

(This essay was first published in Jon Stratton *Australian Rock: Essays on Popular Music*, Network Books: Perth, 2007)

The Scientists and Grunge: Influence and Globalised Flows

The Scientists, or at least two of the band's three members, left Perth for Sydney in September, 1981. By this time Kim Salmon was already redefining the sound of the band. In Perth the first version of the Scientists, with James Baker who subsequently joined the Hoodoo Gurus on drums, had produced what, in retrospect, was the quintessential Perth punk album. Released in 1981, the *Pink Album* as it came to be known for its pink cover was composed of songs that had a powerful combination of English and American influences. Crudely, you could say the sound amalgamated the Sex Pistols and the New York Dolls. However, the band's over-riding influence was the conservative tunefulness of the English power-pop tradition that runs from the Troggs to the Buzzcocks and the Vibrators.

The Scientists *mrk I* had already decided to break up when the *Pink Album* was recorded. Salmon subsequently formed the short-lived band Louie Louie with the drummer who would later provide the beats for the second version of the Scientists, Brett Rixon. It was during this time that Salmon began to evolve the sound that would characterize the second, and more well-known nationally and internationally, version of the Scientists. 'Swampland', a song that will feature prominently in the historical narrative of this chapter, was written at this time with the third member of Louie Louie, Kim Williams. Also written at this time was another staple of the Scientists *mrk II*, 'We Had Love'. Evolving this more radical sound, Salmon and Rixon moved to Sydney where the inner city music scene offered more space and encouragement for the more confrontational music that Salmon was

beginning to develop. Here, Salmon added Boris Sujdovic with whom Salmon had played before in Perth, on bass and Tony Thewlis on guitar.

It is the music from this period onwards, from the definitive reworking of 'Swampland' which appeared as the B-side of the 'This Is My Happy Hour' single in late 1982 and the *Blood Red River* six track mini-album of 1983, that forms the basis of the claim that the Scientists precursed, and influenced, the development of that musical form identified with Seattle bands such as the Melvins, Mudhoney and Nirvana, that came to be categorised as grunge. Kim Salmon himself has asserted that: 'The Scientists were really forging a sound that was later taken up in Seattle'.¹ He goes on to contextualise this, saying, 'if you think chronologically there was punk in the Sex Pistols, and then the guitar action went to Australia...I always say that Australian music was the premier exporter of grunge'. This is by no means an idiosyncratic opinion. Greta Moon of Au Go Go Records has stated clearly that:

The Scientists and Lubricated Goat were most definitely big influences on bands like Mudhoney in particular. The Scientists were the first grunge band. They were in existence before any of those US Sub Pop bands came along. It was US Sub Pop bands like Nirvana and Mudhoney that were openly avowed fans of the Scientists.² And, indeed, the singer of Mudhoney, Mark Arm, has himself stated that: 'By the time Mudhoney began two of our most influential bands were feedtime and the Scientists, along with the Stooges and Neil Young.'³

What is being asserted here is a history of grunge that does not understand the genre as a movement brewing in the relative isolation of the American Northwest and then taken up globally by way of the commodification and subsequent popularisation of Nirvana. Rather,

the claim is that ‘grunge’, however that is defined and this definition has to be a part of the project of this chapter, evolved in Australia, most especially in the innovative sonics of the Scientists and other inner-city, alternative bands of the early-to-mid 1980s, and that these sonic developments travelled in the reverse direction to the usually accepted understanding of global musical flows. A more elaborated version of this argument is that these Australian bands functioned in an increasingly globalised, locally-based ‘underground’ of musical innovation that operated outside of the highly commercialised system established by the major record companies. ‘Indie’, from the idea of independently produced recorded material, is the commonly used term but this doesn’t cover the global reach of this development through the 1980s, nor the complex, and often chance, interactions between local indie bands and labels.

Global Flows and the Globalised Music Industry

Arjun Appadurai has argued that twentieth century technological developments have transformed our experience of the world: ‘For with the advent of the steamship, the automobile, the airplane, the camera, the computer, and the telephone, we have entered into an altogether new condition of neighborliness, even with those most distant from ourselves.’⁴ Appadurai is describing the conditions of possibility for the new, globalised cultural flows.

Utilising an idea drawn from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Appadurai writes that: ‘the world we live in now seems rhizomic, even schizophrenic, calling for theories of rootlessness, alienation and psychological distance between individuals and groups on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the other.’⁵ The important word here is ‘seems’. These technological innovations produce an appearance of a flattened-out world. Cultural flows appear to all function in the same plane.

I have already begun to suggest that this is not actually the case. We can identify a distinction that we might call dominant and subaltern cultural flows.

In my discussion, here, about the subaltern counter-flow of popular music that is a part of the prehistory of grunge I shall focus on a technology that has been nowhere near as obviously influential as the airplane or the computer. However, the humble cassette enabled music to be recorded cheaply and easily. While, especially in the early days, recordings on cassettes were not of a high quality, for many people this was outweighed by the technology's advantages of which accessible recording was crucial. Moreover, the cassette is compact and relatively hard to break. It could hold at least an album's worth of music. It could be easily copied to produce many cassettes of the same music. It could be posted without needing much packaging. In other words, as, as we shall see, a number of people in different countries realised around the same time, cassette technology took both recording and distribution of music out of the hands of the record companies. We can think of the cassette as the basis of subaltern counter-flow which was important not only in the development of grunge but, more generally, in the establishment of that genre of indie music.

Appadurai reinforces his point about cultural flows by arguing that we no longer live in a world that can be distinguished in the terms of a core and a periphery. He writes that: 'The crucial point...is that the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes.'⁶ While this might be the case for nation-states, the situation is more complex when we think about the role played by increasingly globalised multinational companies. Most importantly, for my argument here, was the globalisation of the music industry during the 1980s. Robert Burnett tells us that:

The trend towards concentration that characterized the takeover and fusion binge of the 1980s was also felt...especially in the music industry. The Big Six major phonogram companies—Sony, Warner, Polygram, EMI, BMG and MCA—now [in 1996] account for over 90 per cent of US sales and an estimated 70 to 80 per cent of worldwide sales.⁷

As it happens, the national ownership of these majors at that time broke down into one American (Warner), two Japanese (Sony, MCA), one German (BMG), one British (EMI), and one Dutch (Polygram). All are owned in the old Euro-American ‘core’ with the exception of the Japanese-owned companies.

The Japanese ownership did not change the musical policy of these companies which, like all the other companies, favoured Anglo-American, and English-sung, popular music. Indeed Keith Negus reports on a study carried out by Larry Shore in the late 1970s of ‘top selling records around the world’. This showed that:

Songs with English lyrics dominated the hit records in most countries.... Britain and the United States were the only countries to have a mutual exchange of recordings although the flow was greater from the United States into Britain. Shore concluded that there was a predominantly one-way flow of music from the United States, and to a lesser extent Britain, to other parts of the world.⁸

While the United States did not dominate ownership of the major music recording companies in the 1980s and 1990s, American popular music dominated sales globally. Burnett writes that:

As the number of sales has levelled off in the crucial American marketplace since reaching saturation point in 1978, the major companies have increasingly looked

outwards internationally for new markets. By the mid-1980s CBS, WEA, EMI and Polygram were all claiming in their annual reports that their international divisions accounted for more than half of their sales.⁹

This is, as we have seen, the same time period when the Scientists and other Australian inner-city bands were developing their guitar-based post-punk sound, and when a new flowering of local labels enabled these bands to be recorded.

Negus tells us that: ‘The major record labels began setting up distinct international departments during the late 1960s and early 1970s’¹⁰ and that:

The term ‘international repertoire’ gained increasingly currency and usage in the organizational discourses of the recording industry during the 1980s, ... International repertoire is marketed to a ‘global’ market; the recordings are released simultaneously in all the major territories of the world.¹¹

In other words, during the 1980s the popular music industry became truly international in the sense that the major companies acquired both the will and the ability to release material in all significant markets at the same time.

Burnett has categorised record companies into three types: majors, minors and ‘alternative labels’ or ‘indies’.¹² The minors ‘are the middle tier..., smaller companies who tend to gain their share of the market by making production and distribution deals with the majors.’¹³ As Burnett writes, during the 1980s most of these companies were absorbed into the six majors. The consequence was that an increasingly large gap developed between the global majors and the indies which, as Burnett describes them, ‘place their emphasis on cheapness of production and often have localized networks of production and distribution.’¹⁴

From Regional to Independent Labels

At this point it is important to make the distinction between indie labels and regional labels. This distinction is, to a large extent, historical. That is, regional labels have mostly been supplanted by indies as a result of the nationalising, and subsequent globalising, of the major companies. Regional labels were labels that catered to the needs of a particular local area. These labels would record local artists who would sometimes have local hits; they might also record local musical genres. As we shall see, more often than is acknowledged a common musical genre might have a local inflection resulting in a band having a local hit but failing to translate this into a national or international hit. Sometimes a local recording would be picked up by a major. In England, with its small size and highly integrated economy, there were few regional labels. Brian Epstein didn't think to look for a label in Liverpool for the Beatles, he travelled down to London. In the United States and Australia, though, there were many regional labels.

The numbers of regional labels increased considerably in the late 1950s. One reason for this was the rock'n'roll-based explosion in the production and consumption of popular music. Underlying this, and to some extent making it possible, were two technological developments. First, there was the replacement of easily breakable shellac records with vinyl. One impetus for this was the lack of shellac during the Second World War. Another seems to have been the problem of safely mailing records to the American troops overseas.

The second development which underwrote the spread of recording studios was the use of magnetic tape for recording. The Germans had made great advances in tape recording during the Second World War. At the end of the war John T. Mullin was given two AEG Magnetophone tape recorders when visiting a recording studio at Bad Neuheim near Frankfurt. He took them back to the United States and worked on improving the technology.

With investment capital from Bing Crosby, who understood the potential of the technology, Ampex produced the Model 200 in 1948. Michael Chanan writes that: 'By the early 1950s most recording studios in the United States were using tape...The equipment was not expensive and tape was reusable.'¹⁵ The adoption of tape recording for music transformed the studio process making recording music both easier and cheaper.

In Perth, for example, Martin Clarke had a studio built and started the local Clarion label in 1962. The Australian-made Byer professional tape recorder he bought for the studio was the only one in Western Australia. In this studio he recorded what became local boy Johnny Young's first national hit in 1966, 'Step Back'. The single was distributed outside of Perth by Melbourne-based Festival Records. Much of Clarion's output, though, shows how derivative, from one point of view, Perth's music scene was of the English pop-rock of around 1960. To put this differently, at a time when the only instantaneous form of communication was the telephone, Perth's popular music scene, more than that of other cities in Australia, lived in the past brought by its British migrants. English migrant Robbie Snowden's 1967 single, 'No One Really Loves A Clown' 'was supposedly an update of a 1962 Johnny Crawford number, but ... still manages to sound a few years older than the original!'¹⁶ Crawford's American hit was filtered through an English music sensibility. Snowden's version bears a generic resemblance to Joe Meek's production of Lance Fortune's 'Be Mine' released in England in 1960, including pizzicato strings.

At the same time, with the advent of television in Perth in 1960, Perth's musical culture began to catch up with Britain's. The Valentines, also on Clarion, with Bon Scott as co-lead singer, released a cover of the Small Faces 'I Can't Dance With You' a year after the original in 1967. In 1968 the band released 'Peculiar Hole In the Sky' which takes much of

its psychedelic inspiration from the English band Traffic's 1967 hit 'Hole In My Shoe'.¹⁷ There is, then, a different way of thinking about Perth's musical history. Rather than considering it derivative, we can think about how the mix of genres from different popular musical periods, most importantly pre and post the English pop explosion of the Beatles and the beat sound, meant that Perth developed a quite unique musical style. One long-term example of this style has been the on-going importance of power-pop in the city's musical culture.

Through the 1950s and 1960s Seattle had a more vibrant music scene than Perth. One possible reason for this was the presence of its small and segregated African-American population. Historically, the European middle class has frowned on music that was designed to produce affect. Glossing Immanuel Kant, Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson write that: 'As long as music exists to make us feel good—its sonorous textures caressing our bodies but not our intellects—rather than to provide us with an object of rational contemplation, it can never aspire to [Kant's] category of the beautiful.'¹⁸ Classical music is supposed to be experienced rationally, cerebrally. If dancing is thought of as an expression of emotion then, as Gilbert and Pearson write: 'The classical tradition itself was defined, in a way, by the gradual detachment of music from the dance.'¹⁹ In Perth rock'n'roll was frowned upon as the music of bodgies and widgies, of so-called hooligans and juvenile delinquents. Those playing it would have been regarded as even worse than those listening and dancing to it.²⁰ In Seattle, as elsewhere in the United States, music was integral to African-American culture. In his history of popular music in Seattle, Clark Humphrey writes that white bands like the Wailers and Swaggerz:

Learned their chops the way all early white rockers did, by copying black musicians who couldn't get the opportunities white kids could get. The Wailers went straight to local black clubs like the Black and Tan, Birdland, the Esquire²¹

Rich Dangel, guitarist with the Wailers, confirms this: 'We were going to the Evergreen, coppin' from those black revues, drawing from great musicians and workin' up our version of it, but with our direction and our kind of excitement.'²² The Wailers first single, 'Tall Cool One' was released on the New York label Golden Crest in 1959. Showing that cultural exchange in the Northwest could also sometimes work in the other direction, 'Tall Cool One' was the first tune that Jimi Hendrix learnt to play on his first electric guitar when he was sixteen. He used to watch the Wailers perform at the Spanish Castle, a dance hall between Seattle and Tacoma, memorialised in his song 'Spanish Castle Magic'.

It was during this time that Seattle and the surrounding population centres like Tacoma produced their own, indigenised inflection on the dominant rock sonic which became known as 'The Northwest Sound'. Reflecting and reinforcing this development were a number of new regional labels. Dolton, for example, was started in 1959 by Bonnie Guitar, Bob Reisorff and Lou Leventhal. The label's first release was the Fleetwoods' 'Come Softly To Me' which happened to become a national hit, reaching No 1 on the Billboard chart. Liberty Records distributed the label nationally. In 1961 two of the Wailers, John 'Buck' Ormsby and Kent Morrill, started another local label, Etiquette. The Wailers released the first rock version of 'Louie Louie' on Etiquette that same year. Etiquette subsequently released the early, and best, singles and albums by Seattle's most influential r'n'b/garage band, the Sonics, the band which more than any other, defined the Northwest Sound of the 1960s. In 1966 the Sonics signed to another Seattle label, Jerden, which, after a false start in

1960, restarted in 1963 releasing the Kingsmen's classic version of 'Louie Louie' and material by most of the important garage-rock bands in the Northwest.

Independents

Regional labels are, of course, independent labels in the sense that they are not owned by the major companies. However, since the late 1970s independent, or indie, has become a term used more for labels that record and release non-mainstream genres of music. As Veronika Kalmar tells us: 'The first major wave of indies occurred in the 1950s and served artists of color and what was then known as hillbilly music.'²³ Philip Ennis is more detailed. He writes about Black music that:

'Hundreds of small firms were created on the approximately \$1000 then required to record and press five hundred copies of a record. Anywhere from four to six hundred record labels with some commitment to rhythm and blues appeared in the years immediately following the war.'²⁴

Inevitably, many of these labels did not last long. One early independent label was Syd Nathan's King records, started in 1945. James Brown began his career on King. Rick Kennedy and Randy McNutt write that: 'Nathan targeted the neglected race, country, and western music markets, which he called the "music of the little people".'²⁵ Berry Gordy founded Motown in 1959. But, as Kalmar writes: 'The explosion of labels that began in the late 1970s gave birth to an array of indies and movements.'²⁶ This 'explosion' is associated with the advent of punk. In England, Kalmar lists the three most important indies as Stiff (started in 1976), Factory (started in 1978) and Rough Trade (started in 1978). Where regional labels draw their artists from a particular locale, indies have always been more identified with particular musical genres. Factory, it should be added, also functioned as a

regional label, something historically unusual in Britain, promoting bands from Manchester, including Joy Division/New Order, A Certain Ratio and the Happy Mondays. Rough Trade went bankrupt in 1991 and Factory declared bankruptcy in 1992.

It is often argued, as does Kalmar, that the music industry works in cycles.²⁷ The majors establish a dominant musical form which, in order to appeal to the largest constituency, is watered down to increasingly bland product. Meanwhile, and partly in reaction, new musical styles evolve and indie labels are formed to release this new music. At this point the majors, whose sales have begun to decline because of the repetitiveness and superficiality of their releases, start signing the bands which have been honing their abilities on indie labels, or buying up the indie labels themselves and thereby getting access to all the bands on those labels. To take one example, pub rock and punk specialist label, Stiff, was bought by the 'minor' Island in 1984 and the major company Polygram bought Island in 1989, one example of the concentration of companies that we have already noted took place during the 1980s.

However, something more than the cycle I have just described was happening in the second half of the 1970s and through the 1980s. This proliferation of independent labels, and the punk and post-punk establishment of indie as a general, catch-all description for non-mainstream popular music, for music that was not being picked up by the majors, signals a structural development in the popular music industry that directly relates to the industrial transformation of the majors that became apparent through the 1980s. In Britain, *Record Business* started, the indie chart in 1980. Ian McNay, who began Cherry Red Records in 1978, tells the story like this:

I remember waking up with an idea one morning in December 1979, ‘Why doesn’t someone compile a proper independent chart based on accurate sales information’ I thought to myself. I suggested the idea to Record Business, a weekly trade paper, and within a few weeks the chart was up and running. The rules were simple; any record was eligible that didn’t go through the major record distributors.²⁸

As McNay goes on to write, by the early 1990s the majors were beginning to set up their own indie labels putting the records through indie distribution systems to get their artists into the indie chart. McNay’s recognition of the possibility, and worth, of an indie chart signalled a realization that this time independent labels would have some permanence, if not in particular labels—though some of these have indeed had significant longevity—then in the musical genres that indie labels release.

One context for the new viability of independent labels, like that of the earlier regional labels, was a decrease in production costs. As Burnett puts it: ‘A key factor in the development of the independent sector was provided by cheaper, more compact and efficient technologies for recording music.’²⁹ At the same time, with the decreasing number of large record companies caused by a combination of take-overs by the majors and their concurrent globalisation, the variety of music generally available decreased. This is illustrated in Negus’ research on what constitutes the majors’ international repertoire:

In addition to providing music that in some way can be likened to a melodic ballad, any potential international artist must sing their ballads or melodic rock songs with the right kind of voice. This was highlighted by an international director who remarked that in theory an artist could come from any place in the world as long as they sing ‘in English without an accent.’³⁰

Simply put, then, as a negative definition, indie music can be described as music disregarded by the majors. Any music, or musical form, not picked up by the majors, whether it be regional music—identified here in the broadest sense—to reworkings of the rock tradition which the majors do not consider saleable in large enough quantities to make worthwhile profits can be considered indie music. In this sense the construction of indie as a music category in the late 1970s and 1980s was a function of the increasing hegemony of the majors.

In Australia, too, there was a flowering of independent labels, here associated with the development of Alternative Rock in the inner cities. In 1978 Bruce Milne worked for a short-lived national music monthly based in Adelaide called *Roadrunner*. As Walker tells it:

One of Bruce Milne's self-appointed tasks at *Roadrunner* was to note the release of every new independent Australian record. Doing that today [in the late 1990s] would be a mammoth task; in 1978, such releases were still few and far between.³¹

In Brisbane the Saints released their first single, '(I'm) Stranded', on their own label that they created for the purpose, Fatal, in 1976. They distributed the record themselves. In Perth, the Victims likewise released a single and an EP in 1978 on their own Victim label. They, too, distributed the records themselves. In 1979 the Scientists released an EP on White Rider. Like many independent labels, the White Rider label was an outgrowth of a specialist record shop, in this case White Rider Records. In Sydney the Trafalgar Studios, where Radio Birdman recorded the *Burn My Eye* EP in 1976, created its own record label, Trafalgar, to release Birdman's records.³²

Indies and Cassettes

The label that concerns us most here, though, is the Melbourne-based Au Go Go. Bruce Milne and Philip Morland started the Au Go Go label in 1979. The label's first release, in July of that year, was an EP by Two Way Garden. Milne had begun a fanzine called *Plastered Press* in 1977. Subsequently, he and Clinton Walker started *Pulp*, another fanzine.³³ In the winter of 1981 Milne began what was, in all probability, the first cassette fanzine, *Fast Forward* with Andy Maine. The cassettes were a mixture of interviews and new music. Moreover, while the bulk of the material was Australian, Milne and Maine did not think of *Fast Forward* as being concerned only with local music. For example, while FF-008/009, the *Fast Forward* double-cassette issue of December 1981, had an interview with, and a song by, the Sydney-based synth-dance band the Machinations, it also had an interview with and a song by the Cure. On the other side of the same cassette were, among other things, interviews with Ian Dury and Kraftwerk and a track by Brisbane-originated, Sydney-based band JFK and the Cuban Crisis.

Meanwhile, the Scientists, reformed in their mrk II version in Sydney by the end of 1981, were looking for a record label. Salmon sent a tape of 'Swampland' to Milne at Au Go Go. Milne put the song and an interview with Salmon on *Fast Forward* 012, which came out in August 1982, before releasing it as the B side of the 'This Is My Happy Hour' single in December 1982. As we have seen, Milne clearly viewed *Fast Forward* as international in its content, but also in its distribution. Being based on cassette technology, the magazine was easy, and relatively cheap, to package and post.

Now, Milne was in contact with Bruce Pavitt who at that time was living in Olympia, Washington. As it happens, the 1981 *Fast Forward* double-cassette already mentioned has a track from Pavitt himself titled 'Debbie'. Pavitt had travelled from Illinois and studied at

Evergreen State College in Olympia. In 1980 Pavitt had started a fanzine which he called *Subterranean Pop* that had been inspired by John Foster's Olympia music magazine, *Op*.³⁴ The story goes that Pavitt got credit for *Subterranean Pop* as part of his course at Evergreen. Helping Pavitt on the fanzine from issue 2 was Calvin Johnson who will reappear in this story later. *Subterranean Pop* was shortened to *Sub/Pop* from the second issue. The full title makes clear that Pavitt saw the burgeoning independent music scene as a kind of underground to the mainstream popular music purveyed by the majors. Johnson writes that the motto of *Sub/Pop* was: 'Decentralise Pop Culture'.³⁵ Decentralisation here is only in part geographical. It is, more generally, an undermining of, and a providing of an alternative to, the increasing consolidation and globalisation of the majors. In the contact between Milne and Pavitt we have a small example of the grassroots networking and distribution which epitomised *Sub/Pop*'s idea of decentralisation. We also have an example of what I am calling a subaltern counter-flow.

Receiving Milne's *Fast Forward* cassette gave Pavitt the idea of redeveloping *Sub/Pop*. From issue 5 *Sub/Pop* alternated between print and cassette. On the cover of *Sub/Pop* 5 Pavitt wrote: 'Well hi there. *S/Pop* now alternates quarterly between a C60 transregional cassette and a networking newsletter.' The idea of transregional here retains some of the localism associated with regional labels. Here, now, it also carries connotations of resistance to the globalising hegemony of the major music companies. Appadurai argues that, in the postmodern globalised order there is a tension between what he styles 'homogenization and heterogenization'.³⁶ Indigenisation is the key to the process of heterogenisation. The idea of transregionalism recognises the indigenisation of popular

music as styles are reworked in particular places, such as the Northwest, and, maybe, combined with local musical forms.

In *Sub/Pop* no 8, 1982, Pavitt expands further on his philosophy, offering his ‘Supreme Statement of Purpose’.

1. Culture is controlled by large corporations. It is bland.
2. *Sub Pop* combats this by supporting independent means of expression: Cassettes, records, publications, video, public access, cable television, whatever.
3. We are very big interested in regional trends, movements, ideas, slang, record labels, what have you. We are very big interested in small communities that aren't big time like important N.Y. and L.A.
4. A decentralized cultural network is obviously cool. Way cool.³⁷

Here, Pavitt suggests the importance of regions, of localism, and networking, of the recognition of the informal, and the importance of indigenous cultural expression and production, as ways to counteract the hegemony of the massified companies and their commercialised cultural production. Pavitt mentions cassettes and, indeed, as we have begun to see in the examples of *Fast Forward* and *Sub/Pop*, cassettes were a not-quite-new technology that became very important to the indie movement of the late 1970s and 1980s to some extent as a recording technology but, much more significantly, as a means of transferring music through networks and, indeed, as a cheap means of distributing music for purchase.

The cassette, or compact cassette as it was first known, was patented in 1963 by the Dutch firm, Philips. Originally the idea was to use cassettes in dictation machines. However, by the mid-1960s record companies were beginning to release albums on cassette as the quality of reproduction improved because of improvements in the audio quality of

cassette tapes. In 1970 Dolby introduced its noise reduction technology making cassettes even more desirable as a music storage medium. From these beginnings, the cassette got taken up and reused as a counter-technology, an alternative technology appropriated to resist the globalising and limiting force of the multinational majors.

Two inventions transformed the importance of the cassette: the Walkman and the ghetto blaster. Sony marketed the Walkman in Japan from 1 July, 1979. Once its popularity was assured, it was launched in other countries in 1980. Between them, these two technologies revolutionised the cassette by making it a personal music reproduction technology, enabling people to listen to music of their choice while on the move. With his finger on the cultural pulse, Malcolm McLaren, better known for his management of the Sex Pistols, had Bow Wow Wow release 'C30, C60, C90, Go!' as a cassette single in 1980 (this paean to home taping was also released on vinyl) followed by a cassette-only EP equivalent with eight songs titled *Your Cassette Pet*. Home taping of albums had begun to take off in the second half of the 1970s. With the advent of the Walkman and the ghetto blaster, home taping became much more pervasive. In the early 1980s the British Phonographic Industry ran a campaign against home taping with the slogan 'Home taping is killing music'.

One crucial element in the importance of the cassette is that it enabled people to take some control over the organisation of the music that they listened to. Perhaps the best example of this was the spread of the idea of the mixtape. A mixtape is a collection of pieces of music usually recorded from vinyl (or another cassette) onto a blank cassette for a particular purpose. Thus you could have party tapes, or tapes made for a loved one, or tapes for oneself made up of your favourite pieces of music placed together in the order you wanted to listen to them. In his new, edited collection on the mixtape, *The Mix Tape: The*

Art of Cassette Culture, Thurston Moore, better known as the guitarist in Sonic Youth, recalls that the first time he heard of a mixtape was in a 1978 column by the rock critic Robert Christgau in *Village Voice*. Christgau was writing about his favourite Clash album, an album he had put together himself from the B sides of the Clash singles.³⁸ Like many popular culture developments, mixtapes have multiple origins. Another lay in the recording of circulation of their shows by early hip hop DJs in the Bronx from around the mid-1970s. As Alex Ogg writes: ‘The mix tapes that resulted became a vital source of revenue, as well as one of the main ways in which the music gravitated downtown and through suburbia.’³⁹ The term ‘mixtape’ as first two words and then one is a later neologism.⁴⁰ The majors attacked home taping on commercial grounds arguing that it decreased sales and therefore put artists’ livelihoods in jeopardy. However, from a consumer’s point of view, home taping changed the power relation where majors not only imposed on consumers what music was available but, in the case of albums, even the order in which pieces of music would be heard.

By this time also, many musicians who were just starting out would make cassette recordings of themselves to hear what they sounded like or to use as demos when contacting record companies. For example, we know that the Saints were making blistering fast, buzz-saw guitar-based pop songs before the release of the Ramones first album because of a recording they made in the first half of 1974 on a mono cassette-deck in Ed Kuepper’s parents’ garage.⁴¹ In 1980 the first band of Mark Arm, later of Mudhoney, Mr Epp and the Calculations, recorded some music on a two-track cassette recorder in the basement of one of the band members’ homes. A part of this ended up getting played on local Seattle radio Station KZAM-AM.⁴² The cassette came of age as a high-quality recording medium when

Bruce Springsteen released the demos of his new songs recorded at his home on a four track cassette recorder in 1981 as his new album, *Nebraska*, in 1982.

In Australia the cassette was already being used to distribute music by the turn of the decade. Clinton Walker published an article in the Australian *Rolling Stone* that reminds us that Perth's Dave Warner From the Suburbs was getting known in the Eastern States in the latter part of the 1970s through cassettes of live concerts and the Manikins, a Perth band descended from Kim Salmon's pre-Scientists punk band, the Cheap Nasties, released a cassette 'of 50 or so songs' in 1979 titled *Live Locally*.⁴³ The focus of Walker's article was a cassette compilation of sixty bands called *One Stop Shopping* released out of Sydney in 1981 by Terse Tapes. Seemingly precursing Pavitt's Statement of Purpose, Walker writes that on the front of the booklet accompanying *One Stop Shopping* was: 'Convince some friends to record on a cassette'.⁴⁴

It is not surprising, then, that somebody, as it happens Bruce Milne, would get the idea of not just making a fanzine that distributed ideas and impressions of music but actually distributed the music itself. By 1988, when Steve Jones submitted a paper to the International Communication Association Popular Communication Interest Group, he was able to describe what he called 'The Cassette Underground':

'The term Cassette Underground, as it is used in this essay, refers to a vast international network of musicians and music fans who create and consume music via cassettes. They exist largely in opposition to the traditional music industry not only by virtue of their adoption of cassettes over the vinyl recording, but also in their rejection of the musical values prevalent in mainstream music. Cassettes allow musicians to become the ultimate modern one-man-band—not only because cassettes

allow easy access to multi-track recording, but also because they are a mass medium that allows individual control.⁴⁵

As it happens, the book that Jones' piece appeared in, *The Cassette Mythos: Making Music at the Margins*, about the usefulness of cassettes for making and distributing non-mainstream music, was edited by Robin James, a resident of Olympia, Washington, where both Pavitt and Johnson were living. In the relative remoteness of the Northwest, there was a similar recognition of the problems for non-mainstream artists of the massification of the music industry, and similar solutions, as there was in Australian cities. Historically, the major record companies had viewed Australia as a market not as a place to look for new talent.

In his book James includes a short piece by John Foster, the editor of the music paper, *Op.*, founded in 1979, where both Pavitt and Johnson had worked and from which they drew the idea, as we have seen, for *Subterranean Pop*. In his article, Foster notes that, when *Op* started, 'an independent cassette-only release was an anomaly... It wasn't until 1982 that we started getting quite a few [for review].'⁴⁶ Cassette technology for recording and for music reproduction enabled a quantum leap in the variety and amount of music being recorded and distributed at a time when the majors were reducing their rosters of artists and concentrating on music which could maximise sales and, therefore, profits. It is worth remembering that none of this music that was only available on cassette would show up in that British indie chart that was Ian McNay's brainchild. That chart only represented vinyl distribution to shops.

1982 was also the year that Johnson started the recording label K as cassette-only, 'focusing', as he writes, 'on Olympia's downtown music scene'.⁴⁷ Johnson acknowledges the influence of Milne's *Fast Forward* initiative as one contribution to his decision to start a

cassette-based label as well as the new Walkman and ghetto blaster technologies and, as he puts it, the ‘giant advances in audio fidelity’ of cassette technology.⁴⁸ Milne had confined his innovative use of cassettes to his fanzine. It seems that, for Milne in 1979, music had still needed to be released on vinyl to have credibility. However, cassettes were ideal for small runs because the technology to reproduce music on cassettes was itself cheap and accessible.⁴⁹ Demonstrating the small scale of his cassette-based initiative, Johnson writes that: ‘The usual run for a release was around 100 copies.’ It is clear from this, if nothing else, that the importance of the music on a label such as K lies not in profits and commercial success but in the distribution of music to interested people and, in addition, the influence that that music can have.

This influence can be suggested in the case of Johnson’s own band, Beat Happening. Formed in 1983, Beat Happening was highly influential in the development of a characteristic indie ‘sound’ to the extent that there developed a positive definition, a musical genre that could be called indie. There is debate about where this sound originated. David Hesmondhalgh writes that:

by 1986 post-punk’s status as the most progressive branch of alternative music was under threat. At the same time, the term ‘indie’ was becoming widely used to describe a new phase in the cultural politics of alternative pop/rock in Britain. Rather than a melange of experimental influences covered by the umbrella term ‘post-punk’, ‘indie’ described a narrower set of sounds and looks.⁵⁰

Hesmondhalgh sums up the indie sound suggesting that ‘indie records turned to ‘jangly’ guitars, an emphasis on clever and/or sensitive lyrics...and minimal focus on rhythm track.’⁵¹ Writing from a British perspective, Hesmondhalgh appears to date the development of an

identifiable indie sound to around 1986, coordinate with the use of the term 'indie' to describe that sound. Beat Happening were making music in Olympia that fits Hesmondhalgh's definition two or three years earlier than this. Jason Ankeny writes that the band:

adopted a stance in direct opposition to the accepted norms at the heart of rock music; ignoring all notions of pretense, professionalism, and stardom, Beat Happening created an unorthodox, raw sound which democratically rotated vocal, guitar, and drum duties between members while jettisoning bass altogether.⁵²

All Beat Happening's music has been released on K starting with the *Three Tea Breakfast* cassette-only equivalent length EP in 1984 and the self-titled *Beat Happening* album released on cassette the same year and vinyl the following year.⁵³ K's first vinyl release was the 1984 Beat Happening single 'Our Secret.' Into this discussion we can add Walker's attempt to find a general description for the bands on the *One Stop Shopping* cassette of 1981: 'it's fair to say it's most commonly characterized by "low tech" sound and instrumentation, equal parts electronic and acoustic, an amateurism bordering on naivety and occasionally pretension, spontaneity, vigour and (often black) humour. It's a sort of primitivism, and sound collage is popular.'⁵⁴ Many of the characteristics that Walker identifies are present in Ankeny's description of Beat Happening's music. What is clear is that in many different places the revolt against the increasingly slick and professionalised music being released by the internationalizing majors took a similar form not least, one suspects, because it was the same music that was being rebelled against. Cassette release was one element in this rebellion.

Doubtless Beat Happening's cassettes reached Britain, helping to found what was subsequently identified as the 'indie sound.' What we do know is that, in 1985, David Nichols, then playing in Sydney-based band the Cannanes, flew from Australia to London by way of Olympia. One of Nichols' inspirations to form the Cannanes was Beat Happening. He thinks he heard the first Beat Happening cassette in 1984 when he lived in Melbourne.⁵⁵ It is likely that the cassette was sent to Melbourne because Johnson was in contact with Milne from the *Fast Forward* days. As Nichols wrote to me in a personal email: 'We didn't imitate [Beat Happening] musically but they were inspirational as a genuine minimalist, cool, DIY group.'⁵⁶ In Olympia Calvin Johnson, with whom Nichols had been corresponding, asked him to take copies of the first Beat Happening album to London. There Nichols gave one copy to the rock music journalist Everett True.⁵⁷ True played the album to Geoff Travis at Rough Trade. *Beat Happening* was released by Rough Trade in England in 1986.⁵⁸

Grunge and the Scientists

Pavitt subsequently left Olympia for Seattle where he was introduced to Jonathon Poneman by Kim Thagil, the guitarist with Soundgarden. And so it was that, in 1986, Pavitt and Poneman launched Sub Pop as a record label. Their first release was a compilation LP, *Sub Pop 100*, which included tracks by Sonic Youth ('Kill Yr Idols', previously released as the title track on an EP on Zensor in 1983), the Vancouver based Skinny Puppy ('Church In Hell') and a Seattle band to which we shall soon return, the U-Men ('Gila' previously released on an EP in 1984 by Bombshelter Records). The following year, 1987, Sub Pop's second release was Green River's second EP, *Dry as a Bone*. Green River included members who went on to both Mudhoney and Pearl Jam. As such, as Steve Huey describes the band on the All Music Guide website, they 'were arguably the first grunge band'.⁵⁹ One of the

band's members was Mark Arm whom we have met before acknowledging the influence of the Scientists on Mudhoney.

As I have already mentioned, Arm had started out his musical career as a member of Mr Epp and the Calculations. Humphrey describes their music as 'loud, stupid "snide rock"'⁶⁰ and notes that: 'the hardcore punks treated the slow-droning Mr Epp as "art fags".'⁶¹ The combination of 'loud' and 'slow-droning' suggests that already, in the early 1980s, Arm was developing a sound that was a radical departure from punk.

As it happens, Arm sent a spoof letter to the fanzine *Desperate Times* under his own name, Mark McLaughlin, in the guise of a punk attacking the music of Mr Epp:

'I hate Mr Epp and the Calculations. Pure grunge! Pure noise! Pure shit!'⁶²

While this may be the first use of 'grunge' to describe the new kind of music that Mr Epp were playing, we need to also remember that it is not, here, a genre description but derogation. Humphrey writes that Pavitt 'claimed to have popularized (but not invented) the word as a musical label in a 1987 Sub Pop promo blurb for Arm's later band Green River as "ultra lose grunge that destroyed the morals of a generation".'⁶³ Etymologically, the term goes back to the mid-1960s when, as American slang, 'grunge' meant sloppy or dirty. It may have a similar origin to 'scungy'. The reapplication of the term to the musical form itself as a description may well have something to do with the impression created by the music: slow and apparently loose in instrumental cohesion, a tendency to dissonance and the use of feedback—all characteristics which could make a listener think in terms of sloppiness. The anonymous author of the web-based Wikipedia entry on grunge gives this description:

Grunge music is generally characterized by "dirty" guitar, strong riffs, and heavy drumming. The "dirty" sound resulted from a stylistic change in the standard method

of playing punk rock, and from the common use of guitar distortion and feedback. Grunge involves slower tempi and dissonant harmonies that are generally not found in punk.⁶⁴

This impression of sloppiness is especially marked when the music is compared to the tight, fast, limited songs of punk and its derivative genres like thrash and hardcore.

Salmon tells us that he was using the term ‘grunge’ in 1983 to describe the sound of the Scientists mrk II, the sound on the *Blood Red River* mini-album: ‘I don’t know why this happened but it was the only word I could think of to describe the Scientists’ sound. I was being interviewed on 2JJJ [at that time the Sydney-based ABC-controlled youth radio station] and I know that I used the term repeatedly.’⁶⁵ Certainly by the northern summer of 1985 the term had some currency as a generic description. At that time Richard Cabut, under the pen-name Richard North, published a review of the Scientists’ album *You Get What You Deserve* in the *New Musical Express* in which he wrote that: ‘The LP fully captures the band’s stunning live form and establishes them as the premier grunge merchants.’⁶⁶ At this point the Scientists were based in London.⁶⁷

I do not here want to make any claim for the priority of usage for ‘grunge.’ Rather, I want to suggest that both Mark Arm (and other inner-city Seattleites) and Kim Salmon (and other inner-city Australians) were developing a similar musical form in reaction to punk and that both Salmon and the Seattleites found ‘grunge’ a useful term to describe this music. This similar reaction was to some extent a consequence of similar, or indeed the same, musical influences and to some extent a consequence of similar modes of indigenisation of rock music.

The Regional Indigenisation of Rock

We can start here by thinking about what characterises the ‘Northwest Sound’. The Seattle Mayor’s Office of Film and Music offers this history of a new ‘garage’ sound in Seattle around 1965:

Gone were the earlier ties to jazz and R & B, and the formerly requisite sax and organ. The new Northwest sound was distinguished by a savage rock aesthetic—fuzz-damaged guitars and angry singers who screamed came into vogue. Years later bands from the Kinks to the Sex Pistols would acknowledge the influence of Northwest garage rock. ⁶⁸

In other words, among other things the Northwest sound was whitened. Losing its Black influences the sound became more guitar-based and generally heavier on the beat.⁶⁹ Typifying this shift was the whitening of what became a classic track for Northwest bands, ‘Louie Louie’. Written in 1955 by the African-American doo-wop and proto-soul singer, Los Angeles-based Richard Berry, the original version had a calypso influence. Berry coupled this with a lyric about a sailor missing his girl back in Jamaica (even though mento was the music of Jamaica and calypso the music of Trinidad). The song was picked up and reworked by the white Tacoma-based Wailers with what is often thought of as the definitive version being recorded by the Portland-based Kingsmen in 1963.⁷⁰ By this time the song combined melody, infectious riffs and a hard rock edge. In other words it became ideal garage-band material. The key band, though, at this point in the Northwest tradition were the Sonics. The most important incarnation of this band from white working-class Tacoma dates from 1963. They released their first single, ‘The Witch’, in 1964 and their first album, *Here Are the Sonics*, in 1965 on Etiquette. Cub Koda on the All Music Guide website describes the band as combining, ‘classic Northwest area teen band raunch with early English band grit

(particularly influenced by the Kinks), relentless rhythmic drive, and unabashed '50s-style blues shouting for a combination that still makes their brand of rock & roll the raunchiest ever captured on wax.'⁷¹ Koda compares Gerry Rosalie's vocals to a white Little Richard 'whose harrowing soul-screams were startling even to the Northwest teen audience, who liked their music powerful and driving with little regard to commercial subtleties.'⁷² So respected are the Sonics in the Northwestern music tradition that, in 2000, three members of Mudhoney, Mark Arm, Steve Turner and Dan Peters, along with members of other Seattle bands, played a selection from the Sonics' catalogue at a tribute show for Northwest bands. They later recorded the material for an album titled *The New Original Sonic Sound*. In this acknowledgement we can appreciate an ongoing assumption of the specificity of, importance of, and influence of, the local 'Northwest Sound.'

The inheritors of this tradition and the band which, arguably, most directly created a platform for the grunge aesthetic were the U-men. Formed around 1981, Humphrey tells us that the band's name comes from a bootleg Pere Ubu album.⁷³ As Humphrey describes the band:

They were slow, harsh and (in the early days) clumsy players. They invoked a Dionysian orgy of mutual aggression and abandon that no cartoon-devil metal band could approach. They were also extremely loud.⁷⁴

Their first recording was a self-titled EP in 1984 one track of which would later be lifted, as we have seen, for the *Sup Pop 100* compilation. The U-Men's music, which bears similarities to that of the Scientists, is one place where we can also track a common influence. Humphrey mentions the importance of the Cramps' music for the U-Men's

sound.⁷⁵ The Cramps were just as important to Kim Salmon's idea of what the Scientists should sound like. In an interview Salmon says:

“I guess somewhere in that time the Cramps came along (this is the early line-up of the Scientists, I mean), and when I heard that I thought “that’s the sort of idea I had.” Not necessarily that much rockabilly in it, but the feedback and the simplicity of it and the kind of screaming and everything. The wildness of it. That was the sort of thing I had in my head”.⁷⁶

The Cramps, whose early albums were on the independent IRS label, were also a big influence on the other foundational Australian post-punk band, the Birthday Party (which included Nick Cave), and on Australian post-punk generally.⁷⁷ As Walker writes about the Cramps:

Punk's going back to the garage was one thing; going back, as the Cramps did, to the swamp, where it all began, was something else again. In regurgitating rock's most primal white trash/black magic origins, the Cramps pointed to a profound realignment of the garage band tradition. The Cramps were art and trash all at once, a collision of sex, death and rock'n'roll, and their impact was more keenly felt by Australian music than any other.⁷⁸

In its lyrics as well as in its rhythms, the Scientists' 'Swampland' is the clearest evocation of the Cramps' influence on the Scientists' work.⁷⁹ It is one of those intriguing coincidences that this track, of all the Scientists' oeuvre at that time perhaps the most immediately accessible to a Northwest audience because of its most significant reference point, should have been the track that Milne put on the *Fast Forward* cassette. However, the Cramps' influence runs through all the Scientists' later work to a greater or less extent. This common

reference point is another reason for the underlying commonality between not just the Scientists but the Australian post-punk tradition more generally and the Northwest grunge movement.

The Northwest tradition of fuzz and feedback-laden guitar work coupled with a pounding, heavy beat, a tradition that includes the guitar style of African-American Seattleite Jimi Hendrix, was a constituent feature of grunge. Indeed, from the perspective of localism and indigenisation, grunge was a further evolution of this tradition. In Australia there is a similar, if less-well known, tradition that can also be traced back to the 1960s garage sound. In Australia, as in the American Northwest, there was little African-American, r'n'b influence. The White Australia Policy ensured that, aside from the limited presence of African-American servicemen during the Second World War, there was no direct on-going African-American musical influence. The result was that, as in the Northwest, Australian garage rock during the early 1960s became harder, emphasising more the beat than the rhythm, with innovation based around guitar-work that critiqued melodic form, and vocal timbre that sounded 'dirty,' a reaction against the clear, pure-sounding enunciation of white pop singers.⁸⁰

The most radical of the Australian garage bands were the Missing Links, a Sydney group who released a self-titled album in 1965. We have already met the Missing Links in Chapter Three as the band that gave their name to the Melbourne record label that Keith Glass founded in 1977, Missing Link. On the All Music Guide website Richie Unterberger describes the band as 'at their best sounding like a fusion of the Troggs and the early Who, letting loose at times with wild feedback that was quite ahead of its time.'⁸¹ The Missing Links' use of feedback was probably influenced by the Australian surf band, the Atlantics,

whose first album, *Bombora*, was released in October 1963 and their second, even more radical album, *Stomping Time*, in December of the same year. The Missing Links' 1965 self-titled album contains a backwards version of the band's rendition of Bo Diddley's 'Mama Keep Your Big Mouth Shut' titled 'H'Tuom Tuhs' which, surprisingly, was released as a single. Not just occasional feedback, then, but an entire track made by reversing the run of the recording tape. Acknowledging this radical heritage, the Saints put a version of the Links' 'Wild About You' on their first album, *(I'm) Stranded*, in 1977. The point here is that in Australia, as in the American Northwest, there has been a tradition of white and heavily beat-based, loud, angry, guitar work with feedback and similar noise-related effects. Given this similarity of history and influence it is no wonder that the music of the Scientists and other Australian bands should have been taken up with such understanding by the bands in the Seattle scene.

Mark Arm remembers the music he played on a radio program he DJ'd before Mudhoney started, that is before 1987. He says:

'I would play quite a few Australian bands. I was familiar at the time with the Scientists, Celibate Rifles, and of course the Saints. I never quite got into Radio Birdman who I thought were a little flat.'⁸²

The Saints and Radio Birdman were recording in the late 1970s. The Celibate Rifles' first album, *Sideroxylon*, was released in 1983. It was independent label Hot's first album release. It is clear, then, that a significant amount of Australian independent material, on both cassette and vinyl, was finding its way as a global counter-flow to Seattle.⁸³ Most likely it could be bought in one of the specialist import record shops which, like similar shops in Australia, specialized in hard-to-get, independent releases.

Humphrey writes that Kim Harris' Campus Music, a hang-out in the mid-to-late 1970s for the early Seattle punks, was 'the first store in town with import records'.⁸⁴ Harris closed this store in 1980 and opened the Easy Street store in Bellevue.⁸⁵ Here, he developed the legendary 'Wall of Death', consisting of the largest variety of heavy metal in the Northwest. As Humphrey explains, heavy metal had become the music of choice for the white, working-class, suburban teenagers of the Northwest. Humphrey describes what he calls 'the suburban metal circuit'.⁸⁶ Indeed, punk was seen by its inner-city aficionados as being distinct from metal. Humphrey quotes Dawn Anderson in 1988: 'There were two types of rock'n'roll in 1981: New Wave and Rawk. New Wave was thought to encompass punk; rawk was thought to encompass heavy metal.'⁸⁷ From the point of view of this distinction, in the Northwest grunge has a history in the infiltration of heavy metal aesthetics into punk. In Australia the primary distinction was between inner-city punk and post-punk and suburban Oz Rock. Heavy metal had a more subterranean existence. Its influence on Australian inner-city sound is harder to track but it is there. Clinton Walker, the journalist, music critic and chronicler of the inner city scene, has noted in his semi-autobiographical account of the era that, around 1984: 'This was a time...when I was going back to stuff that I thought I'd outgrown, early seventies metal like Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin, and finding out how much I still loved it.'⁸⁸ Harris' wall would certainly have included AC/DC and, doubtless, the Scientists, Celibate Rifles and not forgetting feedtime whose music John Dougan describes this way:

Imagine laying your head on railroad tracks, feeling the vibrations of the oncoming train rattling through your head, and leaving your head on the tracks as the train roars over it, and you're getting close to the sonic assault that is feedtime.⁸⁹

feedtime's first album was released by the Sydney independent label Aberrant in 1985. As Ray Ahn, guitarist with the Hard Ons, has remarked: 'Bands like feedtime, King Snake Roost and the Scientists were the exclusive bands. The American people who knew about Australian bands knew a lot about them.'⁹⁰ People like Arm were acquiring this music and playing it on specialist radio programs.⁹¹

And so, to cut a longer story of global counter-flows short, we come to Nirvana. Where Mudhoney were the intellectual, artistic pioneers of grunge—both Steve Turner and Mark Arm have humanities degrees—Kurt Cobain was the working class boy from the timber-logging town of Aberdeen. When he was fifteen in 1982, Cobain was hunting for a copy of REO Speedwagon's *Hi Infidelity* (1980) album.⁹² At sixteen, the first concert he went to was Sammy Hagar and Quarterflash. When he discovered the Melvins he compared their energy to his Iron Maiden records. Commenting on how, even after his discovery of punk, Cobain went to see Judas Priest, his biographer, Charles Cross, writes that: 'Like other kids in Aberdeen, [Cobain] mixed his punk with loads of heavy metal.'⁹³ Cobain had been reared on a combination of heavy metal, as we have seen the working-class music of choice in the Northwest, and mainstream arena rock. Nirvana recorded their first album, *Bleach*, for Sub Pop. It was released in 1989. Humphrey accurately describes *Bleach* as 'an amalgam of scorching anthems'.⁹⁴ Cobain has described how 'he felt pressured to conform to a "Sub Pop Sound" on *Bleach* by toning down his pop-songwriting sensibility'.⁹⁵ By this time the majors were beginning to look at the Seattle scene. Nirvana were wanting to sign with a label that had better promotion and distribution than Sub Pop. In 1990 Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth persuaded David Geffen to sign the band. Sonic Youth had already signed up themselves to Geffen's DGC label.

In his early days David Geffen had promoted the careers of Laura Nyro, Joni Mitchell, Crosby, Stills and Nash, among many others. Geffen founded Asylum Records in 1971. Among those he signed for the label were Jackson Browne and the Eagles. In 1974 Geffen sold Asylum to Warner Communications for seven million dollars. Founding Geffen Records in 1980 he signed Guns'n'Roses and Aerosmith. With Geffen's contacts it had rapidly become a very significant 'minor' label. Tom King writes that:

With projected 1989 revenues of \$175 million, Geffen Records was no longer a small company. In three years, the staff had tripled to 110 employees.⁹⁶

With the sales of Island and A&M to PolyGram, 'Geffen Records [became] the only major privately owned record label in the United States'.⁹⁷ Looking to develop a stable of independent music artists, Geffen started the DGC label in 1990, signing not only Sonic Youth but among others Weezer and Teenage Fanclub.⁹⁸

Nirvana went into Sound City Studios in Los Angeles, the same studio in which Fleetwood Mac had made *Rumours*, with the producer Butch Vig who had recently produced Killdozer's 1989 album, *For Ladies Only*, a remarkable collection of cover versions of late 1960s and 1970s songs by such diverse artists as Deep Purple and Don McLean. *Nevermind* was mixed by Andy Wallace who had worked with the popular heavy metal band, Slayer. Later, Cobain was to complain that Wallace had made the album sound too slick but this, of course, was an important element in *Nevermind* getting mainstream airplay. *Nevermind* was released in 1991. By this time Geffen Records had been bought by MCA for around \$545 million—one more acquisition in the massification and globalization of the music industry—and in 1990, shortly after MCA acquired Geffen, the Japanese company Matsushita bought MCA itself for \$1.6 billion.

Nevermind is grunge with a pop gloss. Everett True, among many others, has remarked that: ‘The chords in ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit,’ that famous guitar riff that helped launch a thousand MTV executives’ bank-balances, are basically Boston’s ‘More Than A Feeling’ updated.’⁹⁹ As it happens, the melody of ‘More Than A Feeling’ in part echoes that of ‘Louie Louie’ so as well as being related to 1970s stadium rock, Cobain’s song is firmly lodged in the Northwest’s musical history.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Dave Marsh writes of ‘the evidence of ‘Louie Louie’ spirit and rhythms throughout Nirvana’s recordings’ and quotes from Cobain’s diaries: ‘I learned everything I needed to know from one week of lessons which resulted in the famous musical knowledge of the louie louie (*sic*) chords E, A, B.’¹⁰¹ Sub Pop’s Jonathon Poneman has compared Mudhoney and Nirvana:

Mudhoney channelled the Scientists and the Stooges and to a lesser degree, bands like the MC5 and Beasts of Bourbon. If you listen to Nirvana’s early stuff you can hear, God forbid, Tom Petty. There is a song called “If You Must”, which is the very first Nirvana song I ever heard. [Kurt] starts off with these kind of dissonant chord changes then this sort of Tom Petty-ish type vocal thing, then a roaring crescendo like “Adam Raised A Cain” by Bruce Springsteen.¹⁰²

Clearly, Cobain was constructing his version of grunge with a conservative rock sensibility. Where Mudhoney, and the Scientists, remained immersed in the global counter-flows of the indie, underground rhizomatic disorder, Cobain’s acceptance of his musical influences enabled the mainstreaming of Nirvana. Nirvana, with the marketing help of Geffen Records and MCA, and along with grunge as a marketing category, became an international commodity—indeed a part of the international repertoire. Within six months of its release

Nevermind was certified triple platinum in the United States meaning that it had sold three million copies. It is estimated to have sold around ten million copies worldwide.

1 K. Salmon interviewed in B. Blunt, *Blunt*, p. 15.

2 G. Moon interviewed in B. Blunt, *Blunt*, p. 151.

3 M. Arm interviewed in B. Blunt, *Blunt*, p. 153.

4 A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996.p. 29.

5 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 29.

6 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 31.

7 R. Burnett, *The Global Jukebox: The International Music Industry*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 18.

8 K. Negus, *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*, Arnold, London 1992, p 10.

9 Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*, pp. 47–8.

10 K. Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 153.

11 Negus, *Music Genres*, p. 156.

12 Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*, p. 49.

13 Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*, p. 49.

14 Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*, pp. 49–50.

15 M. Chanan, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 103.

16 Paul Martin reviewing Various Artists *The Clarion Call: R&B, Mod and Pop Psych from Down Under* in *Shindig! Magazine* online at: <http://www.shindig-magazine.com/reviews-mar2003-1.html> .

17 Bon Scott, who migrated from Scotland with his family when he was four, subsequently joined AC/DC in 1974.

-
- 18 J. Gilbert & E. Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture, and the Politics of Sound*, Routledge, London, 1999, p. 41.
- 19 Gilbert & Pearson, *Discographies*, p. 44.
- 20 A short introduction to youth culture in Perth is Jon Stratton, 'Youth Culture' in J Gregory et al (eds), *The Historical Encyclopedia of Western Australia*, 2007.
- 21 C. Humphrey, *Loser: The Real Seattle Music Story*, Abrams, New York, 1999, p. 10.
- 22 R. Dangel in B. Miller, Liner Notes, *The Fabulous Wailers at the Castle*, Norton, 1962.
- 23 V. Kalmar, *Label Launch: A Guide to Independent Record Recording, Promotion and Distribution*, St Martin's Press, New York, 2002, p. 2.
- 24 P. Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music*, Wesleyan UP, Hanover, 1992, p. 176.
- 25 R. Kennedy & R. McNutt, *Little Labels—Big Sound*, Indiana UP, Bloomington, 2001, p. 61. This book provides a good outline of the history of independent labels in the United States, especially in the Introduction, subheaded 'Little Labels and the American Beat, 1920-1970.'
- 26 Kalmar, *Label Launch*, p. 6.
- 27 The foundational article is R. Peterson & David Berger, 'Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1975, pp. 158–73.
- 28 Ian McNay at:
- 29 Burnett, *The Global Jukebox*, p. 59.
- 30 Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*, p. 158.
- 31 C. Walker, *Stranded: The secret history of Australian Independent Music 1977–1991*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1996, p. 48.
- 32 Walker, *Stranded*, p. 31.
- 33 Walker, *Stranded*, p. 35–6.
- 34 C. Johnson, *K records*, <<http://www.kreecs.com/html/info/>>, 21 July 2006.
- 35 Johnson, *K records*.

-
- 36 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 32.
- 37 Pavitt quoted in Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 48.
- 38 T. Moore, *The Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, Universe, New York, 2005.
For another discussion of mixtapes see K. Fox, 'Mixed Feelings: Notes on the
Romance of the Mixed Tape', *Rhizomes*, no. 5, 2002,
<<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue5/fox.html>>.
- 39 A. Ogg & D. Upshal, *The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap*, Channel 4 Books,
London, 1999, p. 41.
- 40 One general discussion of mixtapes can be found on Wikipedia at:
<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mixtape>>.
- 41 The music, and information, can be found on the Saints *The Most Primitive Band In
The World* released by Hot Records.
- 42 C. Joyce, 'The official Mr Epp Biography', <[http://www.unofficial-
mudhoney.com/sideprj/epp/](http://www.unofficial-mudhoney.com/sideprj/epp/)>.
- 43 For details see the liner notes to the selection from that tape released on CD in 2004.
The CD is titled *The Manikins*.
- 44 C. Walker, 'Terse Tapes' Lucky Dip of Quasi-Normality', *Inner City Sound: Punk
and Post-Punk in Australia 1976-1985*, rev. edn, Verse-Chorus Press, 2005, pp. 150–
1.
- 45 S. Jones, 'The Cassette Underground', in R. James (ed), *The Cassette Mythos*,
Autonomedia, New York, 1992.
- 46 J. Foster, 'Op' Castanets' and the Cassette Revolution', in R. James (ed), *The
Cassette Mythos*, Autonomedia, New York, 1992.
- 47 Johnson, <<http://www.kreecs.com/html/info/>>.
- 48 Johnson, <<http://www.kreecs.com/html/info/>>.
- 49 J. Ankeny, 'Beat Happening', *All Music Guide*,
<<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:myev97i7krat~T1>>.
- 50 D. Hesmondhalgh, 'Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular
Music Genre', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1999, p. 38.
- 51 Hesmondhalgh, 'Indie', p.38.
- 52 J. Ankeny, 'Beat Happening'.

-
- 53 N. Abebe, *All Music Guide*,
<<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:tb5uak4khm3z>>, describes
Beat Happening's first album this way: 'Beat Happening can't be given credit for
creating the indie pop genre, but they certainly gave it life in America. This, their first
album, is indie pop in its purest form: fuzzy bedroom recordings of simplistic, cutesy
songs, with intentionally innocent and juvenile lyrics, which Calvin Johnson belts out
with one of the most endearingly bad voices in music history.'
- 54 Walker, 'Terse Tapes' Lucky Dip of Quasi-Normality', p. 151.
- 55 D. Nichols, Email to the author, 22 December 2005.
- 56 D. Nichols, Email to the author, 22 December 2005.
- 57 One version of this story can be found in the booklet accompanying the Beat
Happening box set. The booklet, like the box set, is titled *Crashing Through* and was
written by Lois Maffeo. Everett True gives another version of this story in his book,
Live Through This: American Rock Music in the Nineties, pp. 83–4.
- 58 Quoted in the *Crashing Through* booklet, Johnson says: 'Even though the situation
[with Rough Trade] didn't work out that well, the fact that he [Geoff Travis] made
that call [to Johnson] was very sustaining at the time. The way it affected us was that
by our record coming out in England, it reached people there who hadn't been aware
of us—people like The Pascals and The Vaselines and Teenage Fanclub.' (C.
Johnson, quoted in L. Maffeo, booklet, *Crashing Through*, K records, 2002.)
- 59 S. Huey, 'Green River', *All Music Guide*,
<<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:0cu1z85ajyv6~T1>>.
- 60 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 74.
- 61 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 74.
- 62 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 62.
- 63 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 62.
- 64 Grunge', *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grunge_music>.
- 65 Salmon interviewed in B. Blunt, *Blunt*, p.15.
- 66 R. Cabut, personal communication with the author.
- 67 David Nichols tells me that there was a Sydney fanzine in 1985 titled *Grunge It
Severely* and that the *Rolling Stone Big Australian Rock Book*, published in 1985,
informs readers that the Sydney band Box of Fish 'describe themselves as "grunge"'.

-
- 68 *Office of the Seattle Mayor*, <<http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/music/history.htm>>.
- 69 The best introduction to the 1960s Northwest sound is Various Artists, *The History of Northwest Rock, vol 2*.
- 70 There is a history of the remarkable career of ‘Louie Louie’ on the web at <<http://www.louielouie.net/01-welcome.htm>>. Also, Dave Marsh has written a book about the song titled *Louie Louie*.
- 71 C. Koda, *All Music Guide*, <<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:61e67uq0h0j0~T1>>.
- 72 C. Koda, *All Music Guide*.
- 73 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 64.
- 74 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 64.
- 75 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 64. As it happens, on their first album *Songs the Lord Taught Us*, the Cramps cover the Sonics’ ‘Strychnine’.
- 76 K. Salmon, interviewed in *Noise for Heroes*, <<http://www.nkvrecords.com/kimsalmon.htm>>.
- 77 I.R.S. Records was founded by Miles Copeland. The label started in 1979 and had a distribution deal with AM. In 1994 I.R.S. was bought by EMI and was closed down in 1996.
- 78 Walker, *Stranded*, p. 85.
- 79 The lead guitar repeated descending run on ‘Swampland’ is remarkably similar to the repeated descending run on the English rock’n’roll band Johnny Kidd and the Pirates’ 1960 track ‘Shakin’ All Over.’
- 80 The best introduction to Australian garage rock of the 1960s is Various Artists, *Ugly Things—the CD*.
- 81 R. Unterberger, *All Music Guide*, <<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:rlf6zfaeh4k~T1>>.
- 82 Arm quoted in B. Blunt, *Blunt*, p. 153.
- 83 The same goes for New York. Damian Lovelock, the singer with the Celibate Rifles tells how, at CBGBs, where the band’s 1986 live album *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* was recorded: ‘we walked on and I didn’t open my eyes for four songs, I was so nervous... I remember I opened my eyes and all these people, their lips were moving, they knew every fucking word to every Rifles song! And nothing was released in America in

-
- those days, basically nothing released in America, we don't have deals there. So it was all import and we had no comprehension that people had ever heard of us there.' (Quoted from T. Hutchison, *Your Name's on the Door*, reproduced in *Celibate Rifles*, <<http://www.celibaterifles.com/critique.html>>).
- 84 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 28.
- 85 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 81.
- 86 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 82.
- 87 D. Anderson, *Backlash*, November 1988, quoted in Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 69.
- 88 Walker, *Stranded*, p. 171.
- 89 J. Dougan, *All Music Guide*,
<<http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:m7rvad4kv8w2~T1>>.
- 90 R. Ahn, quoted in B. Blunt, *Blunt*, p. 151.
- 91 There is another history here of cultural counter-flows which is important and compliments the story that I have been telling. Johnson became friendly with David Nichols, of the Sydney band the Cannanes. He and Louise (Zeb) Olsen went to Olympia in 1989. In a personal email Nichols writes: 'We went there because I had a longstanding (well, by that stage, 5 years) friendship/correspondence with Calvin Johnson. This came about because he was interested in cassette fanzines/magazines and he read about my (usually paper, sometimes cassette) fanzine in *Fast Forward* and sent me a Beat Happening cassette, *Three Tea Breakfast*, which I really took to. Calvin put out a couple of the early Cannanes releases on K, and that band had been inspired by Beat Happening (in attitude rather than sound I feel).' Nichols goes on to explain that he, and Zeb Olsen, first visited Olympia in 1986. (This was when he was given the copies of the Beat Happening's first album by Calvin Johnson to distribute in London.) Olsen cofounded the all-girl (with the exception of the drummer) Matrimony in Sydney at the end of 1988. Matrimony made one album, *Kitty Finger*, funded, as Nichols has told me, from *Smash Hits*' glee club money derived from the sale of review copies of records. Nichols was working for *Smash Hits* at the time. Nichols and Olsen went back to the Northwest. Olsen recorded two singles with Tobi Vail, later of Bikini Kill, and Calvin Johnson as a guest in a band called the Go-Team. Nichols played drums on the first single ('Outside'/'Stay Ready' released on K in February, 1989). A then-unknown guitarist called Kurt Cobain played on the second single ('Scratch It Out'/'Bikini Twilight' released on K in July, 1989). Olsen then toured with Kathleen Hanna in Viva Knievel. Here, then, is a direct connection between the Australian sound and Cobain prior to Nirvana. What the impact of this counter-flow was on Cobain and Nirvana's music is difficult to gauge in isolation. Hanna went on to form Bikini Kill, kick-starting the riot grrrl phenomenon. Hanna has always acknowledged the importance of Matrimony as an influence on her music

-
- and on Bikini Kill. In 1997 Hanna persuaded the Olympia independent label Kill Rock Stars, which had released the Bikini Kill records, to rerelease *Kitty Finger*.
- 92 On the All Music Guide website, Stephen Thomas Erlewine describes this example of arena rock: ‘This is unabashedly mainstream rock, but there’s a real urgency to the songs and the performances that gives it a real emotional core, even if the production keeps it tied to the early, previsual ’80s. And so what if it does, because this is great arena rock, filled with hooks as expansive as Three Rivers Stadium and as catchy as the flu.’
- 93 C. Cross, *Heavier than Heaven: A Biography of Kurt Cobain*, Hodder & Stoughton, England, 2001, pp. 45–6. The other information here on Cobain’s music preferences also comes from Cross.
- 94 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 138.
- 95 Humphrey, *Loser*, p. 138.
- 96 T. King, *The Operator: David Geffen Builds, Buys and Sells the New Hollywood*, Random House, New York, 2000, p. 448.
- 97 King, *The Operator*, pp. 448–9.
- 98 For a biography of David Geffen see Tom King, *The Operator: David Geffen Builds, Buys and Sells the New Hollywood*. For background to the California singer-songwriter scene of which Geffen to which Geffen was so important, see Barney Hoskyns, *Hotel California: Singer-Songwriters and the Cocaine Cowboys in the LA Canyons, 1967-1976*.
- 99 E. True, *Live Through This*, p. 9. On the bootleg of Nirvana’s 1992 Reading Festival set the band actually begins playing ‘More Than A Feeling’ before moving on to ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit.’
- 100 D. Marsh, in *Louie Louie*, discusses the similarity of ‘More Than A Feeling’ to ‘Louie Louie’ on p. 155 and devotes three pages, pp. 204–7, to what he considers are the similarities between ‘Louie Louie’ and ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’.
- 101 Marsh, *Louie Louie*, Hyperion Press, New York, 1993, p. xiv.
- 102 J. Poneman, interviewed by S. Tartan, ‘Sub Pop’s second coming’, *The Japan Times*, 26 January 2005, reproduced at <<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/features/music2005/fm20050126a1.htm>>.