

## Has The Music Scene Died In New York?

by Sydney Beveridge

Friday, December 17, 2004 12:00 AM

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When Bob Dylan moved to New York to make it as a singer-songwriter, he was acknowledging something that he helped define – the city was where pioneering musicians had to be. But if Dylan were starting out today, would he stay in Minnesota?

For decades, the city nurtured the alternative music scene and the artists who bloomed – and crashed – here, in famed locales like CBGBs, the punk club on the Lower East Side, and the corridors of the Chelsea Hotel. The names of past heroes rattle off the pierced tongues of the cognoscenti: It was here that Iggy Pop held court, here that John Cale, after studying with Aaron Copeland, settled down on Ludlow Street and formed the Velvet Underground with Lou Reed. Patti Smith dropped out of teacher's college in New Jersey and got her start reading poetry here at St. Mark's Church. And it is here, of course, where [Dylan](#) sets his new bestselling book *Chronicles Vol. 1*.

Neither the music scene nor the music industry has completely disappeared from the city. The major music publications Rolling Stone, Spin, Punk Magazine and newcomer Blender Magazine are all based here. The major bands still routinely perform in the many music venues here. For the past 24 years, the College Music Journal Network has sponsored its annual [Music Marathon](#) in the city, unleashing 10,000 artists, professionals, fans, and even some public officials onto daytime panels and nighttime concerts at over 50 clubs and local concert halls.

But, even panelists at the latest Music Marathon itself made it clear they do not think New York is what it used to be, thanks in part to changes in the music industry as a whole.

### Consolidation

Recent trends in consolidation of music-related industries have made it more difficult for emerging artists to break through.

With this year's partnership between Sony and BMG, just four companies (Sony-BMG, Vivendi Universal SA, Warner Music Group and EMI Group PLC) control 80 percent of the recording industry, and 95 percent of [the top 100 sales](#). The increasing corporate control means increasing profit pressure, with the result that record labels, which are cutting staff and jettisoning even somewhat-established artists, are less inclined to take on the expense and the risk of untested new acts.

At the same time, massive radio deregulation began with the 1996 Telecommunications Act and was furthered by the Federal Communications Commissioner (FCC) under Chairman Michael Powell. Radio was the first victim of the deregulation wave, which has since [affected other media as well](#).

Now, companies can own more stations in each market and as many as they want nationwide. Today, just three companies (Clear Channel, Infinity Broadcasting and Cumulus Radio)

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dominate the market. While the industry leaders before the Telecommunications Act owned 65 stations, Clear Channel alone owns 1,245 stations. In New York City, just four companies control 79 percent of all revenue from the radio.

Radio station formats are carefully controlled by their corporate owners. Research by the Future of Music Coalition has found that though more “formats” are on the radio, such as “Adult Contemporary” and “Hot Adult Contemporary,” the supposedly distinct formats are playing up to [76 percent of the same songs](#) .

While the courts are beginning to assert the primacy of the public interest over [the right for corporations to consolidate](#) , and there are a few holdouts such as college radio stations and [WFMU](#) , the truth is that these barriers to access are harming New York City’s local music industry. Artists coming to New York to break into the business are finding record labels less interested and the radio less open.

### The Internet

Shut out from these traditional routes, up-and-coming artists are turning to a new medium to be heard. The Internet is doing for the underground music scene what blogging has done for political advocacy – provided a more level playing field. The Internet gives both pop stars and struggling bands access to listeners.

Independent rock music has a world-wide venue thanks to the World Wide Web. Musicians no longer need to rely exclusively on the press and personal contact to announce their tours and album releases. Music nerds in 65 cities around the world, for example, can get to know other fans of Omaha’s punk-folk Bright Eyes at [local meetups](#) , [the artists’ Web site](#) , and even on

[Friendster](#)

where lead singer Connor Oberst has a “profile.” Today, online music sites – with names like

[Pitchfork](#)

, [Fluxblog](#)

and

[Epiteonic.com](#)

-- have flourished. Yes, the major magazines continue to reside in New York City, but music Web sites exist in every town. Pitchfork has, as

[The New York Observer recently observed](#)

, “captivated New Yorkers more than any other” music news site, even though it is based in Chicago.

You need not be based in New York, in other words, to define even New Yorkers’ tastes in music.

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And the music scenes in other cities, such as Omaha, are flourishing. Small cities have contributed to rock and roll before, but now the Internet has helped Omaha rock artists like Bright Eyes and Cursive reach a national audience without leaving the Midwest. In the song "The Execution of All Things," Los Angeles band [Rilo Kiley](#) sings "we'll go to Omaha to work and exploit the booming music scene," and they did, releasing their 2002 album on Saddle Creek Records and touring extensively with other bands from the same Omaha-based label.

### Is It Really Dead?

Given these new complexities of the music business, it might be easier to cope from Omaha than to move to New York City and [get priced out](#).

A satirical feature in New York Magazine "[Will the Last Hipster Please Turn out the Lights: New York Cool Dies a Thousand Deaths](#)," perpetuates the notion that New York City's trendsetters are increasingly frustrated with the declining creative scene and increasing cost of living, and as Gavin McInnes of [Vice](#) (a NYC magazine and record label) puts it, true city hipsters are being replaced by "lawyers who just learned to snowboard."

In what may be the clearest sign that something has died, New York University is currently converting what used to be the Bottom Line -- which for thirty years was a hot club for live music -- into [new classrooms](#).

But it may not be time for the funeral dirge just yet.

For one thing, there is an emerging scene in Brooklyn. In a Daily News article "BROOKLYN ROCKS! Cutting-edge rockers discover a hot music scene just over the bridge," music critic Isaac Guzman chronicles the dozens of new music clubs in Brooklyn, from Park Slope to Red Hook, several of which -- [Northsix](#), [Warsaw](#) and [Southpaw](#) -- compete with the major clubs in Manhattan. "I got sick of going out in New York City and I got sick of corporate venues and huge, stupid clubs," said Jeff Golden, one of the owners of The Hook. "In Brooklyn, people go to a club to see music on purpose, and people have to go out of their way to come here. But when you go to the club, there's a sense of community inside. We've had bands who just walked their amps over from the neighborhood." Just over the border, Long Islanders are building their own rock and roll community, as profiled in a recent [New York Magazine article "L.I.R.R. \(Long Island Rock n' Roll\)](#)

And even Manhattan has not turned completely repellent. The truth is, it was never easy in New York. Dylan himself was under few illusions about the city. In "Hard Times in New York Town" he sings "They'll kick you when you're up and knock you when you're down/It's hard times in the city,/Livin' down in New York town." Yet it's New York that he chronicles in Chronicles.

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Have things really changed that much? However appealing the Omaha music scene, one of its stars, Connor Oberst, has apparently relocated to New York City; when he performs at [Town Hall](#)

next month, it'll be as a new New Yorker. In "Train Underwater," a song in his forthcoming album, he explains he wanted to "keep up with the moon on an all night avenue." Â