

Making Music at Studio X: The Identity Politics of Community Studios

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Abstract

What are the social obligations of what I term "community studios"— spaces that exist to provide "at-risk" youth access to free or low-cost music recording equipment, services, and education? This essay reflects the findings of a four month ethnomethodological project, in which I explored the institutional and social affordances of Studio X, a community studio located in a rural college town in upstate New York.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Music History and Culture (Topic), Article, Digital Media, Ethnographic, Identity, Music

“Building Community Expectations”

- Have a purposeful presence ~ sign In and OUT
- Respect Your Self (including dress)
- Respect Others (problem solve in a healthy manner)
- Respect Property (clean spaces accessed)
- Use Clean Language (with your words & lyrics played)
- Honor the Center’s Mission and Vision

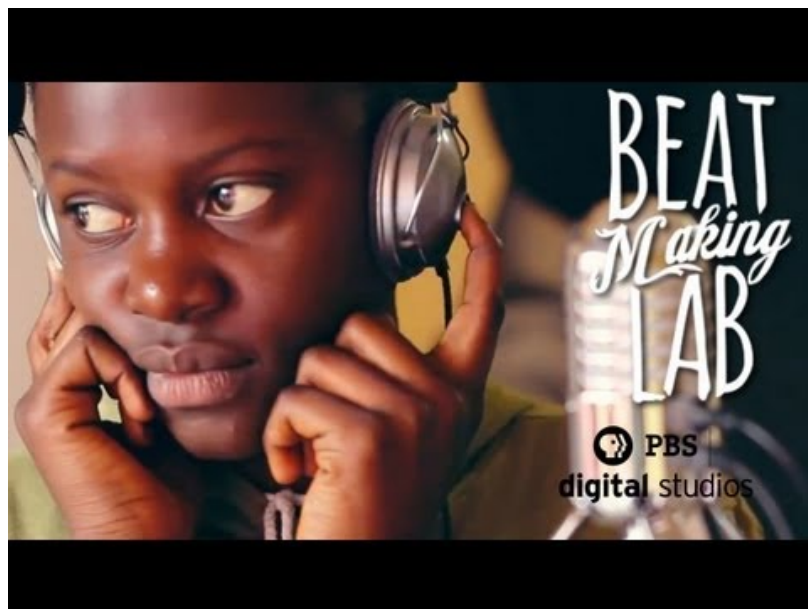
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What are the social obligations of what I term "community studios"— spaces that exist to provide "at-risk" youth access to free or low-cost music recording equipment, services, and education? This essay reflects the findings of a four month ethnomethodological project, in which I explored the institutional and social affordances of Studio X, a community studio located in a rural college town in upstate New York. Using information from interviews and several hours of observation in the studio, I argue that community studios are subject to unique institutional pressures that emerge from their framing as both professional studios (private enterprises with no restrictions on creative expression) and community centers (shared spaces, which, in this context, are designed to provide oversight and the proper socialization of youth through rules and activities). While tapping into private and philanthropic revenue streams has resulted in the development of some exceptional studio projects, it has also led to a problematic situation where the studio has trouble establishing an independent identity for itself. This essay hopes to offer a critical perspective and, in doing so, offer some suggestions to help community studios deal with these challenges.

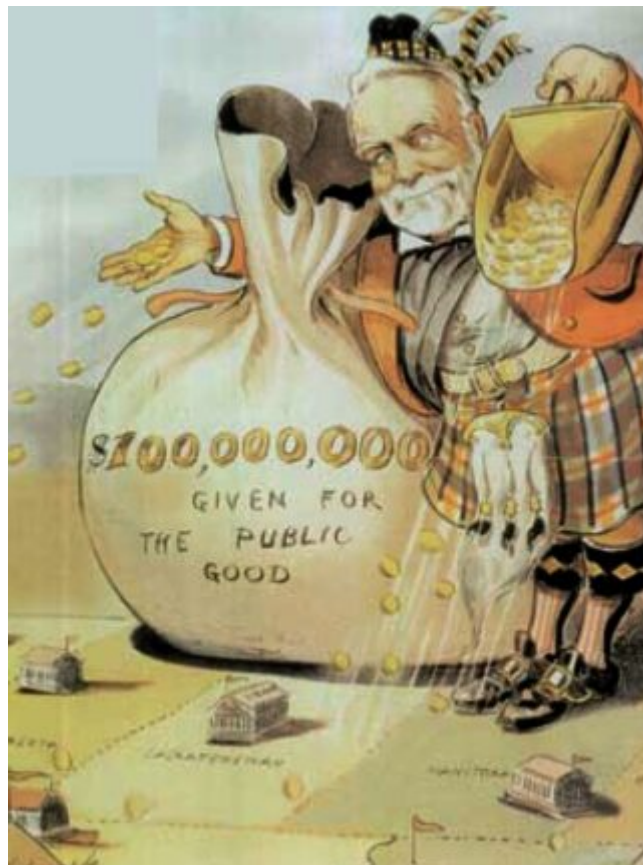


https://youtu.be/_dTk3iiOZS8

Community studios offer a different studio model than the standard professional or DIY models typically discussed in academic literature. While recent work by [Eliot Bates](#) and [Susan Schmidt Horning](#) has done an excellent job of framing the sociohistorical contexts of commercial music studios, neither adequately addresses the politics of community studios. These politics, however, cannot be taken for granted as they challenge [Bates' contention](#) that studios "isolate studio workers from the outside world, and the world from studio work, while possessing a visual and audible difference from other work environments." Contentiously, community studios represent a unique set of stakeholders including parents, donors, youth, and community center administrators, amongst others. The community studio is far from isolated, however, and its identity, therefore, is in constant flux.

Studio X was developed in 2006 with funds from a \$65,000 grant from the New York State Music Fund, a board created by the [Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors](#) to dispense over \$35 million in

settlement money from music businesses that profited from "payola" practices. It was conceived as a space where predominantly low-income African American youth would have access to professional recording equipment and training. According to the grant proposal, technical expertise was to be supplemented with classes that contextualized the music within "the socio-political, and social justice significance and origins of hip-hop, reggae, and other forms" in addition to making connections with "jazz, African percussion, and contemporary world music."



*A picture of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy.
Borrowed from Wikimedia Commons.*

Many of Studio X's goals had been met. On my first day there, I encountered a local singer who spoke with me for over an hour, praising the studio for giving him the opportunity to use a voice he claims to have wasted in jail. Another respondent explained that the studio helped to shed positive light on an area that is often categorized in negative and judgmental terms. He remarked: "More people should know about [the studio]. Show more appreciation. They should come down and see what we're about down here. It's not all negative. Good things happen at [Studio X]."

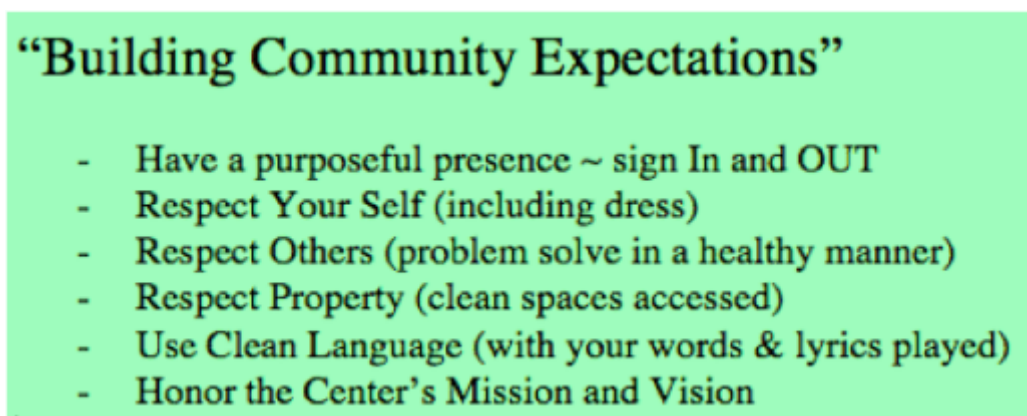
Not all was well with Studio X, however, as I learned when I encountered an administration struggling to negotiate the studio's joint identity as both a community center and a professional studio. At the helm was Eric, an audio engineer by training, and the full-time director of Studio X. Since accepting the position in 2012, he had been crafting the space in the likeness of a professional studio. Free music production and engineering classes ceased and he even began offering private sessions with better equipment at the rate of \$25 an hour. Eric justified this

decision by explaining that the fee helped to ensure that people actually kept their appointments, and the better equipment yielded superior recordings. He also insisted that a large percentage of the funds these sessions earned ultimately supported the community center and studio.

Community response was mixed. Many respondents noted that they trusted Eric, with a few even suggesting that he should charge more. One respondent, a local producer, felt Eric's pay sessions were a reflection of greater economic trends in cloud music sites, like [Soundcloud](#) and [ReverbNation](#), that allow artists to tailor their investment through incrementally priced packages.

A number of community members, however, were deeply disturbed by this change. One local rapper claimed that turning Studio X into a "real studio" had never been a part of its original mission. They were fearful that the space's shift towards a professional studio in structure implied the troubling imposition of capitalist hierarchies. This contention is echoed by scholars like [Louis Meintjes](#) and [Tricia Rose](#), who state that studios and other technologies of musical (re)production are always deeply representative and constitutive of the greater institutional structure of the music industry.

The studio also furthered a number of questionable social policies. Upon the studio entrance was a sign that detailed rules for proper conduct. Not only did the studio maintain a dress code, but it also censored lyrical content. The sign displayed six rules:



This sign was taped to the door at Studio X.

When I asked Eric about these rules he indicated that he'd written these rules to avoid running into trouble with parents and with the Executive Director: "I just don't want to be known as the guy who lets 14 and 15 year olds come and say whatever they want...Usually kids that age don't have language like that although a few times I had to tell them to use different language or I had to tell them to leave." Thus, according to Eric, Studio X's success as a community center meant the censoring many of its patrons. But how did Eric's decision affect the narratives of the studio's constituents?

This research suggests that the administrative politics of community studios has deep implications for inclusion and identity of community members. Although it's easy to dismiss Eric's decisions to charge for studio space and censor language as racist, the reality is that many

members of the community respected his leadership and felt he was guiding Studio X towards a positive direction. Eric's vision, in other words, worked to produce a culture of ideological support within the community itself.



A screenshot of Avid Pro Tools 11 software.

Even though Studio X represents only one community studio, its identity struggles are certainly worth noting as similar institutions crop up around the world. How can community organizers best create a recording space that is safe, professional, and productive for members of low-income populations?

To start, organizers must recognize how the strings attached to philanthropic grants can lead to poor administrative choices. The institutional design of community studios mirrors the demands of broader grant-funding institutions, from which community studios derive their primary income. In order to provide community members with tools to produce work that is "competitive," at least from an audio engineering perspective, community studios must invest in expensive equipment or risk coming across to both community members and potential investors as a poor alternative to daycare.

To adequately support these spaces, administrators and other stakeholders must insist on finding new and creative ways to raise clean money. [Beat Making Lab](#), a community studio initiative that has connected educators and artists with community centers and schools across the globe since 2012, allows supporters to [directly contribute](#) and sponsor the purchase of specific equipment and development of projects. Still, it relies on its grant [partnership with PBS](#) to reach a larger audience. Similarly, [Notes-for-Notes](#), an organization founded in 2006 toward the development of positive spaces for youth to learn about, create, and record music, receives private funding and sponsorship from celebrities and music production companies among others; it is also the recipient of funds from a number of philanthropic grant institutions. The alternative to these

innovative funding tactics is to imagine, construct, and present a studio that is primarily concerned with "positively" shaping the character of young men and women in an effort to appease questionably minded philanthropists, even though this maneuver often compromises the culture, community, and content of the community which the studio itself exists to support.

Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo is a PhD student in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell University. Since completing a senior thesis on digital music software, tacit knowledge, and gender under the guidance of Trevor Pinch, she has become interested in pursuing research in the emergent field of sound studies. She hopes to combine her passion for music with her academic interests in technological systems, bodies, politics and practices that construct and are constructed by sound. More specifically she would like to examine the politics surrounding low-income community studios, as well as the uses of sound in (or as) electronic games. In her free time she produces hip hop beats and raps under the moniker Sammus (based on the video game character, Samus Aran, from the popular Metroid franchise).



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