a threat to themselves than the Xanax user indulging on a couple extra with a little too much wine. Many an ardent hallucinator seeks a form of healing (be it spiritual or psychological), a thread picked up by institutions like Johns Hopkins University, which runs clinical trials using psilocin, LSD, and MDMA to treat afflictions like PTSD. Hawk himself notes that family members of his have used shrooms to treat depression and violent migraines, adding, "The Bible teaches us that God put everything on earth we could possibly need. That means everything we need for healing is here on earth, in the plants and fungi."

UNSURPRISINGLY, there is an evangelical bent to Hawk's work: thanks to a combination of visibility and mycological connections, Hawk has received, preserved, and domesticated for home growing a multitude of spores collected from all corners of the Earth. He asserts that, "Any good vendor keeps a spore bank of the many varieties at different generations of the strain/species," but his bank, at least according to his site's price list, tallies more than 60 varieties. A claim that he is the original disseminator of a number of now-internationally grown spores—including the B+ Cubensis, likely the most widely cultivated and sold strain—is not altogether unlikely, given his rapports with spore collectors like John Allen and the mysterious Mr. G as well as with Amsterdam smart shops which peddle a variety of psilocybin fungus in infantile form referred to as "truffles."

The Hawk's Eye lists spore and provides information on everything from the gigantic Oraissa India Cubensis collected off elephant dung to the UFO-shaped psilocybe Azurescen native to the Pacific Northwest. Considering the fact that shrooms have been outlawed in many of the countries they are native to—the United States, Mexico, Thailand, but notably, not Brazil—Hawk's operation of providing refuge to obscure species of mushrooms during a global prohibition brings to mind the apostles' work of spreading Jesus's gospel during the pagan era of Rome or, if you view his work less favorably, the anti-vaccination movement's success in helping the measles return from near-extinction earlier this year.

The Shroomery

You get the impression, when looking at the scope of what Ryche Hawk does, that the focus isn't getting people high, or even getting people to "tune in, turn on, drop out," but making sure those mushrooms continue to have a foothold in the world. Likewise, many of the prime movers in the internet's amateur mycology community are driven by something besides, simply, spreading the good

vibes. Take Ythan Burnstein, who in 1997 at the age of 15, started the Shroomery, which has developed into a definitive source of information on hunting, cultivating, and experiencing shrooms on the internet. Burnstein has not tripped since 2000, but stays involved with the site because, as he told me over email, “It’s fun and mentally stimulating, and I like to see people benefiting from my work.”

The Shroomery, while only boasting about 37,000 registered members on its message boards, sees somewhere between 1 and 1.25 million unique visitors a month. In Burnstein's eyes, its popularity and its status as a resource are inextricably linked. “The site is about mushrooms and mushrooms alone. This allows us to focus on providing the most comprehensive resources available about mycology. This in turn attracts people who are passionate about mushrooms and experienced with mycology, and the site benefits from their knowledge and contributions, creating a virtuous cycle.” The Shroomery even runs loose regulation of the spore market through allowing whom it considers to be the most reputable vendors to pitch in for site maintenance costs and join the widely-venerated sponsors list.

Pooling Research

While some of the so-called psychonaut forums are focused on dosage information, chemical compositions, and trip reports of various drugs—let's say the user end of things—communities like the Shroomery, the Growery, and DMT Nexus exist more so as places, for those experienced and passionate few, to congregate and pool independent research. And the benefits of pooling are plentiful. Whereas in the past, amateur mycologists would have to rely on a small selection of books for growing techniques—such as Paul Stamets' popular yet occasionally inaccurate *The Mushroom Cultivator*—the Shroomery's archives and forums offer not only crucial advice and immediate feedback for growers of all experience levels, but a degree of assured safety. One incredibly popular thread titled “How it should look – A NEW CULTIVATOR'S GUIDE” provides pictures of all of the possible bacterial, fungal, and mold contaminations which plague home growers, helping beginners and vets alike to avoid mistakes that could land them or their friends in the ER, or even the grave.

Twig Harper & the legacy of RoggerRabbit

This tendency to pool research, to build collective knowledge, unites psychonauts across the board. In attempt to better understand this trend, I chatted with amateur salvia divinorum researcher and operator of Baltimore's only sensory deprivation float tank, Twig Harper. In his telling, dedicated and educated amateurs can conduct research about marginalized medicines which they find crucial without all of the institutional and governmental red tape.

“I pop in and out of these conferences, talking with these people doing it on legitimate levels and they're talking about, 'In five years, in 10 years, the government's going to allow us to use MDMA, the government's going to allow us to use psilocybin, but we're only going to be able to use it on dead people maybe we'll get a phase 3 trial.' And I'm like, 'Screw that!' There's a million plants out there, why don't we start investigating these other plants that are legal and demonstrate how they work, start building a social structure around these things that's true to the plants and can actually heal people.”

While it is rare that you find a psychonaut investigating the legal substance salvia divinorum, Harper is by no means the only psychonaut working inside the law.

Consider the case of RogerRabbit, affectionately referred to as RR and treasured by the members of the Shroomery, especially notable for filming and distributing an extensive video series called *Let's Grow Mushrooms*. RR was something like the presiding guru on the Shroomery's “Mushroom Cultivation”

sub-forum and, without fail, would reply to threads ranging from new growers' agita to near-philosophical discourses on the true effect of light on fruiting mycelium. In 2011, fellow Shroomery member TheIndoCloud collated all of RogerRabbit's notes on mushroom cultivation into a single PDF. It runs 166 pages, single-spaced.

In a rare move for the online mycology community, especially following Professor Fanaticus's indictment, RR forwent his anonymity by showing his face in those aforementioned Let's Grow Mushrooms videos and proudly posting his full name, Marc R. Keith, on the video distribution site. Of course, Keith never had anything to hide: the techniques he taught were applicable to all mushrooms, not just psychedelics. There always seemed to be some question marks, though, around what type of mushrooms were driving Keith to such rigorous research. A farewell thread, "A Thanks to RR," ran on the Shroomery's Mushroom Cultivation earlier this year.

In a post from January 17, RogerRabbit explains that he "started growing medicinal mushrooms instead of psychedelic," when he first met his wife, Vivian, 10 years ago. He was convinced he could save her from the cancer she was suffering. In the decade since, Keith made those Let's Grow Mushrooms videos and posted relentlessly on the Shroomery. Keith was unable to comment for this story, but it's likely that this burst of activity was directly correlated with the knowledge cultivated during his own mad dash to save, "the only person I've ever truly loved."

Regardless of the fact that he enlightened thousands, potentially millions, of Shroomery visitors and did significant work in making home mycology safe and reliable for all with an internet connection, Keith saw his work as for naught. "My baby, the love of my life and my very reason for living died in my arms over the holidays." In that same January post, he concluded, "How can I continue to answer questions about mushroom growing when the most important reason for growing them in the first place turned out to be a devastating failure?"

America Eats Its Cassette Culture: The Marriage of Neoliberalism and the American Underground
AdHoc, February, 2014

I'm personally not too hot on accumulating possessions, but I spend around \$300 on cassettes and vinyl a year. The thrill of purchasing is lost on me, and I tend to see material collections as just more pounds of stuff I'll have to pack up and move every year or two. Outside of a love for collecting or a hard-dying habit (I used to buy a lot of CDs growing up), I can't really see a good reason why people even bother purchasing this stuff anymore. You would think that if a fan really wanted to support an artist, that fan would just pay directly through Bandcamp and call it a day.

But this is not an essay about why physical media is not yet obsolete. Some people like to buy certain things, and there are always people who will gladly sell those things. Such is my simplistic understanding of why a cassette and vinyl market currently exists. To most people in this day and age, the reasons to buy cassettes are as obscure as the sounds that are typically dubbed on them. As younger generations seem to do the majority of their listening through digital means—a Nielsen survey from 2012 reported that 64% of teens listen to music on YouTube, making it the most popular platform out there right now—I often find myself hoping that the grassroots experimental scene that fuels the current cassette culture is not on the wrong side of history.

That particular worry is exaggerated by the fact that this grassroots experimental scene fueling the current cassette culture is most certainly on the wrong side of the economy. 1080p is not in the Fortune 500, Tabs Out does not have national radio syndication, and Goldrush Music Fest will never be Coachella big. At the end of the day, the current DIY experimental scene is a niche carved out by the little guys and girls, albeit weird little guys and girls. Those benchmarks of mainstream success for these underground heavies seem so absurd because this particular music culture exists more or less in opposition to corporate-level entertainment outlets and culture mills. 1080p, Tabs Out, and Goldrush did not rise to prominence because they monopolized broadcast and sales outlets; they simply accrued support from enthusiasts and true believers.

Paradoxically, the powerful companies that once successfully made bank off of music are fucked, and the scrappy underdogs, the denizens of this cassette underground, have figured out a way of becoming self-sustaining—by keeping the scale of event and media production small, for instance, and cultivating a more or less word-of-mouth system of promotion. Granted, the viability of experimental labels is always precarious, and this particular market always seems to be flirting with obliteration.

For example, things have been looking pretty bad for the experimental community in Europe this year. Volcanic Tongue, an international experimental tastemaker and a true hub for weirdos around the world, just shut down its physical shop in Glasgow and ceased mail order. Revisions in European tax code have put small-scale digital vendors, such as record labels, in a spot. Ostensibly designed to more fairly tax massive multinational corporations, revisions to the Value Added Tax on digital goods in the European Union stirred up an outcry from Bandcamp late last year, as well as from countless European labels who use the platform.

The Value Added Tax (VAT) is both like and unlike American sales tax: in both cases, a tax is paid on a product, calculated as a percentage of its price. According to a Forbes report from May, 2014, the defining characteristic of VAT is that vendors, not customers, pay it. Fans who pay 10 euro for Taylor Swift's 1989 will theoretically continue paying that much. What changed is that VAT used to be based on where the company was incorporated in the EU—meaning that countries with lower VAT rates like

Ireland were used, effectively as corporate tax havens. Now, the rate is based on where the buyer resides. This, obviously, means that the EU will stand to benefit from a greater percentage of, say, Apple's and Amazon's massive digital sales.

What the EU is attempting here is actually pretty noble: taxing those who hold all of the money in an effort to redistribute some wealth. What happened is that vendors who were not in that class of multi-million or -billion dollar multinationals were met with the same 27% tax rate and pile of red tape. Such was the case with obscure artists and small labels on Bandcamp. An early post to the site's blog, in reaction to the news, lamented that labels—even those outside of Europe who sell to Europeans—would have to file VAT, submit quarterly reports, and exercise all manner of other tedium which would ultimately nullify Bandcamp's status as a convenient and economically sympathetic sales platform for small-scale labels and independent artists. Much like a dog collar, good financial regulation is not one-size-fits-all. In this case, valorous attempts to shorten the leash on the big dogs posed a detriment to the mangy mutts.

In this VAT scenario, a familiar story gets a peculiar inversion. That familiar story: the game is rigged against us, with the rich and the powerful necking so intimately in plain sight that it almost feels futile to point out that the non-regulation of business and banking benefits only a minuscule proportion of our country's, or for that matter Earth's, population: the mega rich. This is equally obvious to the people who read Marx in college as it is to the people who did not go to college. Of course, the former group will likely put a name to the process by which this deregulation fucked us, by which corporations are really only held accountable for their own profits and yearly growth: neoliberalism.

In his *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, City University of New York-employed anthropologist David Harvey defines neo-liberalism as the policy of increasing freedom, specifically freedom in the marketplace. Neoliberalism is rooted in Adam Smith's original formulation of capitalism, with the idea that the "invisible hand" of the free market will cultivate the necessary competition needed to keep the game fair—and also a reaction to the Keynesian (read: regulation-heavy) economics that helped America pull out of the Great Depression. It is because of post-Reagan neoliberal economic policy that America does such a great job at breeding massive multinational corporations, while our government does such a poor job at making sure that such lucrative business actually benefits our country in material ways, via some balancing system like—I don't really know, just spit-balling here—responsible corporate tax law.

Okay, so where does DIY and underground music play into this? Well, the VAT fiasco shows us that the little guy is caught in the cross hairs of global economic policy, with us, the little guy, sometimes feeling some significant blowback from policies supposedly designed to benefit us. Fortunately, in the case at hand, Bandcamp decided to ease the impact of VAT for users by traversing all of the red tape for the artists and labels using the site so those users would not need to. It is unclear how the taxes will affect artists' and labels' profits; Bandcamp could not be reached for clarification.

But this was not the first threat encountered by the underground music marketplace, and it will not be the last. As you may remember, there was a ruckus in early 2013 when the United States Postal Service announced a drastic increase in international postage rates. Underground communities were distraught—fretting aloud on Facebook and in label email lists—as the cost to ship a single cassette would rocket into the double digits.

This was also the direct fallout of neoliberal economic policy. One of the central tenets of the neoliberal doctrine, as outlined in David Harvey's book, is the privatization of the public sector, stemming from

the assumption that the government meddling in any realm where money changes hands equates to a larger government—one which, theoretically, couldn't understand the nuance of anything economic as well as a private business could.

As such, the United States Post Office has been on the wrong side of a brutal congressional campaign by private parcel lobbyists representing the likes of UPS and DHL to more or less defund the public postal system. This campaign has been successful to some extent, as the USPS is no longer funded by taxpayer dollars, but instead funds itself, in toto, through its own postage revenue. Make no mistake: the bigger the bum deal for the postal service, the sweeter the pot for the likes of UPS. Underfunding in any operation often leads to poor service, and indeed, many post offices are pockets of mild hell. There are myriad other bits of policy that just about guarantee the postal service's failure; for instance, the postal service isn't allowed to get into the email game, even though that more or less makes total sense for the agency.

As was the case of with the Bandcamp debacle, the underground labels basically had nothing to fear. The rate for shipping a few cassettes internationally ended up being about the same as shipping one; that right there is good for business, especially when exchange rates favorable to Europeans make cassettes, and in turn larger orders of them, relatively cheap. Yet, if you think that the message here is that “these underground folks sure make a lot of fuss over nothing!” you're dead wrong. The message is that these underground people persist—wilfully or obviously—in spite of the machinations of antagonistic neoliberal policy.

In early 2013, I was working on a piece about the fallout of this international postage hike, but it more or less fell apart on account of the fact that the hike ended up being a non-issue. I was under the false impression that the real story there was about how much it would cost to send a package. It took a couple of years for me to realize that the postage rate was simply a wrinkle in a much bigger narrative about the value of community, about the fact that this weird music is kept going simply because there are humans among us who see an inherent, non-economic value in making sure the community lives.

In my email archives sits a very long message from Jeremy Bible, who runs the distributor Experimedia, from February, 2013. In that email, he did a poor job addressing my query about how the postage hike would affect his business, but offered crucial insight as to why a person might run venture with such fiscally backwards intentions—selling niche music to a particularly narrow niche—in the first place. He wrote:

“Community is absolutely my primary focus here. I don't view Experimedia as a simple shop. My approach and goal with everything I do here is to act as a positive conduit linking the community together. Of course, the business matters require a portion of attention, but for me, personally, this is only out of necessity. In fact, my personal beliefs are that the monetary system our society is based on is a crippling burden on art, community, and all aspects of our society.”

Amen, Jeremy. I toured the East Coast for a musical project of mine last summer, playing everywhere from the upstairs billiards room of a redneck bar in Western Mass called 13th Floor Lounge; to My Place Pizza in Poughkeepsie, which could in no way pass a health inspection; to a couple particularly foul basements, notably The Vat in Philadelphia. There was something beautiful in learning that innovative art and music will seemingly colonize any corner of society it can find, despite this awful economy and the punitive laws designed to satisfy politicians' backwards idea of a better America. Our better America is the one we conjure at bizarre pizza parlors and stuffy cellars, the one we manifest

when we show up in groups of less than 30 to drink beer and watch people use all means of tools to make music that should, by popular standards of taste, not be made.

No, this is not an exclusively American phenomenon. In February of 2013—two years before the store would close—I also had correspondence with Volcanic Tongue founders Heather Leigh and David Keenan. My correspondent was equally uninterested in giving me a cogent answer about postage rates, instead devoting a long email to the sentiment that, encapsulated in the email in one sentence, read “VT isn’t just a business for us, it’s a way of life.” They went on to explain that Volcanic Tongue was very much so a specialty store, and that their decision to keep operating despite the struggle of selling physical media in this millennium was rooted in the desire to “provide mutual inspiration/admiration and recognize that we are a part of a wider community of artists, labels, promoters that all have a role to play to keep artistic culture alive.”

Of course, Volcanic Tongue closed this year. They fought the good fight until they could no longer, and that sense of fight is nothing short of brave. While the store is being rightly eulogized on social media and in music publications, watch out for armchair sermons suggesting that Volcanic Tongue was running a fool’s errand, pursuing a market and a way of life that’s doomed. Never neglect to question conventional wisdom that says a way of life is doomed.

Consider the case of Deep Thoughts, a record store in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston. Deep Thoughts has a basement area where they host shows—such as the one I played on tour this summer—and the occasional impromptu Phish/Grateful Dead jam session. In an email correspondence in research for this piece, the store’s owner Nick Williams tried to explain the success of his store in an era when so many are, erm, closing shop. “We really are ‘just a record store,’ or more so, we are [what] a record store should be. There are no loftier goals or anything; it’s just a sick place to hang out and buy music.” That is what a record store should be: more so than a place of commerce, a place for community. The “sick place to hang out” is as integral as the buying music part.

There are many types of scene-builders, from distro and record label types like Jeremy Bible and Nick Williams to promoters like Aurora Halal of Mutual Dreaming, Ben Osborne of Voice Of The Valley, or our own Ric Leichtung. Their visions differ, of course, so that some are running “just a record store” or “not just a record store,” “just a festival in the woods” or “not just a festival but a place for community.” But at the end of the day, their goal is common: providing some mechanism to keep something alive that they find essential and, often, beautiful. They get pleasure from bringing pleasure to others. While many would lose sleep over running financially precarious ventures with no real security to speak of, these folks are comforted by the fact that the music just keeps going, that they have some part in making sure that the art they love and the people who make and support it can claim a place in the world.

You see, while neoliberalism is not a distinctly American phenomenon, America is really the primary agent of it in the world (after all, it was propagated by our own Reagan administration and University of Chicago economists; the world’s economic standard is the US dollar). For that matter, Americans are (just about) the only people I’ve been writing about. Americans today are suffering from serious economic inequality, and perhaps these underground heads are doing the crucial work of showing the rest of us how to make the most out of a bad situation.

I will liken these Americans to one mythic American who looked progress in the face and said, “Who is this progress for?” This was John Henry, a railroad man whose own job hammering a steel drill to lay railroad was threatened by a newfangled steam hammer. John Henry, as the legend goes, raced the

steam hammer to see which of them could hammer faster, triumphed, then died from the exertion. There is often, unfortunately, a sacrifice in preserving a way of life, and you can bet your bottom dollar that John Henry didn't look at the hammer in his hand and say, "They're going to make me into a legend for this." He was likely just hammering.