

Introduction: Scenes from an Independent America, 2007



After a hot and stuffy Fourth of July, hungover and weary revelers woke on the fifth to find the San Francisco Bay Area covered in a more typical summer blanket of fog. As Friday the sixth rolled around, the organizers of Oakland's Art Murmur, a monthly gallery walk that had recently grown into a full-blown hipster street fair, expected that the crappy weather and lingering sour stomachs from barbecue and beer would probably keep people at home. It was a prospect welcomed by some of the store owners on the route in question. Art Murmur has become something of a conflict between scale and idealism. Launched a year earlier by three scrappy, funky galleries within a block's proximity of one another whose owners hoped to attract a bigger clientele, it rapidly attracted a cadre of young and middle-aged indie artists, musicians, crafters, and hangers-on who, enticed by the prospect of an artists' community, began to crowd downtown and West

Oakland in search of cheaper rent and the camaraderie of other artists. Lower Telegraph Avenue, where the Murmur occurs, had in the 1980s and '90s become home to several sketchy bars and boarded-up businesses, as well as a brisk trade in male prostitution. Visitors drawn to the area by its newer populace of artists are likely to spot paint-spattered eccentrics in skinny jeans among the neighborhood's majority population of immigrant store owners, street hustlers, and newly arrived loft dwellers, and all those skinny-jeans-wearing artists love congregating on First Fridays. More than once, the cops were called by unfriendly neighbors intolerant of the influx of noise and crowds that broke into the usual run-down but quiet monotony of the street. A recent crack-down on drinking on the block due to crowd control issues followed, and signs posted on street corners notify patrons of the ban. The festivities had even taken a violent turn at the May Art Murmur, when someone took a pipe to the head in a fight.

Jen Loy, one of the owners of Mama Buzz Café and Gallery, which has, in its three years of business, become a combination playhouse, gallery, and performance venue for the local indie set that frequents the Murmur, leans over the counter and confides that "hopefully with this weather everyone'll stay home." Jen is tiny—just under five feet tall—but her size belies a tough personality and limited tolerance for bullshit. Over the past few months, her job on First Fridays has become half police work, half counseling service, and she's getting tired of scolding her ostensible peers. Jen wipes down the café counter as she speaks, clearly alert to the particular annoyances the day will bring. A customer tries to transfer her pint of beer to a take-out coffee cup, earning an admonition from Jen and a shake of the head. Jen and her business partner Nicole Neditch bought Mama Buzz from its previous owner when the revival of Oakland's art scene was in its nascent stages; only one other gallery, Ego Park, was in the neighborhood at that point, and it was more of a home and studio space to its owner, Kevin Slagle, than a full-time gallery. But Mama Buzz tapped into a need in the neighborhood—a need for a gathering space, a need for the sympathetic ear of the two young, cre-

ative women who owned it, and a need for affordable coffee and food in a neighborhood with few restaurants and grocery stores nearby. Within a year of the café's opening, business had grown and, with it, the neighborhood began to change. But Mama Buzz was just part of the changing face of the neighborhood where the Murmur takes place, which went from being an affordable area for artists to being home to a Starbucks, a Whole Foods, and multiple loft buildings within a couple of years. Similar transformations in formerly undesirable neighborhoods were taking root around the country: Brooklyn, a mostly sleepy and seedy place in the sixties and seventies, was discovered by artists in the eighties and is now swarming with hipsters and baby strollers as rents increase and condo developments pop up along with the arrival of chain retail and grocery stores like Trader Joe's, American Apparel, and Urban Outfitters; the west side of Portland, Oregon, a haven for small art galleries for years in the eighties, is now home to designer lofts, a massive Whole Foods emporium, and a Restoration Hardware store that threaten the artists who preceded them, and similar shifts are occurring in Chicago's Wicker Park, Providence's west side, and even in farther-flung outposts of independent art like Omaha and Missoula.

In Oakland, the evolution went like this: more collective and shambolic galleries moved into lower Telegraph in the wake of Mama Buzz and Ego Park, including 21 Grand, a mixed performance space and gallery. They were followed by Rock Paper Scissors Collective, a DIY dream space of zines, hand-sewn objects, printmaking classes, and knitting nights, and, most recently, two slick and Manhattanesque art spaces that stick out among the tattered buildings housing neighboring galleries like upscale loft developments stick out among nearby derelict flats and liquor stores. Esteban Sabar Gallery opened in early 2006, its owner having in turn been priced out of San Francisco's Castro neighborhood, which had become home to tony boutiques and pricey restaurants. Sabar's gallery reflects the upscaling that is beginning to bleed into lower Telegraph; on that foggy July evening, as patrons squeezed into his gallery's multiple rooms and gawked at tasteful

black-and-white photos, he waved a Chinese paper fan in front of his face and, in response to a question about the swelling size of Murmur crowds, sardonically replied, "That's a bad thing?" Sabar has never been secretive about his ambitions for his gallery, whereas his neighbors at Mama Buzz and Rock Paper Scissors are beginning to feel overwhelmed and resentful of the crowds. Around the corner from his space, the recently opened, slickly designed Johansson Projects hosts a show called "Wunderkammer," a mixed-media set of sculpture mimicking the seventeenth century's "cabinets of curiosity" and their collections of mammalian and aquatic skeletons and remains. A large-scale painting of a blowfish done on a mirror is selling there for fourteen thousand dollars; around the corner at Rock Paper Scissors (aka RPS), you can purchase, for five bucks, a knit cozy made to house a mix tape.

The crowd is equally high and low, rich and poor, young and old. Younger people still outnumber the more monied San Franciscans and the hill-dwelling, Prius-driving types Sabar admits he's trying to attract. Still, there are a number of graying heads in the crowd, mixing with the kids in jeans, ponchos, elaborate facial hair, and eyeglasses of every conceivable shape and size. The street outside RPS is closed off to traffic, and tables are set up where artists hawk T-shirts, buttons, burned CDs, and other homemade crafts. At one table, a shopping cart stuffed full of thrift-store clothing is labeled with a handmade sign reading "Pick a garment, pick a screen." The available assortment of print images displayed on the table features mostly stylized appliances like toasters and eggbeaters. Patrons also have the option to pay five dollars and have a custom-made item cranked out right then by the bearded proprietor, an affable guy in his late twenties who's sporting a battered railroad cap along with a shirt identical to the ones on the table. At another table, two dreadlocked African American teenage boys in basketball jerseys try to hype the crowd and sell a mix CD they've made of "authentic Oakland hip-hop." At another, two women in their thirties wearing shirts screenprinted with political slogans pass out flyers for Team Abolition, a prisoners' literacy project, and talk seriously and quietly with people

about their activism. The zine rack inside RPS displays titles ranging from *Biofuel and Genocide* and *Former Fetus: An Abortion Journal* to *Junk Pirate* and *Broccoli Cheese and Crackers*. As a middle-aged couple in fleeces and Birkenstocks poke their way among the racks of revamped thrift-store dresses and colorfully painted light-switch covers, the woman leans over to her husband and confides, "I didn't know there was art in Oakland."

By 8:30 in the evening, as the light begins to dim, Mama Buzz is packed wall to wall, the air above the outside patio blurring with the fog of cigarette smoke and an occasional cloud of pot. People are crammed into Johansson Projects, banging against the sculpture of branches and headless birds that protrudes over the space of one wall. In Ego Park, the massive zoetrope built by Christopher Loomis—which requires patrons to walk up, spin it, and peer in to see images of the zoetrope itself being built—has a line of people waiting to do just that. Crowds jostle one another on the sidewalk, and a young guy in a knit cap shouts to his friends, "Whatever gallery you see my bike at, I'll be there!" Toddlers ramble around, their tattooed moms chasing them. Red dots appear on half the art for sale, and the trays full of carrot sticks dwindle to tiny piles. Though Murrur organizers had hoped to shut things down by 9 p.m., it seems unlikely anyone will take off by the appointed hour as the crowds continue to swell and swell.

Three thousand miles away, on a humid summer day, Park Slope, Brooklyn, looks like something out of a Woody Allen film from the seventies, embodying the idealized New York in which people will shell out a lot of money to live well. The air shimmers with a golden hue, trees are lush and thick with greenery, and the people walking the streets, released from the bondage of winter wear, are letting their skin breathe in shorts and strapless dresses. Music and barbecue smoke from the Park Slope Fifth Avenue Fair drift down Bergen Street, and it's a perfect day for being outdoors. In the midst of this clamorous idyll, independent literary culture is quietly trying to stake a claim in the neighborhood. Unnameable Books is tucked away on one of these picturesque side streets, just down from the Bergen Street 2 and 3 stop. From

the outside the store looks modest: a jumble of books on a cart parked on the sidewalk, a tiny storefront window crammed with more books, a street-level entrance that's easy to miss.

Unnameable Books—recently called Adam's Books, until a similarly named book distributor threatened the store with litigation—is among a small number of independently owned bookstores in the greater New York metropolitan area. One source estimates there are about thirty-five independent bookstores in New York, which seems like a fair number until you consider the fact that New York has a population of nearly eight million people.¹ Opened in late 2006 by Adam Tobin, the bookstore sells a mix of used and new titles, the emphasis for the latter being on books, chapbooks, and literary magazines by local writers and independent presses. Front and center when you walk into the store is a case displaying multiple titles by Brooklyn's Ugly Duckling Presse collective, a nonprofit publisher specializing in poetry and Eastern European poetry in translation. UDP books are letterpressed in the collective's warehouse and, with their surrealist cover art and hand-stitched bindings, they can look like art objects in contrast to the perfectly bound, glossy titles that surround them. There is also a rack dedicated to chapbooks, which are supershort collections of poems or prose usually fewer than twenty pages long, many of which are also letterpressed and hand bound, and a scattering of magazines, including many independently produced titles. Most of these types of books and magazines are difficult to find anywhere outside of independent bookstores, and even while indie presses are multiplying, the onus for getting a book onto bookstore shelves falls increasingly on the shoulders of the author. So the avant-garde poet who's currently unpacking a bag of copies of her own book for Adam to try to sell is doing the same thing the bookstore is doing—struggling to put cutting-edge work into readers' hands. And just as writers increasingly have to manage their own publicity, independent bookstores must do the same, and a two-person operation like Unnameable Books has to rely on word of

mouth and personal interaction with customers to generate interest.

Adam himself is behind the counter almost every day of the week. The store is open long hours, until 10 p.m. or midnight most nights of the week, and Adam bears some signs of strain. The store was recently burglarized, and a sign posted near the counter in response to the burglary reads “Please don’t steal the books. Thanks.” He’s affable enough with customers coming in to trade in used books for more used books, but as he switches the CD from baroque music to Yo La Tengo, he yawns widely and asks a visiting friend to run out and bring him some food since he doesn’t want to close the store to do so himself. In spite of the tight space, the store has recently begun hosting readings and book parties, and it’s slowly gaining a customer base in the increasingly well-off Park Slope community. This success is hard-won; even in Brooklyn—widely thought of as one of the epicenters of indie culture in America—a small bookstore faces daunting obstacles that often stem from the practices of its mainstream counterparts. Nonetheless, book lovers like Adam continue to open independent bookstores. Prior to opening his own store, Adam worked at another independently owned bookstore, Berkeley’s Pegasus Books. Like Pegasus, Unnameable Books has reached out to independent publishers that often face distribution problems that prevent them from getting their books and magazines onto the shelves at chain bookstores. This creates a symbiotic relationship between independent booksellers and publishers; they need one another to survive. Adam says keeping things small makes life a bit easier, but to help ease the constraints of the cramped space, he’s planning to rent the basement downstairs, to make more room for shelves and reading events by local authors, and he plans to keep the store open late in order to bring in a few more customers. Even if running a business like Unnameable is a struggle, the care shown by business owners like Adam helps to forge a community of readers and writers, and that kind of community, whether it’s

widespread or localized, is crucial to the survival of independent media.

While Unnameable Books does its best to keep the flames of independent publishing lit, the highly anticipated Pitchfork Music Festival has kicked into gear in Chicago's Lincoln Park, bearing witness to the massive popularity of independent rock. Chicago has been home to a booming indie scene since the eighties, when classic indie acts like Naked Raygun and Tortoise established themselves there. Chicago's affordable rents and the plethora of service-industry jobs available to young, creative types make the city appealing to writers and artists, so indie communities are able to thrive here, and this climate gave rise to *Pitchfork*. *Pitchfork*, the online review site for indie rockers, was launched in 1995 and currently gets about four thousand readers a day.² It is both beloved and loathed for its long, complex reviews and unflinchingly elitist stance as a tastemaker in the fickle community it serves, where bands of varying visibility rapidly go in and out of style. It's that volatility that makes the number of fervent followers who catalog every new arrival and departure from the scene so remarkable. A *Pitchfork* review can help an indie band gain an international cult following or relegate it to a rarely visited corner of MySpace. It's the sense of community that *Pitchfork* also helps to create that has drawn a huge number of avid music fans to its third annual music festival, where they can revel in offerings that range from an elite squad of indie godfathers, including Stephen Malkmus, Slint, Sonic Youth, Yoko Ono, and Cat Power, to several dozen up-and-comers.

The festival's sponsors this year include eco-friendly purveyor of organic goods Whole Foods Market, indie-friendly download Web site Emusic, and Chipotle, the national burrito chain. Indie journalists who are covering the festival on their blogs chow down on free burritos—after all, rock journalism has never been a high-paying gig. Another attendant reported that “people-watching not surprisingly yielded everything from metallic bike shorts and messenger bags full of books to awkwardly-short

dresses and cutoff jean shorts at every length,” and Chicago-based rock journalist Jessica Hopper told readers of her blog that “drunk kids careened towards one another, texting, crossing their Bambi-legs in line for the baking hot potties.”³

The festival crowd demonstrates something of a “this is no country for old men” skew (excepting the seventy-four-year-old Ono and fortyish Malkmus and Slint guys), but this may be part of its inherent appeal for the average *Pitchfork* reader. *Pitchfork* is written mostly by and for people in their twenties and early thirties, and indie rock, even when it’s being made by forty-something artists, is mostly sold to people in that demographic. In his *New York Times* review of the festival, John Pareles notes that “*Pitchfork* favors introspective music that’s ideal for a lone headphone-wearing computer user,” the very cliché of a hipster kid. And those same hipster kids, wearing the same hipster outfits, naturally congregate to see a bunch of what Pareles calls their “beloved cult acts” for a relatively cheap fifty dollars per ticket, good for three days worth of music.

Pitchfork’s writers are scattered all over the country, and people come from all over America to attend the festival. Attendees report that there are hookups, joyous reunions of far-flung friends, and late-night after-parties all over the city, all signs that, in spite of some of the journalists’ grouching, people are really enjoying themselves. But there are also critiques from attendees posted on blogs and message boards: the lack of enthusiasm from the apparently jaded crowd, the homogenous, clichéd fashion choices, and the plethora of somehow still indie-chic mustaches on guys, and the stream of snarky commentary coming out of the mouths of some concertgoers who have perfected a stance of high irony. Though *Pitchfork* attempts to be inclusive by inviting hip-hop pioneers De La Soul to be a headlining act as well as spotlighting DJ sets and featuring relatively avant-garde acts that play music far outside of indie rock’s usual guy-and-guitar parameters, the festival still attracts a crowd that can seem unable to appreciate anything without quietly mocking it.

Stereogum's review of the festival, which ignored the hip-hop performances, elicited an appalled comment from a fan who questioned their seemingly narrow-minded taste, saying, "I know you're all patting yourselves on the back for seeing the *Pitchfork*-approved indie weirdos, but WTF, no love for De La Soul? I guess the sneering bearded hipsters were afraid they might be forced to, like, conform to some 'urban hand waving' or something equally frightening."⁴ Stereogum's perception of indie rock as a world unto itself is the embodiment of the disaffected indie rocker cliché, and it's spreading via the Internet, television, and radio as indie rock increasingly finds a foothold in mass media. What often gets ignored, however, as that cliché becomes pervasive is the reason these fans were attracted to indie rock in the first place. Though it may skew young and hip, indie rock has a rich history of being open to musicians who want to make music outside of the often rigid parameters of commercialized rock genres, and that history goes back as far as the folk movement in the fifties. And even if *Pitchfork* can come off as pretentious, the fact is that its writers and the bands who play the festival and the fans who attend are all passionate about indie music. But this balancing act between wanting to celebrate the music and wanting it to be an organic part of a close-knit community is one of the many challenges indie culture faces as it works its way into mainstream society.

Art Murmur, Unnameable Books, and the Pitchfork Music Festival each play a part in the lives of independent artists. But they are more than just events or places to go: for many people who create art independently and for many who have done so for years, indie is a valid, thriving culture, and these events and businesses are part of that culture today. If we understand culture to mean something more than a style of music, a visual aesthetic, or a literary mode and try to define it from its Latin root, *cultura*—"to cultivate"—then we can see how indie artists have traditionally worked together to cultivate many things: credibility, freedom, the ability to promote their own work and to control how it's promoted, self-reliance, open-mindedness, and the

freedom to take creative risks. Likewise, if a culture is truly a group of people working and living together, independent artists have traditionally embraced the value of networking, making connections, and striving toward doing their art, their way. If being independent in your choices about what you listen to, look at, read, and watch implies a lack of compromise, then many of the people still making music and art independently would absolutely fit that definition. Indie's ambiguity can partially be chalked up to its emphasis on making its participants feel individual and unique. But before any of us were able to be creatively independent, we had to build on the practice of our independent predecessors. Because indie's history is in many ways a shadow history—one that parallels and reflects mainstream culture but also poises itself as being a subculture of outsiders—the threads connecting the twentieth- and twenty-first-century indie movements are not always readily apparent, especially in this day and age, wherein young artists face a plethora of choices about what kind of art they will make and how to distribute that art. Young fans often encounter art that builds on traditions of independence with which they may not be familiar.

When I began teaching a college course on underground music in 2005, I was struck by the number of students I had who, though they identified as indie rock fans, had little to no knowledge of what it meant to be in an indie rock band. They were unaware of the difference between signing to a major label versus an independent label, and they had never heard of Minor Threat, Black Flag, the Minutemen, or Hüsker Dü. While they were able to argue about formerly indie bands like Green Day and Fall Out Boy, most of my students were unaware of how much Green Day, for example, borrows its sound from Stiff Little Fingers, who self-released its first singles, or how Fall Out Boy builds on the tradition of early emo bands like Rites of Spring, whose lead singer, Guy Picciotto, later went on to join Fugazi. My students had also never seen a zine and couldn't tell the difference between the independently published books we were reading and one put out by a major publishing house. Chalking

this up to the generation gap, I set about trying to show them how and why these bands were actually part of a very old tradition, one that extended into literature and visual art. But what has become clear over the years that I have taught the course is not just that my students and I are from slightly different eras, but that their lack of knowledge about indie culture is really a part of a greater cloak of secrecy that indie has sometimes wrapped around itself in order to survive. Yet in spite of indie's secrecy, its legacy is venerable.

Indie's history can be traced back to the fifties and sixties, when many artists established the tenets of networking, making art outside of the mainstream, valuing creativity above profit, and working at the grassroots level, which were revived in the eighties indie scene. In this later version of indie, zines, tape trading, comics, flyer art, skating, and many other creative genres rose up out of the punk underground and were embraced by millions of people seeking a way to express themselves. Indie seemed to be thriving well into the early nineties, but Nirvana's crossover success sparked the realization for many of us involved in the indie scene that indie was going to have to reinvent itself in order to survive. "In the early '90s you did get this whole new culture of creeps sort of sniffing around, this kind of old-school music biz types who looked at the underground music scene not as something interesting in and of itself, but as something that could be co-opted and turned into mainstream music," said Gerard Cosloy, one of the founders in 1989 of indie label Matador Records.⁵ If the temptation to "sell out" had proven irresistible to many musicians, indie's embrace of capitalist success was like that baby swimming toward a dollar on the cover of Nirvana's *Nevermind*—a sentient being adrift in a sea of money. Many people who had been in the indie scene left it behind in the nineties in pursuit of dot-com stock options and designer lofts. However, what resulted from the exodus was not a gaping hole, but rather an empty stage on which a new kind of indie culture would be revealed. The first ripples of the new indie culture were more about keeping it close to home than they were about changing

the world. In the aftermath of grunge, indie went back to its grassroots beginnings. Some of the newest subgenres of indie rock that began to leak out from small regional scenes showcased their domestic interests in their names: dream pop, twee pop, bedroom rock, nerdcore. In the early part of this century, premillennium tension gave way to domestication across the board, which in turn led to more closely knit regional networks in cities and towns that hadn't had scenes before, as artists began to experiment with home recording, crafting, and other DIY activities. As the hippies used to say, "revolution begins at home." Given time, however, the seemingly sleepy new indie movement turned into a much, much bigger indicator of cultural change.

By the early part of the twenty-first century, it was easy to believe that indie was back in a big way. All of a sudden, indie art was everywhere. Just visiting the news rack at a decent bookstore revealed a plethora of indie magazines: *Bitch*, *The Believer*, *Arthur*, *Clamor* . . . all titles created by their editors and designers rather than conceptualized by Madison Avenue advertising execs. When my friends and I started *Kitchen Sink Magazine* in 2001, our rationale for wading into such a huge project was threefold: the Bay Area lacked a good arts and culture magazine; all of us were indie musicians, artists, and writers and therefore had creative networks to tap into (in other words, people who would help out for free); and we all wanted to do something different, to change things, to offer a different perspective than mainstream magazines were offering. Many of us had come up out of the eighties punk and indie scenes and were now working full-time jobs that could be soul-crushingly dull, and a magazine seemed like a logical way for us to do something fun that might also promote the local writers, musicians, and artists whose work was too abstract or avant-garde for most publications.

Producing, printing, and distributing a magazine was also a shitload of work. All of our peers in the independent press community shared that consensus. Anyone we knew who ran a book press or a magazine was constantly trying to scrape money together: chasing grants, borrowing from family members, and, in

our case, using networking to raise money. *Kitchen Sink* became notorious in the Bay Area for its fund-raising parties. Often held in collectively owned warehouse spaces in the same Oakland neighborhoods where Art Murmur occurs today, we booked up-and-coming indie bands like Deerhoof, Erase Errata, Sean Hayes, and Rogue Wave to play for free, hung some art on the walls, and opened the doors to hundreds (and for some events thousands) of Bay Area citizens who wanted to drink cheap beer and hear good music. Sometimes the parties got out of control—a group of performance artists dressed up as clowns started smashing boxes of plates that were actually part of an art installation at one party, the fire marshals were called on others, and neighbors complained about all of them—but we were making enough money to put out our magazine, people were reading it and getting exposed to new ideas, and in the long run that was all that mattered.

Many of the new indie artists we worked with felt the same way. Even if you were struggling to make ends meet, you made your art. New indie record labels began to emerge, building on the networks established by labels in the eighties punk scene. New technologies made home recording cheaper and easier than ever, thus enabling many musicians to take control of their music. Not only did every indie writer, artist, or band have a Web site and a blog, we were all networking online and in person and constantly providing one another with ideas for staying solvent, distributing our work, and in some cases hooking up and starting relationships with one another. It was entirely possible to feel giddy to be a part of this new indie revolution. Neighborhoods attracted cadres of young artists, independently owned businesses began to move in, and everywhere you looked, you saw someone who looked like you—tattooed, bespectacled, creatively dressed, and sporting all of the signifiers of what felt like the most vital incarnation of indie culture since the end of the eighties. Carey, a young indie musician, describes the appeal of being an independent artist when she says, “I am attracted to the unpredictability

of independent culture. The mainstream, in contrast, is never going to surprise me because everyone is simply trying to please as many people as they can in order to make a profit. Independent culture is less concerned with what will appeal to the majority of people, so artists are free to make the art that they enjoy making.”

Even the demoralizing turn America took when George W. Bush took office in 2001 for a seemingly interminable term and when the Iraq War began were further fuel for the new indie culture. Bands rediscovered politics, and the sounds and overtly politicized lyrics of earlier acts like Gang of Four, the Minutemen, and even Creedence Clearwater Revival returned with a vengeance. Independent publishers began putting out anti-Bush screeds so rapidly it was hard to keep up. Zines and indie magazines chimed in on politics and encouraged the growing antiwar movement. Even crafters got in on the revolution, creating guerrilla knitting collectives and subversive craft networks. For the first time since the eighties, indie artists had something specific to rage about.

But at the same time that indie got political, it also became undeniably appealing to marketers. The media were willing and able to borrow the most appealing aspects of indie culture, from music to comics and style, and use them to market products that had never previously been thought of as indie. At least part of the blame can be laid on the shoulders of the clever producers of the Fox television show *The O.C.*, who created the character of Seth Cohen, a comic-book-loving, emo-listening, ironic-T-shirt-wearing, skateboarding outsider in a wealthy Orange County community that was so bland, tanned, and toned it made Seth's indie quirks look positively exotic. *The O.C.*'s creator Josh Schwartz, himself a fan of indie music, started booking indie bands like Death Cab for Cutie and Modest Mouse on the show. Simultaneously, Madison Avenue advertising firms started matching indie rock to products. Do you like Volkswagens? You might also like the Flaming Lips. Have an iPod? Why not download

(legally, of course) some Spoon songs for the trip to school? Indie became a viral buzzword, and like the memes that encouraged people to post quizzes on their blogs that asked “How Indie Are You?” the nascent indie aesthetic that made magazines, books, and clothes so hip was rapidly sucked up, reimagined, and reproduced for a mass audience. Even indie godfathers Sonic Youth sent ripples of outrage through the blogosphere when they announced they’d be releasing a compilation album through Starbucks’ music label, Hear Music. Sonic Youth’s Thurston Moore tried to shrug off this decision in *Billboard*, saying, “The compilation came out of the idea that I wanted *Rather Ripped* [Sonic Youth’s previous album] to be in Starbucks stores because that’s where people were seeing CDs. They aren’t going into record stores anymore.” When indie rock’s founders admit something like that about their fan base, you know that the culture of indie has changed irrevocably.

Similarly, while the Internet enabled indie artists to network and share ideas much more easily than the tape-trade-and-zine-exchange meet-ups of the eighties, it also began to blur the concept of what indie meant. MySpace quickly became popular with indie artists because they could post MP3s and discuss music with other bands, bookers from clubs, and potential fans. The social-networking site also aggregated “friends” by allowing them to list their music, film, and literary preferences. If you were a fan of Godspeed You! Black Emperor, one click would help you find thousands of potential friends, hookups, or acquaintances who also liked the same band. But what else did you have in common with them? Maybe nothing—in an age of “branding,” whatever slivers of indie culture people claimed for their own were rapidly becoming not much more than labels and tags. As Jill, a twenty-year-old indie fan, puts it, “Personally, I think there is ‘true’ indie (i.e., underground music) and mainstream indie (typical Seth Cohen lookalikes gathering at Death Cab for Cutie concerts). I feel like indie is dead. Only a very small fraction of bands bring the true indie feel these days.”

This mainstreaming of indie culture, which encouraged increasing availability to larger and larger audiences—enabling its co-opting by advertisers and filmmakers, promoting a narrowing down to the clichéd image of a hipster in skinny jeans and big glasses—is still happening as this introduction is being written. But even as indie gets exploited, it continues to change and reinvent itself, continuously giving rise to the question this book will attempt to answer: What does it mean to be indie? At a time when indie's newest audience is negotiating and reinventing indie culture, finding a definition for something so ambiguous is difficult. Nonetheless, it's not impossible. Snapshots of a culture—significant moments when it altered perspectives, changed ways of seeing or hearing, or spun off into new genres—are important ways of seeing a culture as a whole. Therefore, this book will offer snapshots of historical indie surges to provide context for an exploration of the contemporary indie scene.

A friend who works for an independent arts organization recently wrote that because of mass marketing and corporate threats, indie culture today is “hanging on by a thread.” If this is true, and the thread is threatening to snap, it's time to step back and try to understand how, where, and to whom that thread reaches back, and where it might possibly go in the future if we are able to keep it intact. There is also the possibility that a broken thread might not result in the death of indie but instead in new kinds of indie culture—after all, indie never really dies; it continues to reemerge in repeated surges. To borrow a phrase from Ian MacKaye, “The flame never goes out.”⁶ In these pages, many of the people who created this culture, who nurtured and shaped it and still shape it, will tell their stories. Any valid culture, anything that changes people's perception and way of thinking is made of many, many voices, and the disharmony and occasional harmony of those voices is what makes things interesting and complicated when you're trying to define what that culture means. In the case of indie culture, there may be more

disharmony than harmony at times, but when it achieves harmony, it is absolutely sublime. In these pages, an attempt will be made to bring the notes that formed that chord—in all their absurd, funny, deeply moving, and occasionally transcendent ways—back together again.