Weird Music: Tension and Reconciliation in Cultural-Economic Knowledge

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Abstract  
How do music venues reconcile competing desires for popularity and uniqueness in their bookings? According to 25 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the staff of licensed and unlicensed music venues, gatekeepers tended to prefer ‘weird’ music in terms of unconventionality and even obscurity rather than focusing on cultural similarity through genre conventions. Respondents described at least three ways to reconcile this internal tension of cultural-economic value. A few licensed venue administrators took popularity within the ‘underground’ as an index of value. Others constructed a narrative of building bands from obscurity to success in terms of both economic and cultural value. However, most respondents described strategies of differentiation between cultural and economic value in their economic relationships. This final way of understanding the cultural economy extends Zelizer’s theory of relational economics to find that economic actors do not only differentiate transactions according to social ties but also may differentiate their exchange relationships according to opposing value judgments.

Keywords  
culture, economy, economics, cultural economy, field, genre, innovation, music, musical, value, valuation, evaluation, sociology, Zelizer

Introduction  
Actors in the cultural economy face a challenge when trying to adjudicate the value of objects within their fields. On the one hand, they must classify objects according to genre and stylistic conventions as a way to predict popularity among consumers (Beer, 2013;...
Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Bryson, 1996; Lena, 2004, 2012; Lena and Pachucki, 2013; Negus, 1999). On the other hand, they must identify innovative objects that appear to have something new or unique to offer the market (Becker, 1963; Craig and Dubois, 2010; Crane, 1997; Lopes, 1992; Owre, 2014; Peterson and Anand, 2002; Phillips and Owens, 2004; Scott, 2012). Although economic valuation requires the predictive knowledge of the popularity of an object, cultural valuation requires the insightful understanding of what makes an object unique (DiMaggio, 1977; Peterson and Berger, 1971). Rather than distinct structures of value, culture and economy are co-constitutive dimensions of a hybrid form of knowledge among industry actors (Amin and Thrift, 2004; Wenger, 1998). This is a continuous knowledge project that often demonstrates internal contradictions (Knorr Cetina, 1999; Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, 2002), as with the opposing values of popularity and uniqueness.

Of course, these value judgments do not occur in a vacuum but come about in the context of social relationships. How can actors reconcile the contradiction between a desire for popularity and an industry fundamentally in pursuit of uniqueness in the context of economic partnerships? This study of Chicago’s live music performance industry reveals at least three ways of reconciling what respondents understood to be an inherent tension in the cultural-economic meaning of value. A few licensed venue administrators took popularity within the limited scope of the ‘underground’ to be an index for cultural worth, collapsing all types of value into a single metric. Others constructed a narrative of building musicians from obscurity to success in terms of both types of value. However, most respondents described relational differentiation between cultural and economic value in their booking practices, a way to bring together the two forms of value into a consistent strategy of action. This strategy draws into question the temporal order of Zelizer’s model of relational economics (2000, 2005a, 2012). Rather than differentiating transactions and negotiating value according to preexisting relational boundaries, as Zelizer has shown, economic actors may differentiate relationships into opposing categories of value.

Theoretical Background: Mechanisms of Valuation

The cultural economy literature has long described value in terms of positioning within broad fields (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1983; Pinheiro and Dowd, 2009), describing in detail the tension between cultural consecration (Ardery, 1997; Bourdieu, 1996; Verboord, 2011) and the heteronomous principle of the market, where ‘success is measured by indices such as book sales, number of theatrical performances, etc.’ (Bourdieu, 1983: 320). For the purpose of this analysis, economic value will be understood in terms of the monetary capital accumulated through ticket and alcohol sales at live music performances. However, cultural value has a wider semantic range, drawing on Bourdieu’s framework for symbolic capital to include the critical acclaim, institutional consecration, and networked hierarchy of what music is understood to be good (1983, 1997), specifically ‘a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability that are easily converted’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 291). This bivariate field is ubiquitous in sociocultural analysis and can be extrapolated to Zelizer’s framework for the ‘intimate economy’, where economic actors may negotiate values in the context of close personal relationships (2000, 2005a). Velthuis (2005) merges the Bourdieusian field approach
with Zelizer’s notion of ‘differentiated ties’ (2000) in the contemporary visual art market, whereby gallerists and art dealers must identify distinct patterns of payment and value attribution in each intimate relational context.

Yet the question remains how economic actors adjudicate the value of cultural objects within these fields. This study takes the bivariate field of value as a starting point and examines three theories of the underlying social mechanism of valuation. A market economic theory of cultural value understands individual actors to engage in the maximization of complete, reflexive, transitive preferences (Varian, 1987). These consistent values are formed prior to exchange and aggregate to a market for cultural objects approaching equilibrium (Throsby, 1994). Relationships are contingent upon value judgments made prior to engaging in the market (Becker, 1996; Frey, 2000; Grampp, 1989a, 1989b; Stigler and Becker, 1977). A second theory establishes that economic action may be embedded within existing social relationships. Value judgments can be contingent upon the possibilities afforded by these relationships and organizations, yet they tend to result in a relatively stable market for cultural objects (Granovetter, 1985, 1990; cf. Krippner, 2001). Finally, the relational economic model set out by Zelizer (2005b, 2011, 2012) begins with individuals differentiating economic judgments according to the intimate nature of their relationships, often resulting in seemingly inconsistent or surprising economic action. These relationship categories are formed prior to economic action, and subsequent value judgments are negotiated within them.

People erect a boundary, mark the boundary by means of names and practices, establish a set of distinctive understandings that operate within that boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation. (Zelizer, 2012: 146)

Within the context of preexisting relationships, values must be accommodated to levels of intimacy and the cultural appropriateness of action (Zelizer, 2011, 2012).

However, this study has revealed an additional temporal possibility for these theories of valuation (see Table 1). What happens when economic actors approach potential economic relationships with preexisting, yet contradictory, categories of value? These values may be constructed in the context of social structures of meaning prior to engagement in economic relationships. Furthermore, if preexisting values compete with one another, individuals may fit relationships into one or the other category of value, rather than negotiating them in the opposite temporal order. In this case, internally inconsistent categories of value require actors to develop reconciliation strategies in contingent economic relationships,

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resulting in the same market anomalies that Zelizer observes. Of course, there is room in both theories for the reflexive adjustment of prior conditions to latter contingencies, yet the theoretical framework is fundamentally different in terms of temporality.

**Data and Methods**

In order to investigate these four possible mechanisms of valuation, I talked to those gatekeepers who actively choose what music is known, respected, and economically rewarded in both licensed music venues and unlicensed performance spaces. Licensed venues included nightclubs, concert halls, and a non-profit performance center. Unlicensed performance spaces included residences, basements, repurposed warehouses, galleries, and a ballroom where informal organizations regularly host music performances, what Grazian calls ‘micro-scenes’ (2013). An important characteristic of these unlicensed spaces is that none claimed to have made any economic profit from their endeavors. Most of the spaces reported giving 100% of the ‘suggested donation’ to the performers, and only a few claimed to retain a small amount on occasion for maintenance of the space, usually limited to an occasional 20 dollars. As an exception, one respondent attempted to use donations to pay for the rent of a non-residential space but quickly fell behind; all others paid rent and utilities with their own incomes and invested many unpaid hours into upkeep, organization, cleanup, and maintenance of the space. Unconstrained by the profit motivation of licensed venues, these unlicensed spaces were free to book any music they liked, even if this music was ‘weird’ or obscure in the market at large. However, licensed venue administrators described a tension between the motivation to gain profit through the popularity of performers and the desire to maintain a reputation for innovative taste, often resulting in a balancing act between booking unique performers and those who would be sure to sell tickets.

Conducted from July to November of 2012, this study did not target musicians themselves but rather those gatekeepers whose tastes structure the field (Foster et al., 2011): talent buyers, venue administrators, promoters, and organizers of unlicensed performance spaces. Of the 49 licensed music venues in Chicago that offered publicly available contact information, I was able to conduct interviews with the staff of 16. In addition, for the 13 unlicensed performance spaces whose contacts I obtained through personal referrals, I was able to secure 9 interviews. My own experiences performing music and attending events in Chicago were the origin of the chain of referrals that led me to these organizers of unlicensed spaces. The resulting 25 semi-structured interviews averaged an hour and 15 minutes, with the shortest interview being half an hour and the longest lasting two and a half hours. Three of the 25 respondents were women, but this inequality did not accurately reflect the gender composition of the field; rather, women were less likely to respond to my requests for interviews. People of color formed a small portion of the interview pool, in this case due to their overwhelming absence from administrative positions at the venues that responded to my call for participation. All genres of music venue were contacted, including rock, jazz, blues, experimental, hip hop, electronic, classical, folk, and so on. The interview schedule was semi-structured according to ten broad categories of questioning including booking decisions, economic policies, relationships with social movements, the nature of subcultures, and engagement (or lack thereof) with the City of Chicago.
It is important to note that this sample does not only include venues for alternative music but many of the popular musicians who reach large audiences. The venues sampled ranged in capacity from 30 to 1100 people, with an average capacity of 299. For the purpose of this analysis, the data are classified into eight small venues with capacities of 30 to 100 people, ten mid-sized venues with capacities of 125 to 350 people, and seven large venues with capacities of 400 to 1100 people. Although attempts were made to reach all economic strata of the live music performance industry, from tiny rooms to stadiums and arenas, I was unsuccessful in scheduling interviews with any of the very large venues, nearly all of which are run by a single production company. The absence of respondents from the largest venues in Chicago may have had a selection bias effect, excluding the sector that attributes cultural value to very popular artists. However, the existing pool includes a wide range of venue types, genres, and values.

As the following analysis identifies, the term ‘weird’ emerged from the data as a surprising and useful way to think about cultural-economic knowledge of good music. Although I did not ask respondents about booking decisions in terms of ‘weirdness’, many used this term of their own volition; an excellent example of the grounded theory method in action (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After noticing this term in a number of interviews, I began to probe into the meaning of the term if it came up in subsequent interviews. The term ‘weird’ arose from the interview data as a meaningful code for the more general concept of ‘difference’, which furthermore identified itself as an important aspect of the broader category of ‘cultural value’.

**Tensions of Cultural-Economic Value**

**Unconventional Value**

These interviews revealed a variety of understandings (Glaeser, 2011) of the source of cultural value, but a surprising theme appeared among seemingly dissimilar venues: a taste for weird music. This contrarian desire for abnormality lauded deviation from a presumed set of popular conventions and was not limited to a single genre but instead was identified in many types of music. Recent literature has emphasized adherence to genre conventions as a means for cultural producers to signal their value to industry leaders (Holt, 2007; Lena, 2004, 2012; Lena and Pachucki, 2013; Verboord, 2011), yet many venue administrators were hesitant to claim a particular genre affiliation, perhaps resulting in a disconnect between musicians’ pleasure derived from these conventions (Crossley and Bottero, 2015) and talent buyers’ desire for unconventionality.

Many respondents actively evaded genre affiliations. One talent buyer expressed his desire to avoid being ‘pigeonholed’ into a genre in the way other venues have done; the list of genres he claimed to book included metal, hip hop, punk, Americana, bluegrass, country, and world music. However, the large venue he pointed to as exclusively booking rock music made a similar claim to transcend genre lines. Their talent buyer emphasized genre diversity, as well:

Oh, it’s not limited to any genre, that’s for sure. The main job is to sell alcohol, so whatever gets the job done … It can be anything from neo-soul to bluegrass to rock ‘n’ roll to punk or soul. Whatever works, you know? I think we’re sorta known as a rock club, but there’s so much competition in the city. There seem to be little spikes in popularity with all sorts of genres and subgenres, so you always want to stay involved as much as you can … But yeah, it’s all over the place.
By drawing attention away from genre affiliation, these talent buyers emphasized their tastes for a wide variety of styles, at least as a strategy to secure profitable bookings from an array of genres and to encourage a diversity of consumers to consider attending their events. Of course, some venues that declined interviews may have differed from this trend, such as strictly genre-oriented Chicago blues clubs (Grazian, 2003), but even venues that appeared to be of this ilk downplayed genre affiliation and convention.

Rather than genre conventionality, venue administrators tended to emphasize the unique, experimental, challenging, and weird qualities of their bookings. Many respondents described weirdness as a desirable quality in bookings, including this production manager of a large venue:

Sure we have our kinda style that we book here, but that style is kinda all over the place. I guess that’s our style. We try and stay up on up-and-coming stuff and the challenging stuff that’s not always gonna sell a lot of tickets, but people are gonna be like, ‘Oh, I went and saw this band, and they’re really weird’.

Alongside his claim that the venue’s style is ‘all over the place’, this respondent imagined that a concertgoer would be proud to have heard a weird band, demonstrating a taste for challenging music. Although it may have been more difficult to draw audiences for weird music, these performers maintained the taste reputation of the venue.

What exactly does it mean for music to be ‘weird’? Respondents’ use of the term demonstrated a wide semantic range both in terms of explicit denotations and implicit connotations. As opposed to the term ‘avant-garde’, more often an aesthetic identification of creative producers, ‘weird’ music is a taste attribution according to gatekeepers’ understanding of positions within the field. Some preferred to understand weird music as the genre-transcending feature of their own good taste. One unlicensed space organizer with broad taste within the domain of weird music found it to include the genres of ‘weird rock’, noise, hardcore, power violence, and metal. For another, the very genre-crossing quality of a single performer was an aspect of weird value. Regarding a recent dispute over the ‘academic’ as opposed to ‘artistic’ orientation of their audiences, he stated:

In this little tiny ghetto that we all live in of weirdo music that nobody likes, you’re actually going to make those kinds of distinctions? … [Our space] bordered all of those, because at the center of it, I’m just a big music nerd, and I listen to all sorts of stuff, and, like I said, [our space’s] curation has basically boiled down to if I liked it. And if I was gonna do the space again, I’d do the same thing. I’m gonna look for those things that cross multiple boundaries.

This organizer of a small, unlicensed space valued boundary crossing above genre affiliation, yet the blending of styles, subcultures, or scenes was only valuable within the purview of the ‘little tiny ghetto that we all live in of weirdo music that nobody likes’. This understanding resonates with Sontag’s description of the camp sensibility that ‘turns its back on the good–bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment’ in favor of a chaotic bricolage of sound (1966: 286). By dissolving the perception of a popular center, weird culture is destabilized, freed for experimentation, and cast into a performance of indeterminacy (Klett and Gerber, 2014). Thus genre hybridity within the field of weird music offered the appearance of innovation and was often the transcendent goal of booking decisions.
Although no licensed venue administrator mentioned genre conventionality as a sign of cultural value in a performer, some unlicensed spaces developed strict formal parameters, or ‘microtastes’ (Grazian, 2013), for the weird music they were willing to book. The strictly defined niche of free improvisation limited the scope of music in one small venue’s curatorial practice:

[Our booking decisions are] limited to a certain kind of music … I view it in a really basic way, in that I’m donating my time to this, and if I don’t wanna hear it, I’m probably not gonna book it … and that may have to do more with things that just don’t fit into the spectrum of what I’d see fits with what we book … but I’m doing this as a labor of love … there’s some things that I just don’t book.

Operating within the experimental music style of free, unstructured improvisation enabled this curator to avoid popular conventions while participating within the boundaries of a weird art form. Whether defined in terms of genre hybridity or particular formal qualities, weird music offered the appearance of innovation and was often the transcendent goal of booking decisions.

**Obscure Value**

The unconventional nature of music was not the only definition of weirdness; some pointed explicitly to the unpopularity or obscurity of a performer as a signifier of innovative cultural value. The organizer of one small, unlicensed space transitioned abruptly from the formal qualities of music that deviated from ‘pop’ to very small audiences as dual signifiers of weirdness:

Well, when I say weird music I mean things that don’t have consistent melodic or horribly harmonic content. Probably rhythms are non-existent or much more complex than what most people are comfortable dealing with, rhythms that deal with a general pulse as opposed to a ‘1 2 3 4’ kind of thing. So that’s weirdo music. I think it’s all underground, but I mean, independent hip hop, I mean, I say sub-underground just because of a size thing. It’s like, you’re gonna have underground hip hop and a slow show for them is like thirty to forty people, a good show is a hundred, where we’re just dealing with a smaller level.

In this case, formal elements narrowed the parameters of weirdness, yet incredibly small audiences moved performers from ‘underground’ into ‘sub-underground’ territory. This shift from the formal rejection of conventions to the obscurity of a performer adds a layer to the respondent’s understanding of cultural value, echoed in a number of other interviews.

If the obscurity of a performer can contribute to cultural value, then a definitional tension arises between obscure cultural value and popular economic value. The lack of an audience for a performance, demonstrated through a small crowd, contributed to its value according to this organizer of a small, unlicensed space:

It just has to be this very exclusive thing, like the politics that were being involved with the aesthetics of a harsh noise performance, where if there’s more than fifteen people there it becomes something else, things like that … Just that [with a larger audience] it’s not what it’s
This sense of exclusivity took small audience sizes as a signifier of value, linking obscurity with weirdness together as a meaningful sign and as a proxy for cultural value. Of course, all audience members are not equal, and one might speculate that these small audiences included a higher proportion of tastemakers and gatekeepers than the masses at popular events.

Though some stopped short in their understandings of weirdness as an essential stylistic quality of the valuable cultural object, others proceeded to attach unpopularity or obscurity to the meaning of value. Both forms of this value judgment are subject to assimilation over time, declining as soon as a musician’s style is adopted by others or reaches a larger audience, as evident in the incorporation of countercultural, subcultural, alternative, and indie musics of the past (Thornton, 1995). Though temporally contingent, this understanding of value worked for unlicensed spaces that did not generate profit; small audiences only had an economic effect on musicians themselves. However, licensed venues were faced with an organizational conundrum and a value tension between the obscurity of weird music and the need to attract paying and drinking audiences.

Reconciliation Strategies

How were these venues able to keep their doors open while preserving a reputation for unconventional, obscure, or weird music? Faced with contradictory maximization principles, venue administrators were tasked with reconciling these two systems of value into a hybrid knowledge of the cultural-economic value of a performer and a single, meaningful plan of action. Although these two facets of value formed a single, strategic knowledge project, they demonstrated internal tension. Respondents described at least three ways of reconciling this tension – indexicality, emplotment, and differentiation – each with a unique hazard for logical inconsistency.

Indexicality

The first way these respondents reconciled value tension was to configure an index of value that could include economically valuable activity alongside a modicum of cultural weirdness. This index forged a relationship between the multiple qualities of a single cultural object, in this case a performer’s popularity and weirdness. However, the shared qualities of the object in this index are often thought to be in opposition with one another, making them an unlikely pair. In order to configure this index of cultural-economic value, some respondents limited the scope of musicians to a broadly defined ‘underground’ of weird performers. Though popularity in the field at large was not considered culturally valuable, popularity within a limited subgroup of ‘underground’ music had profit potential. For one talent buyer at a mid-sized venue, underground value was both culturally and economically profitable: ‘We tend to book more stuff with underground value. With some of these bands that have hardcore fans, you know
they’re very loyal, because at that level they feel entitled to that band because they’re not mainstream’. By tapping into the niche of hardcore fans, the venue was able to sell tickets without risking mainstream popularity. Capturing a larger number of niche tastes can aggregate to business success, a tactic adopted by this talent buyer. By expanding his understanding of weird music to include the underground of a number of genres, including metal, indie, hardcore punk, and garage, he attempted to capture consumers from a variety of niche tastes.

Although these respondents attempted to reconcile the tensions of cultural-economic value in a single index with the dual qualities of ‘underground’ and ‘profitable’, internal conflict arose in some business strategies. For example, as this respondent highlights, corporate sponsors were equally eager to capture small, untapped demographics in innovative settings as were venue administrators:

Music is always evolving in terms of how it’s funded, how it grows, exposure, all of that. The advertising/marketing aspect of it has really blossomed in the last fifteen to twenty years as far as brands coming in looking to attach themselves to a music demographic of some sort. I’m sure you see it all the time now: certain brands putting on their own events now. They want to be identified with a certain music demographic.

Acknowledging from a market research perspective that tastes have fragmented from a monolithic ‘pop’ sensibility (Rossman, 2012), these sponsors offered free drinks or admission at weirder performances in order to draw new consumers. However, this business strategy was controversial within the underground cultural market. This respondent went on to claim that some performers understood corporate sponsorships to be in conflict with a do it yourself (DIY) ethic of cultural production: ‘There’s been a handful of bands that just generally refuse to work with any sponsor … And that’s part of the punk DIY ethos. The band in mind, they don’t work with brands’. For some musicians, corporate sponsorship posed an ethical problem, leading them to refuse to perform on a stage with corporate advertisements. With a devoted underground fan base in support of this moral framework, at least one band achieved a degree of success, according to this respondent. However, some musicians were faced with a tradeoff in their pursuit of cultural-economic success. A talent buyer at a large venue extended this consideration to music licensing for advertisements:

You know, there are a lot of people who don’t want their favorite band to be in a commercial. And so, when The Magnetic Fields were in a [Volvo] commercial, people were freaking out … They say Feist’s whole career is based on an Apple commercial. She was a great musician before that, and she’s still making great music. But she’s defined by that.

When some consumers were disappointed to see their favorite indie musicians endorsing corporations, these artists struggled to retain weird or underground value. In addition, some music critics were known to condemn corporate sponsorships of performances and the musicians who accepted them. Regarding performers who accept corporate sponsorship, a talent buyer at a mid-sized venue noted:

It gets a lot of negative press, especially with people like [music critic] Jim DeRogatis. Anytime there’s any brand attached to any type of music scenario he’s pretty much flipping the fuck out.
He’s just got a DIY mentality, and people respect that. I respect that. But he’s also a critic, and it’s his job to minimize certain things he doesn’t like.

Thus an indexical approach to value was not without its own problems in terms of the conflict between underground cultural value and conspicuous profit motivation. In seeking to capture the audiences for weird music, these venues had to acknowledge that their single index of value continued to demonstrate tension.

**Emplotment**

Rather than limit the scope of performers to the underground, others preferred to imagine a future for weird artists that would extend into economic popularity. Through a repeated process of emplotment, these respondents constructed a narrative of ‘building bands’ from obscurity to success. Narrative emplotment is the synthesis of both concordant and discordant elements, similar to the formation of an index but with the added dimension of time. The logic of emplotment translated into a booking assumption that some of the weird musicians were merely unknown, holding untapped, essential cultural value that would eventually be converted into economic capital.

Weird music took the form of obscurity in this narrative of untapped potential. Some venue administrators imagined themselves giving someday-famous musicians their first opportunities:

I’m at the grassroots level before anyone gets big … There’s nothing for me to be gained by paying attention to what’s happening at [an arena]. I’m trying to meet new artists on the way up and try to have them here if they’ll be at the [arena] in a few years.

This talent buyer for a large venue hoped to identify the popular potential of artists at the ‘grassroots’ level before they crossed over to performing in stadiums and arenas. The internal tension of this respondent’s self-said desire to book any music that will fill a room with drinking patrons is that he also desired to capture the untapped value of obscure but ‘cool’ musicians. Though it would seem that the most popular performers would bring in the largest drinking crowds, profit maximizing small and mid-sized venues captured niche audiences for obscure performers as well. Yet, he also described the tension with wanting to book music he actually liked:

Essentially I’m hiring people to bring me a crowd that I can sell beer to … All things being equal, I’ll pick the music that I think is the coolest, but that’s almost never the case … Even if I don’t think something is hip, if it brings 400 people in here, then I want to do it. And that’s the business part. Like I said, if it came down to picking one, and two scenarios were the same for me financially, then I would pick what I thought was cooler.

Although it was understood to be ‘almost never the case’, he preferred to book musicians fitting his own cool taste. At the same time, he wanted to book those who would one day be playing to arena crowds. By imagining a field in which selective taste can coincide with popularity, he constructed a narrative of discovering culturally valuable bands to propel toward economic profit.
Discovering these unique musicians with economic potential was an uncertain endeavor, particularly for venues with small capacities. This desire to build business partnerships with up and coming musicians was reflected in a venue seeking to expand its capacity:

[Our smaller venue] has always been the breeding ground for new bands, so we’d get them to play for us 1-2-3 times, and then they would go play for other larger rooms. That’s standard … We basically foot the bill for this band to develop early on in Chicago, and we’d like to stick with the band, continue the relationship with the band, the management, the label, the agency.

Despite the unknown return on investments in emerging musicians, this venue sought to expand its capacity, assuming a growth trajectory based on their ability to predict those who would become popular. The owner of a mid-sized venue who booked many regional touring musicians also aspired to help them grow:

We like building bands. We like to be able to say, ‘The first couple shows are gonna be rough, plain and simple’. Chicago’s a rough city, anyway. When it comes down to original music, Chicago is an extremely rough city.

While acknowledging the difficulty for new performers to make a profit at their shows in the ‘rough’ and competitive context of Chicago, this venue owner was willing to take a chance on them. He proceeded to describe his strategy of offering hospitality in the form of food and alcohol to touring musicians who would not make money at their early performances, hoping that their cultural cachet would bring bigger crowds in the future.

However, this syntagmatic chain projected musicians into an unknown future, first enacted in the choices of these venue administrators but with subsequent implications for musicians with subordinate power in the industry. Though the narrative included fictional elements of an idealized career trajectory, it was a productive imagination, one with observable effects on booking decisions and the present structure of the field of music performance. The presumption that increased exposure would work in the favor of musicians seems to run contrary to the principle of avant-garde cultural value and the ‘economic world reversed’ (Bourdieu, 1983; see also Ardery, 1997). Many licensed venue staff imagined that wider audiences would translate into greater success both in terms of economic capital and recognition of the musicians’ intrinsic cultural value, yet a taste for weirdness might prevent the conversion of capital from the symbolic to the economic context (Bourdieu, 1997). This contradiction between the supposed goal of ‘building bands’ and a valorization of weirdness might have led to the condition reported by venue owners and unlicensed space organizers alike: that it is structurally difficult for musicians to achieve success in terms of both culture and economy (Bourdieu, 1983; Velthuis, 2005; Zelizer, 2000, 2005a, 2011). Rather than actualizing the narrative of bands moving from economic and cultural obscurity to success in both realms, venue administrators more often reported booking bands that held one or the other type of value.

**Differentiation**

This final tactic to reconcile the tension between weird taste and economic constraints mirrors Zelizer’s ‘differentiated ties’ model for intimate economies (2000, 2005b). In the
case of cultural economy, not only must actors differentiate economic behavior as Zelizer has shown, but they may also differentiate relationships into categories of value in the pursuit of hybrid cultural-economic knowledge. Respondents described a variety of ways to distinguish culture from economy in their booking decisions, including some explicit attempts to maximize both types of value in a single booking strategy. Whether in the distinction between a bread-and-butter genre and more ‘challenging’ stuff or between underground and mainstream music, licensed venue administrators often differentiated bookings as either profitable or culturally reputable:

We know that garage rock is our bread and butter right now, because the bands want to play here, and we want them to play here. That’s not to say we didn’t have a guy on Saturday who had four alarm clocks mic’d on a table, and that was his set. You know? We can kinda tell this show’s gonna be bonkers, this one we’ll have to work harder to get people out to.

Although some musicians were sure to draw a large crowd, they were framed in opposition to innovative performers. In this case, the mid-sized venue emphasized variety in bookings, not wanting to develop a reputation for a particular genre yet unable to survive by hosting experimental performances.

Other venues explicitly differentiated bookings into the categories of weird and profitable, without imagining an overlap between them. A talent buyer at a large venue who claimed to have weird taste and described his staff members as ‘music dorks’ described the tradeoff between profitable music and music that would fit his own taste:

Making money on the stuff we have to make money on. We have this opportunity, we have to capitalize as much as we can with this, so we can lose the money on the shows we wanna take the chances on. It’s just, it’s supply and demand. What’s coming up, you know?

This respondent went on to describe the practice of allocating particular nights of the week to bands that fit his own weird taste while reserving weekends for more popular bands that were sure to draw a large crowd. By booking weird music on quiet weekday evenings, this talent buyer avoided the risk of alienating customers and losing money. This balancing act was performed on the calendar; a struggle to make profit while maintaining the taste reputation of the venue.

Among unlicensed spaces, the differentiation of value in music took a different form. With the economic value of performers nullified in organizers’ eyes, they were free to maximize innovative cultural value, often describing economy and culture as distinct worlds of value (Bourdieu, 1996; Zelizer, 2000, 2005a). Many believed that licensed business would have required them to sacrifice their weird taste in favor of a mass audience. The organizer of a small, unlicensed space who was also a performing musician considered economic autonomy necessary for the production of ‘unlistenable’ music:

Everybody knows there’s no money in this. The kind of music that we’re doing at the level that we’re doing it at, there’s no money. You don’t start making unlistenable, well, unlistenable in a conventional sense, music that’s not songs and doesn’t have a hook, or if it does it’s not any sort of traditional sort of structure, things like that, you don’t get into that because you want to be rich and famous. I mean there’s the potential to be fairly well known, but most of the people I know that are what you would call famous doing this stuff aren’t eating off of it.
Though the formal qualities of the music would remain unprofitable by definition, these musicians and the spaces that booked them maximized cultural value; weird music, even when culturally valuable, would not generate large profits. Another unlicensed space organizer claimed the converse, that musicians ‘may change a lot about themselves’ in order to become profitable in the ‘mainstream world’.

Whether by differentiating economic strategies according to cultural value or by identifying with the cultural side of two distinct worlds, respondents of all kinds reconciled competing cultural and economic values by reaffirming their opposition rather than attempting to integrate them into a single index or narrative. Importantly, this process of differentiation was present in both the licensed and unlicensed sectors of the performance economy and did not demonstrate some of the logical inconsistencies evident in the other reconciliation approaches. However, rather than the differentiation of values according to particular social relationships or contexts, as Zelizer describes (2000, 2005b), this strategy found actors differentiating their economic partnerships according to an assessment of competing values.

**Discussion**

What are the implications of this tension for theories of cultural-economic knowledge? Those musicians with innovative or ‘weird’ value were channeled into a category of economic action in which industry gatekeepers were often willing to forego profit, instead maximizing the cultural value of the booking, but these unique bookings had to be offset by a popular booking to recoup the foregone profit. Given this tension, economic actors chose to differentiate their booking relationships into different categories of value. This temporal reordering of Zelizer’s theory of relational work carries with it a powerful critique of market economic modeling based on a consistent set of individual preferences. Similarly, as economic sociologists push beyond merely seeing transactions as embedded within social networks but rather ontologically constituted within social interaction (Collins, 2004; Krippner, 2001; Zelizer, 1988), this evidence pushes one step further to consider the pre-exchange cultural values of economic actors. By negotiating relationships in terms of competing values, economic exchange relationships can be seen as contingent upon them.

In addition to the temporal implication for relational economics, this study addresses the ‘hostile worlds’ aspect of Zelizer’s model of the intimate economy (2000, 2005b, 2011). Zelizer looks beyond the possibility that culture and economy might have a polluting effect on one another, and indeed these respondents tended to concur. However, value differentiation was only possible in the context of economic relationships that might be selected into one of two contradictory categories of value: weirdness and popularity. Administrators of live music venues are able to prevent the cross-contamination of values by relationally differentiating them, rather than negotiating them as relational economics proposes (Zelizer, 2012). The hostile worlds approach was in one sense reinscribed by those respondents with a ‘differentiation’ approach to booking, but at the same time reconceptualized, insomuch as the two worlds were understood to be distinct yet did not infect or pollute one another, as Zelizer sets out as a possibility.

Finally, the pervasive value of weird music speaks to recent studies that have narrowed the focus from broad fields to the position of artists within genres and subgenres (Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Bryson, 1996; Lena, 2012; Lena and Pachucki, 2013; Negus,
1999; Verboord, 2011), emphasizing the use of recognizable conventions, sampling, and genre norms (Lena, 2004) as a means for artists to place themselves within appropriate sub-fields of production. Although these studies begin with genre as the unit of analysis, a classification system explicitly downplayed by the respondents here, they observe that avant-garde values may pose an impediment to music industry success (Lena, 2012). This study addresses a similar tendency in musicians’ career trajectories, framed as an opposition within the meaning of cultural-economic value rather than an essential quality of genre. If musicians emphasize and take pleasure in contributions to their own genres or referentiality within a network of similar producers (Crossley and Bottero, 2015; Lena, 2004), the eyes of the gatekeepers in this study have been averted, preferring to downplay genre conventions in the interest of innovation. Perhaps an additional explanatory layer to understanding musicians’ difficulties in a seemingly saturated cultural market is this disconnect between their own strategies of position-taking within genres and industry leaders’ desire for a trans-genre quality of uniqueness. Although economy and culture may at times manifest as countervailing forces in the career trajectories of musicians, those who make weird music are not without reward. Innovation remains a fundamental aspect of success in the cultural economy, and weird musicians offer this treasured aspect to an industry fraught with tensions of value.

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