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The intern economy: Laboring to learn in the music industry

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THE INTERN ECONOMY: LABORING TO LEARN IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

by

Alexandre Frenette

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

THE INTERN ECONOMY

by

Alexandre Frenette

Adviser: Paul Attewell

As internships become an increasingly normal part of early careers, there is a need to examine how internships really function, if—and how—they benefit interns and companies. Through participant observation at two firms and semi-structured interviews, I focus on one of the major users of unpaid intern labor—the music industry—to analyze the meanings of intern work, both for the interns themselves and their supervisors. Consequently, this research provides an account of how aspiring and current workers in a competitive industry make sense of and reproduce precarious work conditions. By focusing on how interns and employees construct the importance of the music business within a context of routinized work, I analyze how the “charisma” of artistic production generates a powerful, but short-lived source of commitment for workers. I show how the lure of the music industry attracts people who want to do “important” work, though participants must learn to convey their excitement according to an informal code of conduct. Moreover, I show how music industry personnel generally devalue formal educational pathways to music industry employment, instead privileging on-site learning as an ennobling rite of passage. Aspiring and paid employees interpret and accept what I call the mailroom model for training. The responsibility for training thus falls on the intern and occurs under challenging circumstances. I find that interns perform provisional labor – work that is temporary, conditional, and ambiguous (“what you make of it”). Interns embody a flexible pool of labor for a host company, allowing for a range of formal and informal benefits for all parties concerned.
Analyzing how people do succeed within the intern economy, I find that it is possible for interns to elevate their status and move beyond the characteristics and constraints of the role, though notions of race, class, age, and gender inform the selection and evaluation of interns. Taken together, the above suggests how the intern economy exacerbates class and other forms of inequality while nonetheless allowing some especially skilled interns to secure advancement. I conclude with an analysis of current intern activism and legal challenges to unpaid work.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the interns, employees, and various key informants who generously offered their time and insights throughout this project. In particular, Abby, Greg, Hank, Isabel, Nate, and Susan were exceedingly helpful and kind. Although my time as an intern included filing expense reports at Indie Distribution and stocking refrigerators at Major Records USA, every moment was beneficial for this study and I am grateful that everyone I met at least pretended to tolerate even my most obtuse questions.

Since my first day as a graduate student, I consistently benefitted from my frequent conversations with Paul Attewell. His impressive breadth, inordinate productivity, and reassuringly calm demeanor are paired – quite exceptionally – with sustained, careful attention to his students’ progress and wellbeing. I am thankful for his guidance and aspire to replicate his adept form of mentorship during the decades to come.

Like Paul, Sharon Zukin was among those who saw the early promise of this project and helped me formulate some initial research questions; her later guidance and detailed notes helped strengthen this dissertation considerably. Bill Kornblum and Mitch Duneier taught me how to do fieldwork and inspired me to read works from the Chicago School tradition. This project came out of an ethnography class with Mitch, and I am grateful that he insisted (quite vigorously) that I continue this research for my dissertation. Throughout the years, I was also lucky to receive helpful insights from scholars including Stanley Aronowitz, Max Besbris, Dan Cornfield, Sarah Daynes, Tim Dowd, Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, Stuart Ewen, Richard Lloyd, Ashley Mears, Vicki Smith, and Steven Tepper.

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# Table of Contents

Abstract  iv
Acknowledgments  vi
Introduction: Laboring to Learn in the Music Industry  1
Chapter 1: The Charisma of Music Industry Work  35
Chapter 2: Training and In-between Days for Music Industry Interns  82
Chapter 3: The Intern as an Elastic Role  117
Chapter 4: The Chosen, the Choosers, and the Others  152
Conclusion: Back to the Future?  197
References  220
List of Tables

Table 1. List of Participants 29
Table 2. Supreme Court & Circuit Court Decisions related to Work & Hours Division’s Six-Factor Test 209
Introduction: Laboring to Learn in the Music Industry

“Greg”\(^1\) has just finished his first day of paid work in the record industry. As we sit at a fast-food restaurant in Midtown Manhattan he recounts the path leading him to this job. In the summer of 2006 he held an unpaid internship at a “major” record label. He completed unpaid internships at two more major record labels in the summer of 2007 and spring of 2008. After graduating from a prestigious southern college with a bachelor’s degree in May 2008 he moved back to his native New York City and started his fourth unpaid internship in September 2008, at Major Records USA. Of the four major record companies [then] in existence, Greg interned for each one.

On this day, after seven months at the fourth internship, he transitioned to a part-time, temporary, but paid position at a different part of Major Records USA. I congratulate him on the accomplishment, to which he responds soberly: “I have a small amount of my foot in the door.” Greg’s moderate response is understandable. He describes his ascent as a “slow build” and after four internships his new position is far from ideal. Greg does administrative work in the Legal Department and describes spending part of this day punching holes in “a thousand” pages. He says they hired him to work 20 hours a week for a few months, but assured him he might stay on longer if things work out. (Interview note)

Despite the banality of his job, by industry standards Greg’s path from intern to paid employee is a rare and successful one. Most music industry interns never make a transition to paid employment. As Becker (1982) and Faulkner (1983) showed decades ago, all artistic fields are characterized by a considerable surplus of potential workers. Miège describes artistic labor markets as marked by a “reservoir of workers ready to work without the need to pay them wages” (1989, p. 30). While many aspirants compete for the few positions in artistic labor markets, the extra workforce is accommodated in less desirable art-related positions such as teaching (Menger, 1999; 2006). A similar dynamic exists among aspirants on the business side of the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008, 2011; Neff & Arata, 2007; Ursell, 2000). There is no guaranteed path for entry on the business side of the music industry, though internships are currently described as one of the few paths for workers to enter the field and

\(^1\) To protect confidentiality, I changed all respondents’ and company names to pseudonyms.
hopefully get hired. This is even (or perhaps especially) the case for college students pursuing a specialized college degree in Music Business (Rolston & Herrera, 2000).

An internship is a practical educational experience whereby an intern learns by working at a host firm under varying degrees of supervision. Interns often receive school credit for their internship through a formal arrangement between colleges and employers. Neither the Department of Labor nor the Department of Education keeps track of official internship statistics, but several surveys suggest a rapid increase in the prevalence of internships from the 1990s to today. It is estimated that 50% of American students graduating with a bachelor’s degree in 2008 held an internship, compared to 17% in 1992 (Greenhouse, 2010). The recent figure is consistent with the College Senior Survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, where 54.6% of the 24,457 respondents in 2008-09 had participated in an internship program since entering college (Franke, Ruiz, Sharkness, DeAngelo, & Pryor, 2010). Consistent with the upward trend, a survey of 2013 graduating college seniors reveals that 63% of them have completed an internship (Zagier, 2013). Research suggests that completing internships has educational and professional benefits for interns (Coco, 2000; Swail & Kampits, 2004), however little research focuses on what interns actually do and how this plays out in interaction.

As internships become a normal part of early careers, especially in the cultural industries, there is a need to examine how internships really function, if—and how—they benefit interns and companies. This dissertation analyzes the social context of internship practices by considering the interactional challenges and institutional structures involved in this form of socialization. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I focus on one of the major users of unpaid intern labor – the music industry – to analyze the meanings of intern work, both for the interns themselves and their supervisors. Consequently, this research provides
an account of how aspiring and current workers in a competitive industry make sense of and reproduce precarious work conditions.

The Intern Economy

Work-based learning as a way to train and incorporate neophytes into the workforce is far from new, extending at least as far back as the Code of Hammurabi; rather, the apprenticeship is an old idea that has recently emerged in internship form. Work-based learning used to be prominent mostly in vocational training and education for the professions – the low (e.g., welding) and high ends (e.g., medicine) of the occupational status hierarchy; however, internships are now common in nearly every sector of the U.S. economy (Bailey, Hughes, & Moore, 2004; National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2011; Perlin, 2011; Smith, 2010). Internships have spread to almost every occupation, including unpaid interns who tend to vegetable gardens, bus tables at restaurants, and work at doughnut shops (CBC, 2013; Hoffman, 2013; Rupar, 2012). Some interns in sectors like banking, law, and technology are paid well relative to most U.S. employees; for example, a Google intern can be paid as much as $6,700 per month (Lobosco, 2013). The typical internship is part-time, in an office, and lasts for approximately the duration of a school semester. Some internships are exceptionally demanding. A 21 year-old intern collapsed and died one week before finishing his grueling summer internship at Bank of America, which reportedly involved eight sleepless nights during a two-week period (Farnham, 2013). Unpaid “interns” at Foxconn factories, the Chinese manufacturer, reportedly spend their 11-hour days assembling Apple, Sony, and other consumer electronic
products (Chang, 2013). In these varying contexts, from production line to professional office, internships allegedly act as a bridge for youth to transition between school and employment.

However, since the Great Recession began in 2007, “failure to launch” may have become the norm more than the exception. A greater share of America’s youth is enrolled in high school or college than at any period in history (Taylor et al., 2012) yet one in seven of the nation’s 16- to 24-year olds is neither at school nor working (Edwards, 2013). Those who do attend college mostly take out student loans, which has led to fears of a “college debt crisis” (Cohn, 2010) and growing interest in how the nation’s record high $1.2 trillion in college debt affects young workers, families, and the economy as a whole (Denhart, 2013). During the Great Recession, the employment rate fell for students as well as non-enrolled youth; between 2007 and 2011, the employment rate went from 47.6% to 40.7% for youth enrolled in school and 73.2% to 65% for the non-enrolled (Taylor et al., 2012). As of the September 2013 jobs report, the country’s unemployment rate “only” fell to a disappointing 7.2%, but the rate for 20- to 24-year-olds remained in the double-digits at 12.9% (Kasperkevic, 2013). What is more, according to a Pew Research Center survey, only 30% of young workers (between 18-30 years old) consider their current job a “career”; the figure drops to 11% for workers between 18 and 24 years old (Taylor et al., 2012).

By most employment- and earnings-related measures, today is a terrible time to be young. Employment problems among youth can have irreversible “scarring effects,” limiting economic chances throughout a cohort’s life course (Chauvel, 2010). In a study comparing the standing of young adults from 1980 to today, Carnevale, Hanson, and Gulish (2013) found that people reach nation-wide median earning levels later and later in life. In 1980, a young adult reached the median wage at 26 years old; in 2012, the median is reached at age 30. To ease the
transition into adulthood, compensate for a lack of employment, and/or ease the burden of college debt, young adults live at home longer or move home after college, which has prompted observers to diagnose these family/generation issues as *The Accordion Family* (Newman, 2012), *The Boomerang Generation* (Read, 2009), *Generation Debt* (Kamenetz, 2006a), *Disconnected Youth* (Edwards, 2013), and *The New Lost Generation* (Carnevale, Hanson, & Gulish, 2013).

Internships are seen as a cause (Perlin, 2011) as well as a solution to the plight of the young and the jobless (Glaeser, 2013). The popularity of internships partly stems from their perceived potential for the intern’s career advancement. In an op-ed, Edward Glaeser (2013) suggests the government should provide student loans for unpaid interns, even if they are not registered students, to provide pathways to employment for students of all economic backgrounds. Lauren Berger, the self-proclaimed “Intern Queen,” held 15 internships within four years and wrote a book celebrating internships as “inarguably, the most valuable experience of today’s college student” (2012, p. 5). A study by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and America Public Media’s *Marketplace* surveyed 50,000 employers to understand the perceived role of higher education in career preparation. Employers claim to place most emphasis on a potential hire’s experience – most notably, internships – while making hiring decisions, above factors such as college major and GPA (*The Chronicle of Higher Education/Marketplace*, 2012). However, not all internships are created equal.

According to a 2012 student survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, paid interns are considerably more likely to receive a job offer upon graduation than their unpaid counterparts (see Figure 1). The discrepancy between paid/unpaid offer rates is most evident for interns in the for-profit sector, where only 38.3% unpaid interns report receiving a job offer upon graduation compared to 64% for paid interns. Also, the job offer rate for college
seniors who did unpaid internships is only slightly higher than for those who did no internship at all (37.1% to 35.7%). *The Atlantic* used data from a survey of over 11,000 college students (conducted by consulting firm Intern Bridge) to verify the paid/unpaid internship discrepancy and confirmed that paid interns (36%) are more likely to receive a job offer than unpaid interns (17%) while also adding that the two groups have nearly identical GPA distributions (Weissmann, 2013). The studies do not break down the offer rates by specific industry; it is likely that the for-profit unpaid internships are clustered in industries with weak labor markets like media and entertainment. Nonetheless, unpaid internships are in high demand.

**Figure 1: Offer Rates by Sector for Paid and Unpaid Interns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Offer Rate – Paid Internship</th>
<th>Offer Rate – Unpaid Internship</th>
<th>Offer Rate – No Internship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For-profit</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not-for-profit</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Government</td>
<td>59.0%</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State/Local Government</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td><strong>59.9%</strong></td>
<td><strong>37.1%</strong></td>
<td><strong>35.7%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *2012 Student Survey*, National Association of Colleges and Employers

According to estimates, approximately half of internships are unpaid or paid below minimum wage (Perlin, 2011). In seemingly exaggerated cases, interns pay large sums for the chance to do an internship. Some students pay for-profit companies for placement at key unpaid internships, ranging from Interns for You Inc. (Herzlich, 2008) to paying approximately $1,000 per week by registering at DreamCareers, Inc. (Perlin, 2011). Most striking, but more rare, are internships sold at charity auctions; the highest recorded figure was a $42,500 sale in April 2010 for a one-week internship at Vogue Magazine under Anna Wintour (Olen, 2013). Conversely, some colleges are establishing scholarships and other forms of assistance for interns. Smith College provides hundreds of interning students with a $2,000 grant as part of their Praxis
program; other schools, like William College, Wellesley College, and Connecticut College, provide similar forms of financial support while some schools (like Princeton, Duke, and University of Pennsylvania) exempt interning students who are on financial aid from some obligations regarding summer earnings (Lee, 2006).

Until recently internships were almost universally praised as a win-win-win arrangement for students, businesses, and colleges respectively (Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002), though commentators increasingly decry unpaid internships for exploiting the labor of overqualified and unprotected young workers (Frederick, 1997; Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Kamenetz, 2006b; Perlin, 2011). According to supporters, under this arrangement interns gain valuable real world experience, schools provide popular learning opportunities and maintain connections with alumni, and host companies screen potential employees while receiving low-cost labor. On the contrary, critics suggest that internships – despite official claims – are concerned only slightly with a person’s education and are exploitative.

There are debates about the legality of internships; the Department of Labor recently issued a clarification of the rules under which for-profit employers can host unpaid interns as an educational exception to the Fair Labor Standards Act (Lipka, 2010). For an individual to participate in an internship at a for-profit company without compensation, the internship must fulfill various criteria, including: “The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern; and on occasion its operations may actually be impeded” and “The internship, even though it includes actual operation of the facilities of the employer, is similar to training which would be given in an educational environment” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). However, many unpaid internships do not appear to meet those criteria (Perlin, 2011). The three major record companies – Universal Music Group, Sony Music
Entertainment, and Warner Music Group—do not pay interns and, in 2013, former interns filed lawsuits for back pay against each of them (Subramanian, 2013).

In an op-ed published in *The New York Times*, Charles Murray (2012) suggests largely abolishing unpaid internships in order to narrow class divides, calling internships “career assistance for rich, smart children.” Standing (2011, p. 75) portrays interns as a way for employers to obtain “cheap dispensable labour” and describes them as part of (or a channel into) a larger class of precarious workers he calls “the precariat.” Frederick (1997) vividly portrays a system of intern labor where aspirants must arduously compete for and complete numerous costly unpaid internships in order to be considered for paid positions, citing the cultural (or glamour) industries as the worst “abusers” of intern labor. With some exceptions, internships in the music industry are unpaid, save perhaps for small daily travel or lunch stipends. In fact, since a great number of interns pay college tuition for this work-based experience, in effect these individuals pay to do internships. There is therefore wide disagreement and burgeoning debate about who can afford to do internships and who benefits from them.

Previous research on postsecondary internships focuses primarily on program design and outcomes, but there is a crucial need to study what the people involved (interns and employees) actually do at internships—not only in terms of work, but also how they interact and make sense of those interactions. One study compared 156 accounting interns’ initial perceptions of what they should achieve in an internship with their subsequent self-evaluations of what was accomplished. Interns reported that they did not accomplish what they had expected from internships, suggesting a significant gap between interns’ expectations and what was actually achieved (Muhamad, Yahya, Shahimi, & Mahzan, 2009). Based on interviews with 25 student interns from various feminist organizations, Taylor and de Laat (2013) depict the interns’
difficulties fitting in and understanding their (blurry) role, being treated by host organizations as “temps, patients, clients, members, donors, or mailing-list recipients” (p. 94), and feeling disappointed and disillusioned by the experience. Knemeyer and Murphy (2002) found that student and employer assessments of internship effectiveness differed significantly. The disparities between expectation/experience and employer/intern points to the need for studies that incorporate the viewpoints and subjective experiences of numerous actors involved in internship programs, namely intern, faculty/school, and company (Narayanan, Olk, & Fukami, 2010). In this dissertation, I analyze the varied perspectives of interns, employers, and college personnel, using the music industry as a case study.

**Studying the Cultural Industries**

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the “creative” industries and its related workers (Caves, 2000; Florida, 2002; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Peterson & Anand, 2004; Tepper, 2002). This interest seems warranted for a variety of reasons. As post-industrial economies have increasingly transitioned from traditional manufacturing to making and manipulating of symbolic products, the media has proliferated and spread in importance (Lash & Urry, 1994). Cultural products like film, music, and television hold a vital place in our daily lives. Consumers in the USA, Canada, Japan and Britain spend approximately as much or more money on culture and entertainment than they do on health care (Rampell, 2012). At a more personal level, music can serve as a powerful tool for everyday emotional self-regulation (DeNora, 2000) and a symbol around which identities are organized (Gaines, 1990; Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1978). In post-industrial cities, culture is tied to capital and identity at the level of
the individual, but also to a city’s production system (Scott, 2000; Zukin, 1995). Florida (2002), Currid (2007) and others argue that creative workers – and suitable conditions for them to thrive (talent/tolerance/technology) – are primary drivers of economic growth in urban areas. However, despite the importance of cultural industries, until recently there has been a dearth of studies about the subjective experiences and careers of its related workforce.

When Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) used the term “Culture Industry” in the 1940’s, they juxtaposed these two words to polemically argue that cultural products like music, film, and magazines were produced as standardized, banal, and generic commodities geared towards large audiences and considerable profits (akin to mass production in an assembly line). This critique of mass culture held much weight, but did not invite closer scrutiny to the specific ways cultural products were produced. Hirsch (1972) later took seriously Horkheimer and Adorno’s suggestion that cultural goods are produced in an “industry system” and offered a depoliticized account of the organizational structure of cultural industries. Hirsch’s (1972) work traces the “filters” between producers (e.g., musicians) and consumers of books, records, and movies. He describes elements of the highly uncertain environment in which record companies function, characterized by rapidly changing tastes of media gatekeepers and the record-buying public. To minimize this uncertainty, record industry personnel carefully select which records to release, choosing music and performers with the best chance for commercial success. Music recordings “flow” from producer to consumer also due to efforts by “contact men” to gain favorable attention of media gatekeepers (like magazine editors) and retail outlets.

Ryan and Peterson (1982) criticized Hirsch’s “filter-flow” model for treating music simply like “raw material” to be processed by the organizational structure of the music “industry system” (Negus, 1999). Instead, Peterson (1997) and others developed the “production of
culture” perspective, which takes into consideration the wider conditions in which cultural products are born. These works show how cultural products are shaped by the contexts and structures of cultural industries (plural, as there are differences between them) and larger social forces, instead of simply mirroring social structure. Gans (1979) provides an early example of such scholarship by demonstrating how journalists at CBS, NBC, Time, and Newsweek decide – rather than simply report – what is news. His participant observation shows that reporters like to be novel, but only to an extent; generally, they decide what is newsworthy based on their values, professional standards (bound by occupational conformity), and some external pressures (Gans, 1979). Over the last 30 years, the production of culture approach has been the dominant perspective to understand the cultural industries among American sociologists of culture. These studies focus on the ways “symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved” (Peterson & Anand, 2004, p. 311). Peterson and others have applied and developed the sociology of organizations within their study of culture, looking at cultural products like music as organizational products (Anand, 2000).

The production of culture approach parallels and is informed by Becker’s (1982) interactionist work on art worlds, where he shows that art is not simply the result of one person’s genius. The work of artists is shaped, molded, promoted, distributed, and consumed within a dynamic framework of creation. In the realm of music, for example, people at every level (record label owners, music journalists, record store clerks) in their way contribute to the characteristics and legitimacy of the final product (Becker, 1982). Nonetheless, the prevailing convention in the social sciences has been to study cultural workers as one would study workers in any other industry (Becker, 1982; Grazian, 2004; Hennion, 1989). According to this view, while cultural
workers report being attracted by the lure and excitement (or “coolness”) of their respective industry, social scientists should not become enamored by the beauty, glamour, or sacredness of cultural fields (Hennion, 1989). The production of culture approach in effect succeeded in “desacralizing” the study of cultural products. These industries produce goods, and cultural workers employ various strategies to help ensure success. By extension, according to these studies, sociologists must not get too caught up in the distinctiveness or specialness of these industries to capture their guiding patterns and organizational properties. Yet, the cultural industries, at least according to its inhabitants, are not quite like other industries. As Caves (2002) notes about creative workers, employees in these industries care deeply about the products they produce in ways that other workers arguably do not. Workers in the cultural realm identify with the status of the symbolic objects they are in contact with, as simultaneously producers and consumers (Bourdieu, 1984; Du Gay, 1996). Scholars are increasingly studying the meaning that being a “cultural producer” holds for cultural workers, including the characteristics of a no-collar workplace. Below is an introduction to Major Records USA, a major record company where I studied the work conditions of interns and employees.

No-collar work: An introduction to Major Records USA

“Walking down the hallways, I heard music. A chorus of pretty girls was rehearsing in the stairwell, singing enchanting harmonies. More pretty girls worked in the reception area. The atmosphere bristled with hustle-bustle energy.” (Yetnikoff & Ritz 2004, p. 54)

-- Walter Yetnikoff, former CEO of CBS Records, describing the excitement of his first visit at CBS Records

A Yorkshire terrier, no more than a foot in length, makes its way down a long, narrow hallway at Major Records USA. Its legs and strides are very short. From a distance, it appears like it will need many minutes before reaching the end of the hallway, passing numerous offices
on its right and cubicles on its left. As the dog drops a small colorful felt ball from its mouth and wanders towards an employee’s cubicle, a young woman emerges in the hallway and throws the ball down the hall. I recognize the woman; it is an employee in the Artists and Repertoire (A&R) Department who will soon shift from being an “A&R executive” to what she describes as one of the few “full-on A&R” representatives in the world. According to her, only 80 or so people in the world make a full-time living solely from signing and developing music acts at a record company (i.e., do the full-time work of an A&R) – she is therefore on her way to joining what amounts to an exclusive club.

Just being an employee at a record company could, in itself, be described as membership in an exclusive club. There are far more aspiring record company employees than there are positions to fill. The work and workplace environment seem very appealing, as employees are involved in some way in the production and mass dissemination of recorded music. Music industry personnel are seemingly only slightly removed from the musicians and singers who create sounds that people appreciate around the world. However, with the considerable drop in CD sales over the last decade and the pursuant downsizing at record companies, the club has gotten even smaller. Record company employees could be characterized as members of an endangered species.

As the dog chases the ball it passes by Greg, a white man in his early 20s who does work for A&R employees as an unpaid intern. He hopes to get a paid job in the industry. I later walk by to say hello to my fellow intern, and he tells me he is researching bands on MySpace (a popular music and networking website). Greg’s desk is not in an office or even in a cubicle – his workspace, a small desk with a computer, is in the hallway. Although the location of the desk is a marker of interns’ low position in the office hierarchy, Greg is perhaps better off than interns
elsewhere in the building. Some sit at workstations comprised of a long table and many closely placed computers – forming what many call “intern row,” a place of intern camaraderie as much as of physical isolation from employees. Conversely, Greg is in the thick of it, overhearing A&R employees going about their work and observing the comings and goings of people along the hallway – as well as the dog owned by one of the top executives at the company.

The dog picks up the ball further down the beige-carpeted hallway and runs by employees from the Publicity Department, brushing slightly against the wall to the right. Posters of the record company’s releases mostly cover this section of the wall, which partly obscure patches with missing paint. Different music emanates from a variety of offices and cubicles. Walking past them is akin to flipping through a radio dial.

As the dog walks through the space occupied by the Sales and Marketing Department, Hank is on the phone and his music is turned down. For several months Hank was my internship supervisor. He assists an executive in charge of sales and marketing at the record group as well as the Executive Vice President of the company. Hank is a slender 37 year-old black man. He dresses sharply almost every day I see him, routinely wearing expensive designer clothing. Hank maintains an aura of style and immodest confidence, sometimes remarking to others with a tinge of humor, “What can I do? I’m se-xyyy!” He wears his hair slicked back and often ties it into a ponytail (untied it approaches the bottom of his neck). Hank manages artists on the side, sometimes during paid work hours, although around me he remains mostly discreet about his moonlighting.

The dog turns a corner towards the International Department and is now out of sight. I wonder how it would have reacted, an hour before, when Hank blasted one of his recent favorite
jams. Hank dances almost every day I am in the office. On this day Hank says, “Here we go,”
and stands up from his office chair so swiftly it rolls back a few inches. He blasts “Hot Sauce” by
Sweet Rush, a duo of two young women whose music revisits old school hip hop mixed with
bursts of pop. He walks a few steps with exaggerated vertical movements towards the opening
between his desk and the desk of his co-worker Kendra, a tall, slim 22 year-old black woman.
My seat is across from and perpendicular to Hank’s desk, so I turn 90 to 180 degrees to my left
to see the show. Becky, a young Asian-American intern from the Publicity Department sits
across from Kendra and turns similarly to her right. Standing in place, Hank contorts his body
forward from top to bottom, ending each brief cycle with a thrust of his mid-region. He
accelerates his pace and lifts his bent arms upward. Kendra looks on somewhat sheepishly and
likely anticipates what will come next. Hank straightens his arms and swings them forward and
to the sides as his knees intentionally buckle. Becky and I exchange a look, which I interpret as
implying a mix of amusement and discomfort. Hank works his way backward and to his right
towards Kendra. He is directly to her left, shaking his behind just a few inches away from her as
the chorus starts: “I’m just like hot sauce… Hot sauce… Can you handle me? I’m just like hot
sauce… Hot sauce… I’m a spicy cup of tea…” They both laugh as she pushes him away. He
walks back to his desk, drops himself onto his chair, turns down the music and lets out a sigh of
fatigue. Hank smiles widely and catches his breath.

The episode distracts me from my day of administrative tasks, filing CDs, and fetching
lunch. Hank routinely dances, playfully chats with or teases co-workers – his routine has become
routine. Hank is not the only employee expressing himself and having fun at work. Other people
partake in and also initiate these moments of sociability. Mara, a recent hire in the Sales
Department who sits in an office almost directly to my right, later blasts Beyoncé’s track “Work
It Out” on her office’s loudspeakers. She sings along at an exceedingly high pitch, loud enough for Hank and I to overhear. At first I wonder if Mara chose the wrong octave for her vocal abilities and temporarily suspect she is parodying Beyoncé. Mara’s voice comes out in brief high pitch bursts, almost yelps, as she contributes only the occasional words to this very funky song. Hank laughs. I laugh. I ask him why he is laughing. He asks me why I am laughing. I answer, “For the same reason you’re laughing!” He keeps smiling. “She’s coming out of her shell,” he says, adding: “She cracks me up.” After a few weeks on the job, Mara increasingly partakes in the self-expressive culture of Major Records USA, to Hank’s approval. More broadly, Mara responds to and helps construct the workplace’s fun, no-collar culture.

Across several decades, industrial sociologists have documented playful instances of interaction among workers. Notably, Roy (1960, p. 166) depicts factory machine operators fighting the dreariness of monotonous work through “enjoyment of communication ‘for its own sake’ as ‘mere sociabilities,’ as ‘free, aimless social intercourse’.” For example, Roy documents the scene where Ike “steals” the banana from Sammy’s lunch box every morning, exclaims “Banana time!” and quickly devours the banana despite the latter’s feint protests. Brief breaks such as this one, organized as daily repetitions, help produce “job satisfaction, at least job endurance, to work situations largely bereft of creative experience” (Roy, 1960, p. 166). Through patterned horseplay, these workers fend off the monotony of repetitive physical movements. As Kornblum (1974) found among mill workers, the ability to control the work process provides the freedom to create leisure time (or “good times”).

Music industry personnel enjoy a far different workplace than the setting in Roy’s (1960, p. 160) study:
Standing all day in one spot beside three old codgers in a dingy room looking out through barred windows at the bare walls of a brick warehouse, leg movements largely restricted to the shifting of body weight from one foot to the other, hand and arm movements confined, for the most part, to a simple repetitive sequence of place the die, --- punch the clicker, --- place the die, --- punch the clicker, and intellectual activity reduced to computing the hours to quitting time.

While significantly less bleak than the setting above, work in the music industry is not without its dreariness and anxieties. Although far less patterned and predictable, workers like Hank and Mara frequently create leisure time during the workday, though these behaviors go beyond fighting “the beast of monotony” (Roy, 1960, p. 158). Music industry employees and interns find an everyday balance between fun and work, though – significantly – the two overlap as part of the work day: an executive watches footage of a Stevie Wonder DVD; two employees debate the merits of various Beatles songs; Kendra speaks with one of the label’s artists to set up a phone interview; a Publicity employee watches one of “her” artists perform on a daytime television show; an A&R employee attends a show to check out a promising new artist; an intern looks up the MySpace page of a recent signing. It is partly this balance that makes the experience of working at a record company blur the boundary between work and non-work.

The informality of a dog walking throughout the office, music playing on stereos, dancing, sexual innuendo, and various other forms of self-expression come at a cost to workers. Some individuals are so strongly motivated to be part of this business they are willing to work in a hallway for free in exchange for the chance to move up the hierarchy. Yet, as this dissertation illustrates, the workers’ everyday lives alternate between the exhilarating and the dreary. Record industry employees’ careers are highly uncertain and at times quite stressful, not least because of the industry’s struggles since the late 1990s. With the advent of digital technologies, illegal downloading, and the consequent restructuring of operations and business models, the record
industry shrank significantly. During the first decade of the 21st century, global revenues for the sale of recorded music fell from $36.9 billion to $15.9 billion (Smirke, 2011). In the United States, the sales figure went from almost $15 billion to $8.5 billion annually (Friedlander, 2010). In 1999, major record companies employed approximately 25,000 people and by 2010 that figure fell to under 10,000 (Friedlander, 2010).

**Careers in the record industry**

Although the record industry has undergone drastic changes in the last 10 to 15 years, the industry has been notoriously unpredictable for decades (Scott, 1999; Hracs, 2012). The industry’s characteristic unpredictability affects its workers’ chaotic careers. The commercial record industry is a “competitive field” organized around a few oligopolistic firms and a large number of specialized independent companies, both of which provide unstable contexts for careers. The former tend to frequently reorganize, divest and buy units (e.g., Pham, 2011), whereas the latter are inherently small and fragile (Peterson & Anand, 2002). Moreover, the careers of record company personnel are tied to the (unpredictable) success of music recordings and yet most music recordings do not make a profit since, when it comes to cultural products, hits tend to be flukes (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Caves, 2000). Recorded music releases differ only marginally from each other, thus it is difficult to predict which will be successful, despite strategic and often collaborative efforts to ensure commercial success (Hirsch, 1972; Long Lingo & O’Mahony, 2010). Companies in the cultural industries consequently try to minimize this uncertainty (without sacrificing creativity) in various ways, partly by redistributing risks downward, including to its artistic and non-artistic laborers in the form of low salaries and

An emerging body of literature focuses on work conditions and subjective experiences of cultural industry workers (or “cultural workers”), especially focused on employees in the fields of music, film, television, and publishing. Stahl (2012) calls cultural workers “unfree masters,” characterized as Janus-like figures at the intersection of freedom and vulnerability. Cultural workers report strong feelings of stress regarding their job and career uncertainty. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) refer to the workers’ blurring of pleasure and obligation in the television, magazine publishing, and record industries as a complicated form of freedom. Their respondents experience considerable anxiety in the face of work conditions marked by increased casualization, long working hours, and substantial competition. Similarly, research on television and magazine work identifies uncertainty as a key career problem (Dex, Willis, Paterson, & Sheppard, 2000) and portrays a culture of employment insecurity and embedded risk (Ekinsmyth, 2002).

Careers in the cultural industries tend to be “chaotic” and are not bound by internal labor markets, most obviously for individuals engaged in temporary organizations and freelance work, but also for those employed at permanent firms (Ekinsmyth, 2002; Jones, 1996; Neff et al., 2005; Peterson & Anand, 2002). Consequently, cultural workers generally frame and organize their careers around the field instead of the firm:

For virtually all those involved, the locus of the career is now the field and not the current employer, and, as in contemporary team sports, players work very hard for their employer not so much out of long-term loyalty to the team but to ensure and enhance their own career prospects in the field at large (Peterson & Anand, 2002, p. 272).
While scholars and participants refer to cultural work careers as uncertain, these are perhaps especially so at their onset. The aspirant’s transition from layperson to skilled worker is a slow and challenging process (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961). Neophytes often struggle to find and define their place and identity (Ibarra, 1999; Louis, 1980), even within large, highly structured firms with clear bureaucratic structures (Hughes, 1958). Established members of a workplace or “community of practice” introduce newcomers to its values and behaviors through liminal and (in theory) incrementally growing involvement (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). There is variation within and between the cultural industries (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011), however the usual challenge of finding one’s footing – and, potentially, employment – is generally exacerbated by the (1) considerable oversupply of potential workers and (2) lack of a clear, formal sorting mechanism for entry (Ekinsmyth, 2002; Jones, 1996; O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006).

The substantial surplus of aspiring workers prompts some participants to compare attempts at entry to boot camp (Jones, 1996) or fraternity rushing (Rensin, 2004). In the cultural industries the aspirant, not the firm, assumes the main burden of training (including cost); and yet training does not guarantee entry, nor does entry ensure advancement (Jones, 1996; Jones & DeFillippi, 1996). In the absence of a clear formal sorting mechanism in most cultural industry subfields, like a specialized advanced degree as a recognized filter, employers in these labor markets struggle to differentiate between the skilled and the unskilled (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012; Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & von Rittmann, 2003). Potential employees attempt to build and signal their “employability” particularly through developing professional networks and accumulating (often unpaid) work experience (Ekinsmyth, 2002; O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Smith, 2010). For these workers – and firms more generally – an important part of getting work
revolves around building and sustaining a good reputation (Becker, 1982; Blair, 2001; Zafirau, 2008). Cultural workers stress the importance of strong networks at every stage of their career, but the emphasis on networking is especially salient for new aspirants (Dex et al., 2000; Randle & Culkin, 2009). Moreover, according to Hesmondhalgh (2010, p. 279): “It is increasingly difficult to enter the media and media-related industries in advanced industrial countries without having performed, at some point, a significant period of unpaid work.” Launching a paid career in the cultural industries often necessitates extended unpaid (or low-paid) work, though some commentators and cultural industry workers claim this informal requirement causes a significant barrier to entry for individuals with less privileged backgrounds (Christopherson, 2009; Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Lee, 2011).

Research Methods

Two preludes inform this study of the intern economy as they allowed me to recognize the importance and challenges of unpaid internships early on during my research. In the first instance, as a teenager, I founded and eventually co-ran a small independent record company from the basement of my parents’ home in Quebec City. In the subsequent years, the label consumed most of my free time during my undergraduate education, an investment offset by garnering considerable satisfaction, some success, and developing several memorable friendships. Three years into the endeavor, in the fall of 2000, the small record company hosted its first and only intern. By then, the company had moved up in many ways: a handful of releases were college radio hits, our roster of bands was obscure but well-respected in the Canadian indie rock industry, and the HQ had moved from the house’s basement to the top (i.e., second) floor. The intern, Zvonimir, was a very good, albeit somewhat recent friend. He had expressed interest
in helping my twin brother (one of my record label partners) and me with the record company out of passion and interest.

Early on, one of us (perhaps Zvonimir) joked that he was our intern. The title stuck. Somehow, the relationship with our friend temporarily changed into an asymmetrical “joking relationship” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). By then I had never been an intern nor consciously thought about the intern economy, and yet we joked about Zvonimir running our errands and doing other menial tasks. The work we assigned was not much better. Although Zvonimir is fluent in three languages, good with people, passionate and knowledgeable, we nonetheless had him primarily cut out articles from magazines to create press releases, count CD inventory, stuff envelopes for orders, and enter figures in a database we never used. He was also charged with listening to some of the least promising demo recordings we received. On one occasion, my brother and I failed to inform him we would be absent for part of his intern shift so he worked alone and drank tea with our mother. After a few months, Zvonimir applied for a job at the largest record store of the city and listed me as a reference. When I received a call from a store employee, I praised him vigorously and stated that his loss would be significant. Zvonimir landed the job and he continued to offer invaluable help, though less frequently, unambiguously as a friend. The intern jokes ended, though I reflected many times since about this sensitizing episode and the significance of the intern role.

The second prelude occurred the next year when I moved to New York City in August 2001. Looking for work, I considered getting a job in the music industry. After all, I founded and had been co-running an independent record company in Canada for a few years and thought myself amply willing and capable of performing low-level tasks at an American record company. The week of my arrival I discussed this idea with one of my music industry contacts at an online
music retailer. As I stood in the company’s office, a huge loft space in the heart of SoHo, the young man perhaps five years my senior described the structure of the music labor market, saying that if I wanted to get a job I would have to intern first. He informed me that, despite my experience, to the people in the New York music industry I was basically – professionally speaking – a stranger. A lot of people who intern do not go very far, he added, though the interns who are smart and motivated tend to get noticed and hired. He expressed confidence that I would get hired as an employee after establishing myself as an unpaid intern. Financially, I quickly needed a paid job and therefore could not afford to take an unpaid internship. I applied for the few music industry jobs I saw listed online that summer and never heard back from anyone, eventually working in another industry before attending graduate school.

My earlier experiences within the intern economy made me aware of the challenges of interning. “Intern” became a loaded term, a sensitizing concept and therefore provided me with “a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances” (Blumer, 1969, p. 148). Moreover, due to my music industry contacts and credentials, I was able to gain access to a research site in spring 2004 to complete the requirements of a graduate ethnography class.

Pilot study

From early February until mid-May 2004, I spent at least two hours per week, usually a whole afternoon, at College Promotions as part of an ethnography class. The firm promotes records on behalf of bands and mainly independent record labels of the indie rock genre. The company’s day-to-day work involves remaining in contact with personnel at about 400 college and community radio stations as well as mailing records to these radio stations on behalf of
clients. I gained access to this site by offering my services as an intern, stating that I wanted to study how the firm functions as part of a class project. I had known the boss (Kevin) of the four-employee company for many years because I had worked with College Promotions since 1999 to promote my independent record label’s last eight releases. After warning me that my intern tasks would be very tedious, I assured him of my serious interest and he granted me access.

When I started studying this firm, it was not my original intention to focus on the role and experiences of interns; instead, I was interested in the way promotion and PR firms help shape popular tastes in music. However, I was quickly struck by the abundance of interns. The company was hosting five part-time interns who spent the bulk of their time preparing CDs for the Friday mailings – this involved manually taking the shrink-wrap off of CDs (like you would when you buy one at a store) and placing a College Promotions sticker on the back. Every week about 2,000 or more CDs were “stickered” in this way. Other times interns helped with doing inventory, photocopying, running errands, and – seemingly the highlight of the week – writing short CD reviews to be posted on the company’s website. In addition, the company hosted an unpaid full-time intern who essentially did the same work as employees, though he kept in touch with personnel at the least important radio stations. I realized there was a hierarchy of interns, with such a thing as super interns (or “head interns”), with those at the top being next in line for a promotion.

On my third visit at the site I was part of a conversation that reminded me of my earlier contact with the intern economy and alerted me to the sociological promise of this research topic. It took place on a Friday afternoon after the weekly mailing was completed. Two part-time interns, Abby (an employee), and I went to a Mexican restaurant for a late lunch. During lunch, an intern and Abby complained that the full-time intern had been acting like “a jerk.” The full-
time intern did higher level work like interact with music directors at radio stations, yet according to Abby, he forgot that ultimately he is an intern and “grunt work needs to get done.” This conversation helped me realize that there was something significant happening at this site. While I thought of interns as having a relatively informal role at this office, they definitely have their “place.” The intern’s role is to take care of whatever menial tasks need attention. It was understood as wonderful that a senior intern had the chance to do “real” work like get in touch with music directors, thereby gaining actual experience in the PR industry, but if he did not stop what he was doing to help with administrative duties, or did not stop fast enough, he was straying from performing his core function of making sure the employees were not burdened by the grunt work. Through this conversation I started thinking of interns in the music industry – and interns in general – as performing a particular role, thereby meeting or challenging expectations about their place.

*Participant observation and interviews*

This dissertation presents evidence from participant observation and semi-structured interviews with music industry interns, employees, and college personnel. From July to December 2008, I conducted participant observation for at least seven hours per day at two companies: I spent two days per week for four months at the Sales and Marketing Department of a major record label I call Major Records USA and at least one day per week for six months at the Digital Sales Department of Indie Distribution, a distribution company specialized in “indie” (or independent) music. At both research sites I gained entry as an intern and was an overt participant observer. Like the interns I met through this study, I had to “work my way up” to
finally gain access to my preferred site (a major record company). I secured the Indie Distribution internship pursuant to interviewing Abby for this study. I had gotten to know Abby well during my fieldwork at College Promotions years before. Abby worked for Indie Distribution, mentioned that she was looking for an intern, and put in a good word with her boss (my interview for this internship consisted of a handshake and brief chat with Dana, the department head). During my second month as an Indie Distribution intern, I met a Major Records USA employee at Abby’s birthday party. The employee seemed interested in my research and, when I told her I was applying for an internship at Major Records USA, she insisted that I list her as a reference. Months later, I learned that the employee knew the head of my Major Records USA department well, which may have played in my favor. Other large music companies’ human resources departments had previously refused my requests for access.

At Indie Distribution, I interned in the digital sales department, mostly interacting with Abby (a 26 year-old white woman), Nate (a 26 year-old Asian-American man), and Dana (a 30 year-old white woman). My responsibilities included content verification of cell phone ringtone menus, i.e., going through the ringtone menus of various cell phone providers weekly and taking note of which distributed artists were featured; compiling emails sent to me from a handful of digital sales employees (a few of them working outside New York City) regarding their sales strategies for upcoming releases and formatting these into marketing plans; and various small administrative tasks, which included helping Dana assemble her expense reports, but never entailed fetching anyone coffee or a meal. At Major Records USA, I interned in sales and marketing for Hank (37 year-old black man) and primarily spent my working hours stocking refrigerators, running errands in the office, printing reports, checking emails, and occasionally picking up food or coffee orders.
Assuming the position of intern provided a fruitful point of entry to situate internships and careers within the music industry. Ethnographers who assume a highly participatory role in the field, and thus carry out real responsibilities, have been likened to interns in that both roles provide “special opportunities to get close to, participate in, and experience life in previously unknown settings” (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw, 1995, p. 4). Doing fieldwork as an intern enabled me to become socialized to the norms of the sites, to observe and participate in everyday activities, focusing particularly on the visible workplace interactions between (and within) interns and employees. At both companies my tasks as an intern were primarily administrative or research-oriented, though typically not time-sensitive, which made extended observation (and note-taking) from my desk or during occasional walks throughout the office possible. I had built-in reasons for walking around both offices: at Major Records USA I frequently needed to interact with employees or interns down the hall or on another floor; at Indie Distribution I sat down the hall and around the corner from my assigned department, which made movement necessary.

In addition, since employees expect interns to attempt to speak with various employees, they encouraged or seemingly tolerated my additional walks and detours. Grindstaff (2002) and Zafirau (2008) also studied cultural industries by gaining entry as interns; similar to their respective experiences, my low status as “just an intern” (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 283) limited my access to certain meetings and people, yet also facilitated entry and mitigated some of the typical trust issues between ethnographer and participants. As Zafirau (2008) found during his fieldwork at Limelight, a talent agency in Hollywood, one’s status as an intern can overshadow (though not completely) one’s status as a researcher. I wrote daily field notes and frequently re-read these notes to locate potential themes and gaps in need of further development. The fieldwork occasionally brought me beyond the context of the office, extending to music venues, bars,
coffee shops, and birthday parties. Participant observation helped build on early interview data to capture contextualized work practices (Barley & Kunda, 2001) as well as generate and clarify the themes of inquiry regarding people’s attempts to start and sustain careers in the music industry.

As part of this research, I interacted with hundreds of music industry workers, college personnel, and key informants (writers, attorneys, etc.). Most recently, I met several “intern labor rights” activists and attended a handful of their gatherings. Building on these various conversations and fieldwork, I completed semi-structured interviews with 60 people between April 2008 and December 2013 (primarily between September 2008 and November 2011). I remained in contact with most of these participants throughout the study, sixteen of which I formally interviewed more than once to follow up on their status and revisit findings. All but five of the interviews were digitally recorded. Interviews were transcribed and then coded using ATLAS.ti software. Interviews ranged from 38 minutes to over three hours, though most lasted at least 90 minutes. Interview data served to investigate, verify, and counterbalance data from participant observation. Later interviews were conducted for the purpose of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Questions elicited participants’ biographical and occupational backgrounds, experiences with and opinions about internships (and interns), career challenges in the music industry, the forms and consequences of recent music industry struggles, and workplace culture.

Interviewees include 33 men and 27 women; 48 of which are white, eight are Asian, and four are black. I interviewed five internship coordinators from New York City colleges and a lawyer (Maurice Pianko) who represents interns suing for back pay. Among the 54 interns and

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2 As the table of participants suggests, interns at Major Records USA and other companies are mostly female (though gender distribution varies between departments) whereas the employees with the longest tenure tend to be male.
employees I formally interviewed, 39 had completed an internship or more. Thirteen of the recent or current interns had not yet secured their first paid music industry position (five of these were still full-time students). Five of the employees were no longer employed in the music industry – these relative “old timers” were interviewed to gain a better historical understanding of internship programs. For additional information about participants, see Table 1.

Table I. List of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<th>Race</th>
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I recruited participants through messages sent via two local university music-oriented student email lists, through contacts at fieldwork sites, and via snowball sampling. College internship coordinators were contacted directly from website listings and were chosen partly based on their likelihood to supervise interns in the music industry. While the sample was not randomly selected and thus is not representative of the music industry as a whole, it is arguably illustrative of practices in the commercial New York City rock/pop record industry, focusing especially on “major” record companies and smaller independent (“indie”) companies. Participants mostly worked or interned in the following departments at major or indie record companies: A&R (Artists and Repertoire, who scout talent and act as a liaison between the artists and record company), Publicity (cultivates publicity for artists/releases) and Sales/Marketing (these duties overlap and are not completely separated at most record companies encountered in this study).
Scope of Study and Chapter Outline

Despite their increasing prevalence and formalization, internships have not yet generated the level of research that befits their rising importance. I began research with the general aim of investigating the context, characteristics, and challenges of the music industry intern’s career. “Career” as a concept is used here in the way post-WWII scholars, many of them at the University of Chicago, studied a social process by identifying a series of “turning points” and “status passages”; in this way a career became broader than the understanding of a sequence of jobs in that one could analyze the career of the marijuana smoker, mental patient, or medical student (Barley, 1989). One of the benefits of studying careers is what Goffman (1959a, p. 127) refers to as the concept’s two-sidedness: “One side is linked to internal matters held dearly and closely, such as image of self and felt identity; the other side concerns official position, jural relations, and style of life, and is part of a publicly accessible institutional complex.” This dissertation therefore focuses on the career of the intern as situated within organizational practices and the way interns and employees interpret and experience the intern role.

As I completed fieldwork and coded interview data, several themes emerged. The study of interns in the music industry became the story of newcomers trying to find their footing; aspirations finding or eluding more concrete shape; the choosers, the chosen, and the others; a business in shambles fighting to survive; generations fighting each other’s pretensions; race, taste, and professional pigeonholing; paying dues and figuring out how to pay the rent; becoming an adult quickly and feeling like a child; ambivalence towards conventional forms of work; an educational experience in an industry that devalues music business education. These themes emerge in several of the chapters below in which I describe what Becker (1996, p. 56) refers to
as “a system of relationships” with the intention “to show how things hang together in a web of mutual influence.”

In Chapter 1, I ask why so many people are attracted to working within the music industry. The chapter applies and expands accounts of Weber’s theory of charisma to understand what is both specific and general about the music industry case. By focusing on how interns and (especially) employees construct the importance of the music business within a context of routinized work, I analyze how the “charisma” of artistic production generates a powerful, but short-lived source of commitment for music industry workers. I show how the co-existence of charismatic and bureaucratic qualities plays out in the everyday, informal negotiation of workplace order. The lure of the music industry attracts people who want to do “important” work, though participants must convey their excitement according to an informal code of conduct and worker commitment may be short-lived. The music industry’s “institutional charisma” helps recruit potential new workers and results in cycles of enchantment where an army of committed newcomers eagerly awaits the exit of current employees.

In Chapter 2, I articulate how situated members of the music industry construct internships as a path towards employment. I show how music industry personnel generally devalue formal educational shortcuts to music industry employment, instead privileging on-site learning as an ennobling rite of passage. Employees also construct internships (or other “on-site” experience) as the best way for an aspirant to learn, yet the responsibility for training falls on the intern and occurs under challenging circumstances. Aspiring and paid employees interpret and accept what I call the “mailroom model” for training and thus reproduce uncertain and precarious work arrangements for interns.
While aspirants are guided into doing internships as a strategy for career entry, most interns do not gain music industry employment. Why? And how does this work? By focusing on the characteristics and challenges of the intern role, in Chapter 3 I argue that interns perform provisional labor. Internships are provisional as in temporary, conditional, and ambiguous (“what you make of it”). Interns embody a flexible pool of labor for a host company, allowing for a range of formal and informal benefits for all parties concerned. Internships represent a liminal and indeterminate period during which aspirants form a reservoir of excess workers before some interns potentially get hired as paid employees.

Chapter 4 analyzes how people do succeed within the intern economy. How do employers choose and evaluate interns? How do interns move up and down the status hierarchy? I find that it is possible for interns to elevate their status and move beyond the characteristics and constraints of the intern role, though notions of race, class, age, and gender inform the selection and evaluation of interns as well as the interns’ ability to succeed. I describe three main factors in intern selection (time, informality, and demonstrable passion); these disadvantage aspirants without the means for extended periods of unpaid work, mask nepotistic or other preferential selection, and reproduce racial stereotypes. To be a “good intern” and stretch the role, aspirants must look and sound right, show deference while deploying soft skills, and be entrepreneurial. Taken together, the above suggests how the intern economy exacerbates class and other forms of inequality while nonetheless allowing some “mismatched” or especially skilled interns to secure advancement.

I conclude with a look towards the future of the intern economy, which necessitates closer attention to its past. How long have internships and similar forms of work-based learning existed and how do these historical antecedents help us understand the organization of the
current intern economy? Also, how is it legally possible for interns to work \textit{for free}? I briefly survey the history of work-based learning with a focus on apprenticeships and its related social/economic system as an antecedent to the intern economy; I show how the transition to the current intern economy was driven in part by the perception that work-based learning provides a solution to problems with the “school-to-work” transition; and I explain the emergence of a formal legal structure permitting unpaid labor as part of educational experience. I conclude with an analysis of current intern activism and legal challenges to unpaid work.
Chapter 1: The Charisma of Music Industry Work

Labor and glamour: Notes from a day at Major Records USA

I arrive at the office at 8:20 a.m. and do not see a computer at my workspace. Hank had moved it to make room; I will spend the day folding t-shirts. For several days, three interns and one assistant work to mail nearly 5,000 t-shirts to various record stores as part of a campaign to entice customers to buy a band’s new CD. For most of the day I open boxes of extra-large t-shirts, fold t-shirts into piles of five or sixteen, and stuff them into packages for delivery. Within the first hour I get used to the new t-shirt smell in the air. I occasionally need to take breaks from the physical work of carrying boxes from one part of the hallway to another and repeated folding movements. My arms and back start to ache. Hank later asks me to order lunch for the department that day – a weekly ritual – and I welcome the break. Although I am not technically an employee, I receive a free lunch as well. In the afternoon, as my work pace slows down slightly, a publicity department employee hands me a wristband as she walks past, telling me there is an event tonight.

A few hours later, I arrive at a venue to see a performance by a musical act recently signed to Major Records USA. It is an industry showcase. As an executive casually described it, attendees are all “industry people,” including “radio people, MTV, press, and some industry wannabes – people who want to be in the industry who know someone and got themselves invited.” I show the wristband to a doorman and walk into the large rectangular room. Pink light is projected onto the white walls, nearly all the way up to the high ceilings; there are four circular columns in the room, each surrounded by tables covered in pink flowers and rose petals; the

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3 Despite the lax corporate culture at Major Records USA, some employees must arrive earlier than others. The sales department must prepare and distribute reports by the time other employees begin their day. Therefore, I typically arrive by 8:30 a.m. and my supervisor starts his workday even earlier.
drink sponsor for the evening is providing a sweet pink-colored alcohol beverage so most of the people immediately around me are holding a pink glass. Opposite from the door is a stage and a large screen showing photos of tonight’s act and promotional blurbs about her accomplishments.

Near me stands Judy, a 23 year-old white woman who has been working at Major Records USA for about seven months. Shortly after we begin talking, Judy points to a young white man wearing a dark sweater, noting that he manages many artists. I mention that the DJ for the evening seems to have a lot of friends standing around him. Looking befuddled, she asks me if I know who he is. I tell her I do not. “That’s DJ Cassidy! He’s huge. He’s a really big deal. Putin flew him to Russia to [DJ] a party.” Judy and I are standing near various Major Records USA employees, including the president of one of its subsidiary labels. The president warmly greets the young white man who manages artists and then speaks with an executive from another record label. Although the employees I see from the company mostly tend to speak with people who are close in status – e.g., an assistant with an assistant, a manager with an assistant, and a project manager with a vice president – I am struck by everyone’s proximity. The audience comprised of journalists, musicians, executives, “wannabes,” and others blurs together in this dimly lit space. We are all eating the same hors d’oeuvres, drinking the same pink drink, listening to the same DJ, anticipating the same show, and standing merely a few feet from each other.

Over drinks, Judy tells me she does not just want a job. “I need perks.” She adds, “I want work to be fun. I want to listen to music every day. I want to go to events like these.” I can’t blame her. My evening is quickly making up for a day spent folding piles of smelly t-shirts. The social distance in the workplace is replaced by the pleasure of being surrounded by fellow music
people in this exciting context, giving me the – I suspect false – impression of social proximity and collegiality.

I later work my way through the crowd to get another drink. Standing with two other interns, we position ourselves close to the stage and watch the show. The artist plays a short set, and we comment to each other about her songs and appearance. The discussion continues with employees of the label later that evening and occasionally throughout the week as we return to our mundane tasks in the office. The exciting experience bleeds into our day-to-day and, then, into our collective memory of the workplace. Work is fun, and the fun ends up being work.

Attending a show can be an exciting perk of the job and it can be a chore. It is a common enough occurrence for many in the industry to feel both extremes in the same day, and even at the same event. When discussing the experience of attending a similar show on the morning after, Larry (a senior Major Records USA employee) illustrated how the fun is also very stressful: “I did not feel like going out last night, at all, I knew it was going to rain and I was tired, but you know what, I did it, and it turned out I had a great time.” Going to shows is potentially an exciting, important part of one’s job; not going to shows is sometimes a sign that one has lost enthusiasm for being part of the music industry. When talking about having to attend two different shows the night before, he told me he has little choice:

The day you stop going to shows, and the day you stop being part of the music business, you might as well just go and sell, you know, insurance, because you came into the business to be part of it and if you just wind up making it 9 to 5, which people do, then why even bother? You might as well change careers.

Not attending shows regularly, according to him, is tantamount to no longer being part of the music business. Larry is not simply making a personal, moral argument about what it means to be (or not be) part of the music industry; he is articulating some of the distinguishing features of
Major Records USA’s organizational culture and the characteristic tension in music industry work between freedom, self-expression, and fun vs. precariousness, constraint, and routine.

Record companies like Major Records USA generally have a no-collar office culture where self-expression in and outside of the office is encouraged and, at least superficially, well received. As my day at Major Records USA illustrates, workplaces in the cultural industries are understood as ideal sites for worker self-realization and the blurring of work and fun (Florida, 2002). Workplaces like a record company do seem to present, as with other cultural/media industry workplaces, “an environment where personal identity could be deeply felt and shaped” (Ross, 2003, p. 51). However, being one of the few people working in music is not only fun; with few exceptions, it involves mundane office work and highly precarious employment.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010, p. 10) argue that there is a close link between pleasure at work in cultural industries and self-exploitation, and consequently ask, “Why do so many young people want to work in these industries, in spite of the low rates of pay and long working hours?” Ross provides a partial answer in his study of “humane” workplaces during New York City’s dot-com boom, pointing to the lure of a casual, self-expressive workplace culture, though at the cost of the workers’ low salaries and long hours: “When work becomes sufficiently humane, we are likely to do far too much of it, and it usurps an unacceptable portion of our lives” (2003, p. 255). Ross asserts that workers become blinded by the humane workplace crafted to incite fun and self-expression; in essence, he argues they are duped into becoming loyal and accepting bad labor conditions. Yet, relatively new employees as well as industry veterans I met consistently identified tensions between “fun” and “work” co-existing every day. As opposed to Ross, in this chapter I find that workers claim they know they are in dead-end
jobs, but these are dead-end dream jobs. Worker commitment, I suggest, is linked to the music industry’s “institutional charisma.”

This chapter applies and expands accounts of Weber’s theory of charisma to understand what is both specific and general about the music industry case. By focusing on how interns and (especially) employees construct the importance of the music business within a context of routinized work, this chapter analyzes how the “charisma” of artistic production generates a powerful, but short-lived source of commitment for music industry workers. Of course, this application of charisma departs from Weber’s original formulation of the concept. Weber (1968) contrasted the “traditional” and “legal-rational” with the “charismatic” form of authority legitimated by an innovator’s recognized exceptional qualities. A charismatic leader is seen by others as endowed with divine power (e.g., Jesus Christ) and is most capable of disrupting social order compared to the traditional and legal-rational forms of authority (Weber, 1968). Weber focused on the most concentrated, or ideal typical, form of charismatic authority. Shils (1965, p. 202) later extended the theory to address how the charismatic and the routine co-exist in everyday, non-ecclesiastic forms, suggesting that charismatic qualities could be found at the level of institutions:

[Charismatic qualities] may be manifested intensely in the qualities, words, actions and products of individual personalities. … But they may also become resident, in varying degrees of intensity, in institutions—in the qualities, norms, and beliefs to which members are expected to adhere or are expected to possess—and, in an attenuated form, in categories or strata of the members of a society.

According to Shils, charisma may disrupt as well as maintain social order. An individual’s charismatic quality stems from a perceived “connection with (including possession by or embodiment of) some very central feature of man’s existence” which can include “contact with the divine,” “disciplined scientific penetration,” or “artistic expression” (Shils, 1965, p. 201). In
a bureaucratic institution bound by rational-legal authority, however, “charisma is not concentratedly imputed to the person occupying the central role or to the role itself, but is dispersed in a diminished but unequal intensity throughout the hierarchy of roles and rules” (Shils, 1965, p. 205). Charismatic qualities may therefore spread to the level of institutions, organizations, or occupations that people identify with the most “central” and “meaningful” features of life (like art, science, politics, and religion).

Kanter applied Shils’ notion of institutional charisma to understand how utopian communes, often lacking in charismatic leadership, can initiate and sustain a high level of member commitment. According to Kanter (1972, p. 113), organizational ceremonies such as the Major Records USA industry showcase described above instill “institutionalized awe,” which serves as “a means by which surrender to the greater power of a social system can be effected” by reinforcing members’ commitment to the group (Chen, 2012). For institutionalized awe to be effective, it “first requires an ideological and structural system that orders and gives meaning to the individual’s life, and which attaches this order and meaning to the organization” (Kanter, 1972, p. 113). An individual’s surrender to a system based on shared beliefs can range from limited to near complete, though in all cases “merely by virtue of their participation in the system, members could partake of its special fund of qualities” (Kanter, 1972, p. 115). This helps explain how, to workers at a record company who do mundane work, their significant role in the production of music relative to most of the population can create “awe-arousing centrality” (Shils, 1965, p. 201). As I show below, members construe themselves as moral and worthy of deference by non-members even though their day-to-day may consist predominantly of routine administrative tasks; in this way, the bureaucratic and charismatic co-exist.
Biggart (1989) applied these interpretations of charisma in her study of direct selling organizations like Avon. She found that these businesses secure social order and worker commitment through institutionalized awe. Direct selling organizations feature strong organizational ideologies with a mission-oriented character; working for a direct selling organization is “an intense and encompassing experience” (Biggart, 1989, p. 134) predicated on the perceived moral value of the organization and, by extension, one’s work. Biggart (1989, p. 131) contrasted direct selling and traditional bureaucratic organizations by claiming the former are legitimated by a philosophical mission as opposed to the latter’s universal rules and laws; workers are “followers” instead of bureaucratic officials; hierarchies are blurred; members are recruited based on their potential for commitment as opposed to clear expertise and experience; compensation is not solely material in nature; and tenure is described as “way of life” instead of part of a career. Companies like Major Records USA and Indie Distribution share these non-traditional (or charismatic) qualities, yet they are also unambiguously bureaucratic organizations. Throughout this chapter, I show how the co-existence of charismatic/bureaucratic qualities plays out in the everyday, informal negotiation of workplace order.

In the first part of the chapter I focus on how a strong occupational identity based on music’s sacredness is exploited and reinforced day-to-day. Newcomers must learn the appropriate ways of being fans and professionals as articulated through the norms, values, and occupational identities of music industry workers. These workers resolve the fan/professional dynamic (or tension) by deploying an informally policed code of conduct I call “industry cool,” involving how to dress, speak, and demonstrate reverence for music. Music personnel must also accentuate the nonmaterial rewards of their work; they articulate their occupational identity as a “passion job,” i.e., a choice between meaning and money, though managed in practice by finding
a tasteful balance between artistic and commercial imperatives through stressing music’s meaning. Moreover, their occupational identity gains further currency through building symbolic difference compared to workers in other fields as well as the insufficiently passionate members of their industry.

In the second part of the chapter, I consider some factors that challenge the worker’s commitment and therefore show the limits of institutional charisma. Various factors challenge the enchantment and continuation of the music industry worker’s career, including: mundane work, precariousness, and low pay; a complicated relationship to music; and aging out. Organizations in the music industry profit from being charismatic sites that attract passionate newcomers. Music industry work is potentially exciting yet tenure is almost assuredly brief. By considering the meaning people attribute to their work and providing an account of workers’ experiential career (Tavory & Winchester, 2012), I show why interns might want to work in the music industry, what it means to act as a professional in this context, and why music careers tend to be short.

“Music in their Blood”: Industry Cool and Building Symbolic Difference

“Within the cultural industries the notion is endlessly reproduced that cultural work is special and mysterious and can only be undertaken by special and mysterious people.” (Beck, 2003, p. 3)

In 2012, while announcing the completion of Universal Music Group’s acquisition of EMI’s recorded music operations, Lucian Grainge, UMG chairman and CEO, exclaimed: “EMI is finally returning to people who have music in their blood” (Sisario, 2012). Through the acquisition, the Big Four major record labels became the Big Three: Universal Music Group,
Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group, a shocking development considering the historical importance of EMI. Citigroup, which seized the company in 2011 from private equity firm Terra Firma Capital Partners, most recently owned the record label but Grainge was unambiguously referring to Terra Firm’s founder Guy Hands and his associates. The venerable EMI, once home to The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, and The Sex Pistols, was taken over by Terra Firma in 2007 with disastrous results. Hands’ track record was previously untainted as an extremely successful financier with Goldman Sachs and Nomura; he made those banks billions of dollars from acquiring businesses in industries as varied as alcohol, renewable energy, aircraft leasing, and waste management. Yet Hands, not exactly a rock ‘n’ roll kind of guy, had no experience in the music industry and soon learned “managing talent is a lot different than selling liquor” (Lauria, 2010). By the end of 2007, the label’s market share dipped from 17.9% to 15.4% (Finch, Gibson & Needham, 2008). He replaced the CEO with fellow music neophyte Elio Leoni-Sceti, an executive from Procter & Gamble and Reckitt-Benckiser.

Around this time, artists left the label in droves. Notably, Radiohead and Paul McCartney signed new contracts elsewhere. On their way out, Radiohead portrayed Hands’ new team as “a confused bull in a china shop” (Finch, Gibson & Needham, 2008). Hands also fired U.K. music head Tony Wadsworth, a respected figure with 25 years of experience, prompting chart-topping act Coldplay to threaten to leave the label, with their manager stating: “Tony was the reason a lot of bands signed to EMI. Artists want to work with music people, not finance guys” (Bates, 2008). Grainge’s statement about having music in one’s blood signals not only Hands’ relative inexperience in the music industry; the statement highlights the music industry’s prevalent sense of distinction as a business run by passionate fans. According to the industry’s script, music people, as opposed to financiers, understand (or project) the sacredness of music as more than a
simple commodity, they relish its aesthetic culture, and their passion for music flows inextricably in their blood.

Music industry personnel are on the front lines in negotiating what social scientists describe as the contradiction in cultural industries between art and commerce (Caves, 2000). Music and the experiences surrounding it are often described with reverence; simultaneously, the people who inhabit the music industry attempt to make a living by selling music in commodity form. The people involved in the business of recorded music tend to describe the symbolic results of their efforts – the music – as sacred. While it’s all about the music (or art for art’s sake) is a simplistic, oft-mocked idiom about the music world, it is arguably no more crude than the alternative stereotypical description of music industry personnel as backhanded sharks who purely seek to make gains at the expense of artists. Neither formulation has outlived its usefulness in describing the personal engagement, identity, nor organization of individuals involved in the music business.

The people within the walls of a music company bring a range of biographies and fluctuating levels of excitement towards music and, more specifically, towards their work in the music industry. Nonetheless, the pleasure and meaning derived from working in the music industry is articulated, in its most general terms, through an occupational and personal identity as a “music person.” Music people gain status by being affiliated in some way with the creation of music. As with other occupational identities, the role comes with a general behavioral and attitudinal script, including attending shows and showing enthusiasm for music. Status and the strength of one’s occupational identity are not evenly spread. Even if employees do not regularly attend shows and are not as enthusiastic about music as they once were, they very rarely describe their job as purely a 9-to-5 affair. Conversely, an overly enthusiastic music person (e.g., an
intern) risks appearing simply like a “fan.” Employees must channel their personal musical engagement – or construct / perform it – in order to act as a professional. These characteristics of music workers and their occupational identities are attached to the construction of symbolic difference.

Learning the culture: Being industry cool

Karl is the Director of Sales for a well-respected indie record company and meets me for an interview, coming directly from the office, wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, sneakers, and socks adorned with skulls and crossbones. Karl describes his workplace culture as very casual, where employees wear whatever they want. As further evidence of the laid back and flexible work environment, he points to the stubble on his face and notes with some obviousness that he has not shaven in a couple days. In addition to appearance, the workplace is relatively casual since the workday starts at 10 a.m., and even then: “I get to work really around 10:15 most days and I don’t have a boss sitting there at my desk, you know, at 10:00 wondering where I was at.”

Although many music industry employees tell me they appreciate their loose culture, the importance of no-collared perks is most evident when newcomers fail to adequately fit in as members of the group.

Becker et al. (1961, p. 4) mark the importance of learning one’s role during the transition from student to practitioner: “Science and skill do not make a physician; one must also be initiated into the status of physician; to be accepted, one must have learned to play the part of a physician in the drama of medicine.” As interns transition, potentially, from merely consumers to producers of music, they must learn more than how the work is done. Employees describe a newcomer dressing too formally as a physical manifestation of cluelessness. Newcomers must
learn to fashion their behavior (including presentation style) according to a code of conduct I call *industry cool*. Though largely implicit, as with other forms of professional socialization, interns learn to understand and respect the local culture via a moral education most likely leading to conformity. As much as appropriate clothing lends itself to an appearance of competence, to dress inappropriately challenges (intentionally or not) the social order of the organization. Industry cool includes forms of dress, interaction etiquette between co-workers, and a professionally appropriate enthusiastic-yet-detached relationship to music.

To better understand how role is adapted and internalized, I asked Nate, a music industry employee and ex-intern, to talk about how he learned to do his job. He recalls the interview for his internship at an indie record label and how he overdressed: “They made fun of me because I came all dressed up.” He showed up wearing “a blazer and a button-down, suit pants and everything and [the employees] were like, ‘What are you doing?’” Despite his inappropriately dressy outfit, he was granted the internship on the spot. He continues: “The next day I come back in my normal outfit and they were like, ‘Thank god.’ I’m in a hat, jeans, and t-shirt.” Similarly, Ryan, who interned at Major Records US for two years before becoming an employee, recalls interviewing and starting the internship wearing a suit. After retelling his gaffe, he informs me about his (white-collar) father’s surprise at the relaxed dress code:

And I look back at it now, it’s the silliest thing. *No one* here, including executives, really wears suits. This is very informal. I remember when I first started I was at home and I was leaving one day to go to work. I had my jeans on, sneakers, and a t-shirt and my father goes: ‘What the hell are you wearing to work?’ I’m like, if I go in a suit I get laughed at. I literally came in here one time in khakis, a dress shirt, and shoes when I was working here and I was made fun of the whole day. So, this is – just the industry in general – it’s very laid back.

As several interns and employees put it, you can tell it is an intern’s first day if she or he is overdressed. Conversely, I witnessed many interns and employees getting complimented for
expressive, stylish, and usually informal clothing: a female employee praises a female intern’s grey dress and matching shoes; a female employee tells a male employee he looks sharp in his new leather jacket; a male employee declares “cool glasses” as he looks at me and asks where I bought my frames. However, some exceptions to the “don’t overdress” rule exist. My internship supervisor, Hank, consistently wears suits to the office and often receives compliments for his style. He sports designer clothing and a meticulously groomed look. The addition of formality to his appearance is not inappropriate, arguably because he has over ten years of experience in the industry and his form of dress is interpreted as aware and expressive instead of discrediting. Therefore, overdressing as expressiveness is tolerated, though blind formality is not.

In addition to dressing inappropriately early on, Ryan had to learn the correct way to address people – again, to understand the informal workplace culture: “I called everyone Mr. and Mrs., which offended everyone…. My first two days I called my supervisors Mister Shaw and Mister Smith.” The bosses did not seem pleased and responded: “‘Dude, just stop. Don’t ever do that again.’ So I was like, OK, note to self, don’t do that.” Interns must quickly learn that many people in the music industry claim to derive pleasure from working in an unconventional workplace (nor do they want to feel old by being called “Mr.” or “Mrs.”). Not only does the industry cool code of behavior need to be acknowledged and respected, but also interns (and employees) are expected to want this symbolic distinctiveness.

On one hand, if an intern in no way shows passion for music, employees may begin to question the intern’s level of interest. However, interns must not merely act as fans – they must convey excitement and, at critical moments, display the correct level of detachment. Brandon, a recent college graduate and temporary employee at Indie Distribution, tells me about his recent internship at a major record company. He recalls meeting artists as one of the perks of the
internship yet when questioned, using a show as an example, he specifies a certain code of conduct:

AF: So you would chat with the artists?

Brandon: Yeah, you could go over and talk to them. Usually I stayed with, like, the people I knew from work, but we went over and said hi to the artist. We didn’t hang out with them, like, be all over them.

AF: Why not?

Brandon: Because that’s weird and you’d probably get fired for that.

AF: Oh really?

Brandon: Yeah. I mean, if you become one of the crazed fans that starts screaming, that’s not really professional, so I guess they could probably let you go.

Although neither one of us heard of an intern getting fired for being a “crazed fan” per se, Brandon pinpointed another aspect of the fan/professional dynamic within the industry cool culture – personnel must both appreciate the special status of (sometimes famous) artists and act “normally” in their presence. Brandon goes on, specifying how one should not act:

When you look on TV and you see the crazy fans, like the little girls they scream for the [boy band], they go crazy for that stuff. If you worked in a record label and you screamed like those girls when somebody famous comes in they will not keep you around because you wouldn’t scream for any reason in the workplace, but especially because you don’t want the artist to feel uncomfortable also, like this person can’t handle working with somebody famous.

Music industry workers must handle their proximity to artists with moderately detached professionalism. Brandon claims he was never star struck in the office during his internship, though he provides an example of when some interns became excited when they saw a prominent male artist in the office, ran over to fellow interns to say: “Oh my god it’s Artist X! It’s Artist X!” Since the artist was not within earshot, this was deemed acceptable or even appropriate behavior. If the artist were in the immediate vicinity, the script would be different:
“But you would never run up to him and say that. Like if he walked by, you would just say, ‘Hi’ or ‘How are you’ or something like that. You wouldn’t go screaming and asking for an autograph.” As a site of business, the artist should feel comfortable at the record company. For an intern to act appropriately or, as Brandon puts it, “as an adult,” remains important for interns to secure future recommendations for employment. Two people he met as an intern recently provided references to Indie Distribution. He concludes, “It benefits that you behave like an adult.” Or, put differently, he contrasts how to act with the inappropriate behavior of the screaming, jumping, awe-struck studio audience on Total Request Live, an MTV show that hosts live music performances: “This is not TRL. You’re in the real world.” Music industry workers must be fans of music, but must also act as music professionals.

Nonetheless, workers in the music industry are allowed to break from their professional, detached demeanor under the appropriate circumstances. A junior employee from a record company describes an especially notable moment of fun at work when Kanye West, one of the most popular musical artists in the world, came to the office:

Kanye [West] came in and his publicist [sat near] where I sat. [Kanye had just recorded the album My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy and] no one had heard any of it. He comes in. It’s all finished. He just puts it on [the publicist’s stereo] and plays it. And then he comes out of the office and screams in the hallway to no one in particular, ‘Don’t act like I’m not playing my new shit! Come listen to it!’ So he just calls whoever happened to be there and like 10 people listened to his brand new album. And then he goes, ‘Alright I’m going to do this’ and he took [the CD] out and put in just the instrumental [recording] and he actually performed it for us in the office. So I was like, ‘This doesn’t happen anywhere else.’

Employees, at first, continued with their day-to-day tasks even though one of the most popular artists in the world was unveiling his new album down the hall. Eventually, Kanye granted the workers the opportunity to act as fans. The record company employee describes this occurrence as the “coolest” thing to happen in the office during his tenure and the sort of symbolic event that
draws people into music industry work: “People think that stuff like that happens all the time so they want to do it.” Adding: “The thing is that it does happen once in a while – probably once a week there are shows and for other jobs there isn’t that kind of thing.” Events like these crystallize the lure, excitement, distinctiveness, and pleasure of music industry work; they instill institutionalized awe and therefore help foster the enchantment and commitment of workers. However, music industry personnel must fit into and appropriately partake in the local culture. If Kanye had not granted access, the employee continued, “no one would have gone. And that’s kind of the unwritten rule that everybody knows.” On a different day, the employee points out, the superstar singer Rihanna came into the office and “some intern went up and she said ‘I’m a huge fan’.” A senior publicity employee later tersely told the intern: “Never speak to an artist like that, unless you’re told!” Therefore, newcomers must learn, usually informally, how to be industry cool. The code of conduct represents an ambivalent synthesis of the fan/professional dynamic.

The passion job: Meaning and/or money

Employees commonly describe music industry work as a “passion job,” a “lifestyle job,” or not a job at all (i.e., an extension of their affinity for music), emphasizing the nonmaterial rewards of their work over whatever money they receive. “It’s definitely a passion job,” Kevin tells me after spending five years promoting indie records to college radio stations. He goes on, “It’s all about the music.” When discussing how the job is different than what he originally conceived, however, Kevin describes a familiar tension: “There’s the beauty of working with music which is my one true love, but it’s not a lot of money to start off with especially with all
the hours and stress that’s put into it.” Despite the challenges of music industry work, Kevin concludes, “At the end of the day it’s definitely worth it.” Kevin deploys a “love for” metaphor, which carries a sense of moral worth and accentuates psychic rewards according to a narrative of passion and engagement. In *The Opera Fanatic*, Benzecry (2011) organizes his analysis of opera fans around the “love for” metaphor to consider the powerful, affective elements of opera consumption. In the case of music industry workers, the “love for” metaphor is also deployed as a moral argument of cultural membership, though workers’ involvement occurs simultaneously as *consumers* and *producers* of their object of affection. Workers are expected to convey strong passion not just for music, but for their vocation as well.

Much of music industry personnel’s day-to-day tasks are not specific to the industry. Record industry personnel focus on disseminating goods, which involves promoting, sales, marketing, etc. Caves (2000) refers to these non-artistic roles within the cultural industries as “humdrum” (or ordinary). Artists forgo money (available via non-artistic work) in exchange for autonomy and self-expression, in contrast to humdrum workers who allegedly only care about money:

Wherever they work, humdrum inputs demand a wage at least equal to what they earn in the outside market for inputs of their type. They do not care who employs them or what task (within their competence) they are asked to undertake. They are just in it for the money (Caves, 2000, p. 4).

Contrary to Caves’s argument, music industry personnel claim their positions are far from humdrum; the artist is not unique in trading financial return for nonmonetary rewards. As a senior employee told me, there are “publicity people in a lot of types of jobs. There’s marketing people, there’s sales people, there’s production people, there’s product managers that [focus on] diapers, cars, whatever.” But music industry personnel convey a significant difference between
selling diapers, cars, and music. Music industry personnel describe a strong passion and attachment for music, which inform their choice of occupation and thus constitute their occupational identity.4

Velthuis (2005) showed how art galleries symbolically separate their front space, which tastefully presents artworks, from their business- and administrative-oriented backspace; the symbolic distinction enables actors to bracket and navigate between the industry’s co-existing artistic (“art for art’s sake”) and commercial logics. While record company personnel seemingly operate in the commercial-oriented backstage, they use rhetoric rather than geography to strategically to buffer against the idea of the conventional job. Music industry workers enact a boundary between themselves and people not consumed by the same passion.

Karl has been involved in selling records for over eight years. Speaking of his colleagues in the music industry, he describes how music orients career choice: “Music is one of those things that, for a lot of people, they’re very passionate about and they’re very excited to be involved with it.” In setting up a contrast, Karl describes the average person as being dispassionate about music, saying, “Some people may flip on the radio when they’re in their car, whatever, but the good solid majority of our population doesn’t really care about music.” For a small portion of the population, including him, music is integral: “Those that [care], it’s extreme. They love it. It’s part of their being.” The people who work in the music industry define and produce music, and to varying extents their relationship to music defines and produces them.

4 Wright (2005, p. 115) similarly showed how bookstore employees accentuate passion for books as a precondition for employment and there is “an evangelism at work in their orientations to the [books] they sold.” These employees construct their special status as connoisseurs and elevate their low-paid service work as creative, moral work motivated by nonmaterial rewards.
After more than a dozen years of work in the music industry, Jerry tells me that music still affects him deeply: “Music makes my hair stand on end, it just affects me. I have this immediate visceral reaction.” Jerry is an executive in A&R at Major Records USA. Not all A&R people do the same job – some solely scout and sign bands to record contracts, others take on more of a vested role in the production of the music. Jerry describes himself as one of those A&R people who help put records together, “from soup to nuts.” He works directly with “his” artists, many of them chart-topping acts, and accompanies them in the studio. He remains involved as the record comes out, taking part in setting and carrying out the marketing strategy for releases. Although he describes himself as an unabashed music fan, personally connected to music, he also recognizes a social component to his role:

I’ll be sitting in the studio at three in the morning working on a mix with a band and I’ll sometimes think to myself, ‘just step back and realize the reach that this song is going to potentially have. It’s going to affect people all around the world in all sorts of different ways.’ And, you know, I’ve had people get married to the music I’ve been involved with, I’ve had people get buried to the music that I’ve been involved with, and all points in between. And that’s a great feeling. That’s an amazing feeling.

Music industry personnel take part in the production of music, which affects countless others; this “amazing feeling” is personal, but rooted in the social status (or perceived centrality) of music.

Jerry’s role in A&R is among the most creative positions at a record company because he can inform key artistic decisions, including who should produce a record, potential guest musicians, which songs to record, and whether a song needs a catchier refrain. Jerry’s proximity to the recording artist affords him license to feel a connection to and special status from a recording. Nonetheless, workers in various supporting roles express a similar type of personal satisfaction or reflected status – workers in different roles are still afforded the possibility to
draw from their proximity to the art (i.e., draw from the institutional charisma). Mark describes one of his co-workers in a legal and administrative role as “happy to do his job” even though “he doesn’t draw the contract or negotiate the terms, but literally just types them up.” Mark feels less excited by his position, but recalls a recent conversation with his colleague that captures the potential far-reaching satisfaction from music industry involvement:

We were going over some contracts and he … has this administrative role and has been there forever, and he’s just like, ‘Yeah I get some satisfaction in knowing … that in some way I was related to the fruition of this new opera by so and so’ who’s a major figure in the classical world. That does provide him with a sort of emotional kind of satisfaction. According to this example, simply being involved in some way in the creation and dissemination of music provides the potential for the worker to derive meaning and satisfaction.

Karl works in sales and marketing for an indie record company and describes the creative challenge of marketing as, in itself, a source of satisfaction:

You may find that you’re a creative individual and you enjoy the challenge of trying to market something specific, be it a tube of toothpaste and when you launch a successful marketing campaign and lots of people go out and buy your toothpaste, you undertake a certain amount of pride and satisfaction. Beyond the baseline of pride and satisfaction from overcoming the challenges of bringing a product to the public’s attention, Karl depicts an additional reward when marketing music: “Doing that with music, it goes a step further because … you [also] have a personal, almost spiritual connection to it. Like, I love this record. It goes beyond the creative outlet of marketing the record.” The worker’s love for the record is only one level of the personal connection. He goes on:

I personally love this record and when other people are going out and discovering it and buying it, it’s even more satisfying knowing that I’m helping share my personal experience in providing a way for other people to hopefully get that same personal experience out of it.
Karl is describing a strong sense of attachment to and engagement with the recording, perhaps akin to the “amazing feeling” Jerry describes above. Karl concludes with a broad statement about why people want to work in the music industry:

And I think that’s why people want to get involved, it’s like they love music, they’re people that always are talking about music, they’re people that are sharing music with their friends. They live, they just feed off of the excitement of sharing things with other people. Like, ‘wow! This is a great record! You should hear this record! You listen to this record!’ They’re not just staying at home enjoying what a fantastic record it is. It’s like, it’s inbred into them to share their love and excitement with other people because they think it’s so wonderful that everyone else needs to hear it. You know… Shout from the rooftops! And being a part of the music business gives them an outlet to do that. ‘This is a great record. I love it. Here it is for you. Buy it and you will love it as well.’

Working in the music industry, or at least in a promotion/publicity/sales role, provides the opportunity to spread the word, to actively proselytize as part of a mission-oriented organization. Karl describes both a deep level of excitement and passion, but also a desire to move beyond purely being a consumer of music. The producer of music assumes more of a position of centrality; producers, as fans and professionals, can be self-expressive and affect culture.

The allegedly humdrum music industry positions are therefore depicted by the workers as significant due to their proximity to and contact with the production of music. I ask Nancy why she thinks people specifically want to intern in the music industry. She immediately answers with seemingly obvious humor: “Because it’s cool man!” Unpacking what “cool” means to her, I ask what that means, which she answers by portraying the record company as the backstage where the magic happens, a place of mystique and curiosity:

Because you’re going to be around artists, and you’re going to see the creation of things that you’ve consumed your whole life as a kid, you know? Um, where do music videos come from, where do records come from, where does the imagery I see on the internet and I see on TV, and I see on posters, like where does it come from. Where does it start?
The music industry internship is, she continues, “like seeing behind the curtain of something.” By extension, music industry personnel are the people who help create the music, the imagery, etc. They are at the center of where things start.5

I ask Abby, my internship supervisor for five months at Indie Distribution, why she thinks so many people want to work in music. She tells me it is because music has a certain cachet. Searching for more, I ask, “Yes, but why is there this cachet [in selling music]? Why not sell pencils?” She immediately responds, “People aren’t reading up on pencils. There isn’t a new and exciting pencil.” Similarly, Brandon, a recent Indie Distribution hire, describes a “feeling of accomplishment” as one of the benefits of music industry work. Employees describe the social importance of music, its significance, as a key source of satisfaction. During an interview with Brandon I play the devil’s advocate by comparing music and pens:

Brandon: When an artist comes out with a new album; I helped to create that, I helped to make sure that MySpace cleared their song, I helped to get that delivered to MySpace, I helped to get the artist’s page going. Even if it’s something little … just to have a part in something that you love that millions of people are going to hear. I mean, you can’t do that at a lot of other jobs.

AF: What if you’re involved in the creation of … this pen. You’re involved in the creation of this pen. A lot of people buy these pens, you know?

Brandon: [Looking at me seriously] A pen doesn’t affect someone’s life the way music does. You go into a subway, you don’t see as many people writing as you see listening to iPods. Music is everywhere. And yeah, pens are common also. Some people have three pens, or five pens, but a guy can’t say, ‘Oh wow, that pen changed my life,’ but people can say songs really inspired me to do this, songs changed my life, this song did something. You’ll see in somebody’s Facebook status, or their away message, lyrics to a song. You’ll never see ‘I heart my Bic pen’ because music has a bigger effect on people’s lives than a simple object.

5 Interns visit the record company to get closer to the magic or coolness of the backstage. Per Benjamin’s (1936) concept of aura, interns’ and employees’ voyage to the workplace is akin to a pilgrimage to the source, an effort to seek closeness with the original.
Music industry personnel therefore stress how they are part of something larger, the release of music, which they see as deeply affecting people. They emphasize the status of music in society—the charisma of music provides them with a resource from which they can draw. Workers convey a passion for music that is both individual and social. In this way, their stated belief in the specialness of music industry work is also belief in its prestige.

*Building symbolic difference*

Music personnel further portray their special status by comparing themselves to people in other fields. Ralph is 51 years old and has been involved in selling music for nearly 30 years. Ralph describes himself as a musician first, a music salesman second. He says he still hopes to get signed to a record contract and make a living as a singer/songwriter. In the interim, he sells other people’s music to stores: “I think you’ve got to enjoy what you do every second…. For me to sell something, I’d rather be selling something I love.” On the December afternoon I interviewed him, Ralph hands me a pile of paper and introduces it as his “best of” list from last year. Every year, going back to 1964, Ralph makes a list of what he considers to be the top 400 records released in that year. He describes the process as “intense,” one that involves listening to at least 800 new records per year. About the nature of his paid work, he tells me, “I think in order to get up in the morning and actually drudge yourself to a 9-to-5 job you might as well do something you love doing. I prefer selling CDs than selling shoes.” Ralph therefore claims that music is important *to him* and consequently helps compensate for the inevitable minutia of a 9-to-5 job. Ralph also marks the difference between working in music and another field.
Jerry, the A&R executive, portrays the lure of the music industry by noting other people’s interest in it: “I’ll bump into some Wall Street hedge fund guy who’s making a shitload more money than I am and yet he’s talking about getting into the music business…. [Music is] kind of sexy.” The perceived status attributed to music in society infuses the experience of working for a record company. It is a sexy industry because other people seem to be so interested in it and the products it releases. Many record label employees, and interns, describe deriving pride from this important work, from their position. With his Wall Street example, Jerry conveys how outsiders want to be part of music industry and this, on one hand, reaffirms what music industry worker’s perceive as their special status, and on the other it states their choice of meaning over money.

As a music promotion employee put it, working in a field like music is “a lot more fun than working that same job working for, say, Ernest [sic] & Young Accounting where you’re going to meet accountants and you’re going to meet financial officers and you’re going to meet CEOs or CFOs or something.” Since the music industry is in the realm of business, workers must treat music recordings as products. Much like with the fan/professional tension, workers must negotiate the tension between meaning and money inherent in their industry. In the latter case, music personnel resolve the tension (articulated as a choice between the two) by referring to the likeminded people with whom they interact every day compared to workers in other fields.

Maria has been working at a major record company for over two years and fondly recalls her early desire to work in the music business atmosphere, with its people and its sounds: “I wanted music to be the product I was working with.” She also describes negatively the “other” people around her during college: “So one of my majors in college was business and there were so many accounting and finance kids in my majors so it was easy to decide what I didn’t want to do” [she laughs]. With nearly 25 years of work experience in the music industry, Larry narrates
his early enchantment with the record industry and also notes his preference to work with people
who share his affinity for music:

When I was in high school I had a cousin that worked at Atlantic Records and I went to
visit her and standing in front of me were [members of the rock band] AC/DC. I think
that’s, like wow, that hit me. All of a sudden this is where I wanted to be…. I was a fan
of what was happening in music and when I saw these guys hanging around the record
company I knew that that’s where my place was. That’s where I fit in, that’s where I
knew that I would be part of a community of people that were like me.

Compared to Maria, Larry is more explicit in pointing out how different he is from “non-music”
people. In his mid-40s, with a wife and kids, Larry lives in a New Jersey suburb of New York
City. As a short middle-aged man with a receding hairline I would have guessed that Larry
blends into the suburb he lives in. However, to Larry, because of his passion for music he is
markedly different from his neighbors:

My peers, my friends, people that are in my community, I’m nothing like them. They are
in normal jobs, they are in finance jobs, and lawyers, and doctors, and accountants, and I
live in a very white-collar area. Or they’re, you know, in construction or whatever they
do. They’re builders or… I live in an area where there’s a lot of pharmaceutical: Pfizer
and all that. People do that and most of them probably make more money than I do, but
they don’t have the passion for music like I do because that’s what keeps me going.

Through comparing himself to his neighbors, Larry refers to his career choice as one of passion
over money. He returns to this topic shortly thereafter:

For me it has never been only about the money. Never. Because if somebody said to me
tomorrow that I could get a job selling something, call it toilet paper, paper products, and
I could make a $100,000 more a year, I would certainly think about it. I think that if you
didn’t think about it with a family you’re insane. But I would be miserable and I’m
certainly not going to have a passion.

Not only does passion define who he is, it keeps him going. The passion narrative marks a
boundary between music people and neighbors with “normal jobs.”
While music people describe a significant contrast between themselves and others (or normal people), they also set up a hierarchy within their own group. It is a common occurrence to hear a music industry employee criticize some fellow employees for their lack of passion. In an interview, Dana, a senior employee at Indie Distribution, diagnoses a problem with the music industry she described to me on several occasions: “I feel like there’s a lot of pollution in the music industry of people that don’t even listen to music.” Dana does her part to fight this pollution – on another day she informs me she does not take on interns who are not music fans. After naming names and criticizing people in the music industry who are oddly passionless for music, she goes on: “And these people, I don’t know if they get into it because they want to be cool or something? I don’t really know what it is, but I think it’s kind of polluted the music industry.” Dana accuses culprits of not even listening to music and therefore not caring for it. She goes so far as to suggest a highly unflattering motivation for their presence in the industry – wanting to be cool, which is the opposite of what should be the seemingly effortless performance/embodiment of industry cool.

Dana continues by stressing the challenge of building a career in the music industry and inherently questions why non-music fans would want to take part in the industry:

I just have a certain kind of enthusiasm for [music] that I expect others to have. It’s like, why the fuck are you in this industry, it sucks. It’s not easy, you’re not going to get paid shit for years, you’re going to struggle. Unless you really want to do this, then don’t do it. You know what I mean? Unless you really can’t live without doing this, then there’s no reason to do it. If you can’t see yourself doing anything else in the world then I believe you should do music, but other than that don’t do it.

The passion job narrative of music industry personnel draws on the industry’s precariousness. The irrationality of wanting to struggle for years before potentially making a comfortable living casts music industry personnel as a special case of the passionate, i.e., moral worker, yet this
status is not distributed evenly and marks a blurry boundary. Shane, who works at an indie record company, concurs. He warns me that everyone in the music industry claims to like music, but upon joining the industry he realized some people do not meet his definition of (very passionate) music fan: “You assume people are going to be music fans, but … there’s lots of people who aren’t actually music fans who work in music. A lot of them, actually, which is always strange to me. I don’t get that.” Like Dana, he questions why these people work in the record industry considering its condition: “If you’re not really into it, why in god’s earth would you want to do it? This doesn’t make any sense. The sacrifices, the hours, the energy you put into it, you need the extra motivation!” But Shane is correct: not every employee fully embraces the passion job narrative, and the lack of passion may encourage people to lose, or not see, the industry’s enchantment.

**Exits: The Limits of Institutional Charisma**

*An August morning: Goodbye Will*

I walk up to Abby’s desk around 9:45 a.m., shortly after arriving at Indie Distribution for the day. She is already sitting at her desk, but the cubicle across from hers is empty. Nate is not in the office yet. I was originally supposed to sit at that cubicle, but Nate was hired (as a paid employee) shortly before my arrival as an intern. I sit down on an extra chair next to Abby’s desk, and we chat as I drink coffee. We talk about a range of topics including music, food, and Scooby Doo.

As usual, hundreds of CDs litter her desk. Most of those CDs are promotional copies of releases the company sells to retailers, though Abby also received some as gifts or trades from
her friends at other companies. I point to a particular pile of 40 or so promo CDs near me and ask if any are good in her estimation. She looks at it from top to bottom and plucks out more than I expected. She also pulls out a large box of CDs, somewhat hidden near my feet, and we talk about its contents – the bands and record labels – though most of these new releases are completely unknown to me. She sets aside more than a dozen CDs for me, which I later bring to my desk. As an intern I was specifically instructed by employees to ask for and accept CDs, partly as music education and as payment. At Indie Distribution I mostly accepted CDs on loan and returned them later during my internship.

Nate slowly strolls in a bit after 10 a.m., and we say hello. He lets himself fall somewhat abruptly onto the chair in front of his computer. After a few minutes we try to lure him into our conversation. Nate slowly swivels his chair to the right until he faces us. He announces, “I was out late and I’m hung over so I’ll be looking at girls on Facebook most of the day” and turns back to his computer monitor. I peek and confirm to Abby that he’s actually looking at girls’ pictures on Facebook. I ask her if he’s single. Overhearing, he answers somewhat loudly, “I’m always single.” Abby corrects him and mentions a serious girlfriend. Nate disagrees and claims he does not have a girlfriend, though also says he will break up with a “pseudo-girlfriend” this weekend. After a few moments I suggest that Abby surely knows some eligible bachelorettes for him – he replies even more loudly without looking away from his computer screen, “I met a girl last night! That’s why I’m hung over!”

The office is quiet on this Friday morning so Abby continues to pull out CDs as we chat. She shows me a CD with the image of a gory child on it. It looks like the soundtrack to a horror film and I say “no thanks” to that one. As we continue our discussion Will walks over to our

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6 Interns should want CDs and showing interest in music is part of their socialization to industry cool. Simultaneously, a few employees claim to feel better about using the interns’ free labor knowing that the unpaid work is at least slightly compensated via perks like free music and entry to some shows.
area. He looks serious and a bit distant. Will is a fairly tall black man with short hair and a thin mustache. He’s wearing a white polo shirt and black slacks. We ask him how he’s doing and he unconvincingly replies “well.”

Abby smiles and says she’s enjoying one of the last summer Fridays (when she can, theoretically, leave the office early). Summer is almost over. Nate asks, “Woah, one of the last ones already?” Will replies that this is his last summer Friday. We look at each other, confused. He says it has been a pleasure to work with all of us. Nate and I lock eyes, slightly shocked, and both utter a variation of: “Is this your last day?” Yes, it is. Will has worked for Indie Distribution in numerous roles – mostly in physical sales, then recently in digital sales – for almost ten years. He is also approximately ten years older than Nate and Abby. Nate wheels his chair in our direction to form a closer circle. Nate says, “What, you’re leaving?” Will leans in a bit towards Nate and says, “Yeah, you took my place!” and pretends to hit his shoulder with his elbow. Nate sits still, surprised. Will adds that he’s OK and tells us this is an opportunity for a change: “We don’t get these chances often and, when we do, we need to take advantage of them.” The conversation allows Abby to respond with a joke she has been using for the last few months, “You always have to have a back-up plan. Mine is library school!” It is unclear whether she is more serious than she lets on. It is an ambivalence that reinforces the partial commitment to the business—being a passionate member of, but also realistic about, the industry. After a few more words Will walks away and continues his farewell tour around the office. The three of us sit motionless. I excuse myself and return to my desk in a cubicle around the corner, which neighbors Will’s desk.

I can occasionally hear Will exchanging comments, sad goodbyes, and small mementos with co-workers. Weeks ago, on my first full day with the company, I walked around the office
with Abby as she introduced me to nearly every employee on the floor as “Alex, the intern.” Will’s tour is strikingly different from mine; his sounds very emotional, full of hugs and offers to help him out if he ever needs anything. A bit after 11 a.m. Dana, the department head, comes over to my cubicle looking for Will. She sounds tired and her voice is hoarse. She was in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with Abby the day before for lunch with a client and stayed into the evening. I recall bumping into Abby last night as she was getting into a car; I removed my earphones and she yelled from across the street: “I’m escaping before dinner!” Looking at Dana now, her eyes looking heavy, I’m guessing she has a hangover. I direct her towards the other side of the office, where I last heard Will.

Will transferred departments in the last year, from physical to digital sales, though the move was not a success. Dana and another senior employee became unhappy with his work and began closely scrutinizing his performance. His biggest account was taken away from him and he became a marginalized member of the department. Will’s status was evidently downgraded—Abby, a relatively newcomer, handled the largest accounts and Dana occasionally made negative comments about Will’s work even in my presence. Nate was hired to expand Indie Distribution’s online video operations—a role perhaps Will could have assumed if he possessed the necessary technological savvy. As Dana later told me, “It’s also hard because he’s also not up on technology. I gave him my phone and he couldn’t use it.…You need to know this stuff.” In the end, the official story is that Will left amicably, though the prevailing opinion is that he moved preemptively since he suspected he would eventually be asked to leave.

I catch up with Will as he finishes his office tour and is sorting through papers on his desk. He tells me it makes sense to leave because he lost what he sees as the necessary passion. After telling me about the non-music endeavor he is pursuing, Will starts reminiscing about his
beginnings in the music industry and, slowly and wistfully, talks about the hunger that used to consume him. When he started out in the business, he recalls, “I would do a-ny-thing,” slowly accentuating the first syllables. “If someone asked me to go to Kinko’s at 1 a.m., I’d do it.” He tells me he does not feel that way anymore and has not for some time.

Susan moves on from “the cause”

While I started my research thinking about how nonmaterial rewards help lure people to the music business, the brief discussion with Will further sensitized me to the potential disenchantment of workers and fluctuations in enchantment overall. It was only a few months later that Susan, an employee at Major Records USA shared the news with me that she would soon quit her job of 15 years to attend graduate school and pursue a career in teaching. After her transition, we catch up over coffee and Susan recalls feeling out of place towards the end of her time at Major Records USA; she no longer felt the necessary passion. As she commonly and wittily does, Susan uses popular culture to introduce her point. She asks if I have read Gone with the Wind. I admit I have not. She goes on:

One of the things that bothers Scarlett O’Hara, who is the southern belle in the book, is that everybody around her talks about the cause. The Southern cause is the civil war. And she gets into this whole big thing, she doesn’t get it, she’s like, ‘I care about finding a nice dress and finding the right husband. I don’t get [why] what’s happening on some battlefield hundreds of miles away matters to them?’ She felt like an alien.

Similarly, Susan no longer believed in the cause: “That’s how I remember feeling at these meetings.” Susan briefly imitates someone with sarcastic enthusiasm: “How can we get Artist X to be huge?” She returns to her normal voice: “I don’t really care about Artist X. I don’t care.” The disenchantment spread to all music: “It began to creep into music I like. I would start to think ‘I like that band, but who the hell cares?’ Artist Y, great! They become big, great! They
don’t become big? Who cares?” Although multiple people I met admitted to various frustrations and, ultimately, disenchantment about music industry work, Susan recalls her reluctance to communicate this loss of passion:

I couldn’t share that and I felt like a freak. And the reason I felt like a freak is because everybody did either feel it or put on a really good act of feeling like this is the band. We’re going to make this happen. And it wasn’t just executives, it was mid-level people, you’d be in these meetings and they’d be sort of like, ‘Did you hear they’re getting an add on whatever station.’ You’d be like, ‘Oh!’ And I would think, who the hell cares? When’s lunch?

Susan clarifies that she did not always feel this way: “I realized, this is not the place for me, I don’t feel this. And I did at the beginning, I really did.” At her first record industry job, she recalls, “every piddly band, whether I cared about their music or not, I wanted them to become huge and I wanted to do everything I could to make them big. That was what I did.” However, Susan no longer felt the requisite passion for her job, for many possible reasons.

For the various benefits of working in the music industry, some employees take on work they describe as unfulfilling. Susan worked in an accounting-related position and speaks unenthusiastically of those everyday tasks. Many months ago, while employed in the music industry, Susan told me in an interview: “My job is the kind of job I could do for almost any business and I wouldn’t want to do it for any [other] business. If I’m not working here I don’t want to do Excel spreadsheets for Procter & Gamble.” I asked Susan how her day would be different doing this job at a place like Procter & Gamble. She answered:

I couldn’t wear jeans and a t-shirt to work. I wouldn’t have a TV in my office [pointing to a TV]. I wouldn’t be able to listen to music. The CDs I get, the shows I go to, these are all...[Speaking in a more animated manner] We have a bin in our kitchenette that says, ‘Do not throw CDs into this trash,’ because we get so jaded, we get so many CDs we just throw them away. This is a kind of ‘working at the candy factory.’ This is the place that puts out the stuff that excites you and it’s such a dream for so many people.

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7 An “add” refers to a radio station adding a song to its playlist. Once a major radio station adds a single to its rotation, other stations (and sales) usually follow.
While employed in the music industry, Susan claimed that she knew her job was a special one – implying a certain prestige and status – yet she also made a comment about the sign on the trash bin (a sign that I saw above or on many other trash bins at Major Records USA). Susan noted that people become jaded. To be jaded means to become tired or bored with something, typically from too much contact with it. In the case of music industry personnel, to become jaded is not necessarily negative. Socialization into a music industry workplace involves a healthy level of jadedness to achieve the proper fan/professional balance of industry cool. However, jadedness can become disenchantment; music industry workers can eventually take for granted or forget their special position, despite some reminders. Susan continued:

When I go to a dinner party and people are going around telling their jobs: ‘I’m an accountant, I’m a lawyer, I’m a teacher.’ I know I’m going to have the best job in the room. I’m going to have the job that people say, ‘Really? Who have you met? What do you do? What is it like?’ Always. It’s never, ‘Oh that’s great. What do you do,’ to the next guy. It’s always a ‘stop let’s all ask her questions’ kind of position and I never forget that. I don’t ever think, ‘Eh, I’m just going to do something else.’ I’m holding on to this as long as I can.

Nonetheless, less than six months later Susan told me she was bored and burnt out with the music industry and was moving on to attend graduate school.

*Becoming disenchanted*

Faulkner (1974, p. 157) calls the early career a period of “illusionment” when young adults attempt to establish footholds and success seems possible; depending on what the worker achieves, dreams are replaced by “new mobility outlooks and motivations.” While employees might lose their jobs (or interns might never get hired) before becoming disenchanted, the aim in this final part of the chapter is to delineate some overlapping factors in music industry
personnel’s experience that challenge the continuation of the worker’s music industry career, namely: mundane work, precariousness, and low pay; a complicated relationship to music; and aging out. These factors show the limits of institutional charisma and help explain the loss of commitment among music industry workers.

After working for an indie record label for two years, Shane has already seen employees lose their sense of excitement and decrease their level of commitment. This process of disenchantment, he adds, exists in every industry:

There are people who worked at Indie Label X and over the course of time you just sense they’re not really committed, they’re not really into it, and you get the vibe that they’re not really happy because they know that they’re not making that much money, they’re working long hours, you could just sense either you’re excited about your job or you’re not. It happens in every industry I’m sure.

People become disenchanted in other industries, yet music industry employment is characterized by low pay, long hours, and precarious work conditions. Therefore, when perks count as payment and workers portray their source of livelihood as a passion job, disenchantment (or the inability to deal with a loss or routinization of passion) is identified as a key reason for quitting or getting let go.

Despite its centrality and potential for glamour, most of the actual tasks carried out by the music industry worker are neither glamorous nor glamorized by others. At Indie Distribution, Nate manages YouTube content for record companies, i.e., ensures official record company content is on the website (and incorrect, inappropriate or illegal videos are not). It is slightly technical and low profile work that needs to get done, but an unglamorous afterthought for most people:

I lot of people think they’re interested in music and they want to do this, they think it’s all glamorous, but it’s not a very glamorous job working in music. You’re the back end.
You’re the shit end of the stick. You’re doing all the work that you know you never get credit for. No one gives a fuck what I do on YouTube, really. But [record companies] need that. They don’t have their videos on YouTube right now, it’s nothing, but is your average fan going to thank me? No. They don’t give you a second thought.

Workers at all levels can draw from the music industry’s charismatic qualities, yet this fund is dispersed with unequal intensity within the industry’s hierarchy. While working in the music industry is described as high status, and newcomers or outsiders may expect exciting work, employees also realize that their actual day-to-day tasks tend towards the mundane and thankless.

Mark also describes his actual day-to-day tasks negatively. Before moving to New York to study Music Business at NYU, Mark did administrative work at a law firm. He describes his current job in music publishing as “probably less enjoyable than when I worked for a law firm because it involves less human interaction.” Mark tells me he likes talking to, emailing, and calling people. His current job involves little interaction: “If you’re working interfacing with a database or whatever, your end product could be music, but the collective experience of your individual tasks is still shitty, you know?” Working in music, he realized, does not “cut it” for him, although he tells me about a co-worker who seems satisfied with the industry’s nonmonetary rewards. To Mark, the psychic rewards were short-lived: “getting head counts from venues for the new Artist B tour, it’s kind of grunt work, but it does involve Artist B and venues and so it’s cool and that does stimulate for a while.” In his case, Mark points to the actual work as unsatisfactory, but then tells me how the low pay has taken its toll:

I was so broke for the first part of this month. This sucks. It just sucks to live like that, especially when I had a very comfortable way of life [beforehand…]. I know it’s part of the process where the rewards are delayed and come later, but right now it’s like a very much lower quality of life. I can’t do anything, I can’t even buy new strings for my guitar, you know. And those are like six bucks!
While noting the familiar “paying your dues” narrative, at least on this day Mark seems exasperated with the music industry’s low pay. He informs me he is applying for jobs outside of the music industry.

Exceptions exist, especially at senior levels of employment, but overall the status, excitement, and prestige of music industry work are offset by relatively low incomes. A recent report by Berklee College of Music’s Career Development Center (2012) establishes starting salaries in the record industry (excluding music attorneys) as ranging between $24,000 and $28,000 per year. Greg recounts joking with a friend employed in book publishing about the existence of a “fun tax” assuring lower relative salaries for jobs in glamorous fields. Employees must find various ways to support themselves. Among the people I met, common strategies include the following: Eric’s hourly salary as an assistant is very low so he works overtime (bringing his weekly total hours to 50) to make “a living salary”; Mara works full-time at Major Records USA and supplements her income by working at bars on weekends; Kendra lives with her Mom; Ralph sells some of his promotional CDs to used record stores; Liam waits tables at a high-end restaurant to supplement his music job; some people likely get money from their family, though they are careful not to publicly announce it.

Not only are starting salaries low, job security in the music industry is scarce (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). On a visit to Major Records USA, a few weeks after my internship ended, I learned that approximately 50 people were let go in one day – each person was asked, one by one, to walk to a conference room where the news was delivered. A few years later and after more rounds of layoffs, Hank tells me things are more stable now, but for some time he felt so nervous about losing his job he could not eat. He said he lost 15 pounds. Even the committed and the relatively successful workers have uncertain futures. Shane tells me he would
like to work for the same company for another five years, though he is not sure in what capacity:

“What position? I don’t know. Again, I don’t have… I would just like to continue doing a good job whether that means somehow moving up, which I don’t know what path that would be.”

Speaking of the future, he then shifts to job uncertainty: “I don’t know. If I do a good job they’ll keep me around, if I don’t they’ll let me go. We’ve let people go.” Similarly, Nancy, a very successful A&R employee at a major record company tells me she enjoys working at what feels like a “fun party ship” even though, she adds, the ship is sinking:

I like to joke with friends, because they’re like, ‘why do you want to stay at Major Label Z, it’s so… There’s so much drama going on, it’s always changing’ and, you know, the business is the way that it is and I’m just sort of like, I think, this is going to sound terrible, but I think the major label ship is sinking but I kind of feel like I’m on a really fun party ship. [Laughs a bit]

Workers are aware of their precariousness and mention it occasionally. The uncertainty, precariousness, and low pay in the music industry (except for senior management) provide potential sources of disenchantment for workers, which may translate to tenuous levels of commitment.

A complicated relationship

Workers identified numerous day-to-day challenges and long-term career concerns. While pay/uncertainty issues were most prevalent, some of the other reasons identified for disenchantment have to do with the workers’ fluid relationship with music. As an intern, Danielle describes learning to work with music she does not love as an early challenge: “I think that was something I learned, that you can respect something without necessarily being a fan, having all the paraphernalia and what not.” Music personnel rarely like all of the releases they work with, though they may not admit it out loud. One day at Major Records USA I ask Hank if
he likes a particular new rock release on the label. He tells me, “Hold on” and emails me the link to an online review of the record. The review is, to put it mildly, negative: the subheading reads “[Artist A] Sucks,” the record receives a rating of zero out of five stars, and listening to the album is likened to torture. On a different day, I overhear Larry speak cynically about the type of pop music he sometimes sells. He gives a buyer a sales pitch over the phone for a new pretty-boy duo. Their music, as Larry describes it, is poppy and they are gorgeous, as if to say: “This can’t miss.” The person on the other end of the line seems to ask if they sing well. Larry answers, “Can they sing? I don’t know. What does that matter?” The buyer says something else and Larry responds, “Can Rihanna sing?” and pauses again to listen to the response. “No fucking way,” he continues, “Smoke and mirrors. Smoke and mirrors.” By virtue of their position, at least some of the time music industry workers must treat music as a “product,” albums as “units,” fans as “customers.” These examples are practical examples of workers managing the art/commerce tension day-to-day – their professionalism and occasional cynicism function as identity work which allows them to maintain aesthetic integrity while bringing to market music they may not like, but fulfills their employers’ commercial imperatives (Wei, 2012). Simultaneously, these examples portray the struggle between sustaining passion and routinely doing work that seems to challenge the worker’s reverence for music in a passion job.

Working in the candy factory, it is a challenge not to take things for granted and get used to the activity of music making. At the same time, workers describe it as a challenge to consistently become excited by new music. Despite their professed passion and seemingly strong identity, music industry personnel change their relationship to their work and to music. People, as Ralph describes, tend to remain fans of music from their formative years:
The first like ten records that I’ve owned I probably know better than any of the stuff I
listened to yesterday. The way I look at it … it’s just like a glass that’s overflowing.
There’s so much in our heads and then the only thing that really takes is the stuff down at
the bottom of the goblet there and that’s what you remember. You have all the memories
from childhood and adolescence. It’s like, I know every Dylan lyric but I can’t even
understand some of the lyrics of some of this [new] stuff.

Ralph then gives me his most recent “best of” lists that he constructs every year as an exercise to
remain engaged with new music. After early, definitive periods of finding one’s aesthetic
identity, new music does not necessarily affect adults as easily.

I ask Bela if her relationship to music has changed through working in the music
industry. She quickly retorts: “God, now I’m so much more fucking jaded, and I don’t go to as
many rock shows, and I don’t really care about being a sponge and learning about every new
band and reading Billboard and Magnet every week.” Later on during our conversation, she
diagnoses part of the problem: “I’m not that excited by new music. I listen to a band; very rarely
do I like the new band.” She expands on why she has gotten bored with most new music: “You
listen to a lot of the same stuff, you just get a little bit bored and you want to hear something new
or maybe you want to hear something familiar. You realize what you really like. You know?”
Bela describes having identified her preferences – in contrast to a few years ago when everything
sounded so fresh and exciting. Keeping abreast of music takes its toll:

You get tired. I mean, there are so many things you get tired of. You get tired of the
bullshit, you get tired of hearing the same—you get tired of hearing what you think are
crappy bands. They might not be crappy to the 19 year-old with fresh ears. You heard it
before. You get tired of other people not caring even though you don’t care. You know?
You get tired, you want to go home and go to sleep! Literally, physically tired. It’s just
like… Listening to music, as you experience life, you probably experience so many other
things; you want to do all those other things. You’re not so focused on just music. You
know when you’re like 19, you’re younger, you just like, you’re psyched about one thing,
you want to do it all the time, you know? You start to experience life and want to do
other stuff. I don’t want to go see bands every night. Yeah, you get tired.
She describes becoming tired of new music and much more; she captures a changing relationship with music as tied to age and changing interests.

Bela tells me she does not remember the last time she bought a ticket for a show. I ask her if she still attends shows and she does, for free, though not with the same vigor as she used to: “Instead of showing up early and standing down front I’m like, ‘Eh, I’ll go sit down and watch half the band and probably talk’.” Fonarow (1997) portrays various strategies of consumption at live music venues, from those of young music fans who stand near the front of the stage (Bela’s younger self), to older enthusiasts who comfortably park themselves further away, and the industry insiders who stay towards the back. Bela completed the process Fonarow describes, where industry workers “move back through space until they are aged out of the venue all together” (1997, p. 369). Bela was 29 years old at the time of this interview and a few months later she applied for graduate school and left the music industry. The changing relationship to music, as Bela’s case shows, overlaps with the process of aging out.

Aging out

_Jim walked through a crowd of punks and college kids into the Mercury Lounge. He was thirty now, but he believed he still looked like one of the fans. He had shoulder-length hair, no longer as red as it used to be, and he was very thin. His skinniness exaggerated all of his other features—his roman nose, his heavy brow, his big hands—and made him look taller than his six feet._

_Jim leaned down to tell the rat-faced kid on the door that his name was on the guest list but before he opened his mouth the kid said, ‘Go ahead, sir,’ and waved him in._

_A Rolling Stone writer Jim knew was leaning on the bar, smiling at this display of deference._

_‘I guess he could tell I’m important,’ Jim said._
'No,' the writer said. 'He took one look at you and thought, 'This guy's too old to be here for fun.'

(Flanagan, 2001, p. 5)

As we sit at Heathers, a small bar in the East Village, two beers into our Tuesday evening, Oliver and I talk about clothing. I mention how I got rid of much of my clothing and am on my way to getting rid of more. He seems interested, and we discuss the difficult process of purging our beloved closet possessions even though these defined our 20’s. We talk about how difficult it is to get rid of things, and specifically how he just cannot get rid of those band t-shirts (I admit to the same). He says he hesitates wearing band t-shirts, seemingly asking whether I think it is alright to wear band t-shirts. I blurt out, somewhat randomly, perhaps brutally, that wearing band t-shirts is best reserved for people under the age of 25. I ask Oliver to remind me of his age (at this time I’m 30 years old). He’s 35. Oliver is wearing jeans, a red button-down shirt, and a dark grey undershirt. He describes his practical solution currently in effect – he sometimes wears a band t-shirt as an undershirt.

Oliver continues with a recent anecdote. As he was walking down the street in his Brooklyn neighborhood of Park Slope recently, one male teenager motioned towards him and said to another teenager: “Your dad should dress like that.” Oliver guesses that they were 12 years old and concludes: “I wasn’t sure if I should be flattered or... [pause] What...” He seems to struggle with the possibility that, age-wise, he could be these boys’ father, though also reflects on aging, hipness, and age-appropriateness. It is challenging to remain aesthetically engaged yet not come off as a lame middle-age person absurdly dressed like a kid. I mention how interesting it is that musically inclined people – to varying extents – seem to think of themselves as kids. Before I explain what I mean, Oliver agrees and adds, “It’s amazing how some people will try to hang
on, try to stay with it,” thereby diagnosing the extreme to be avoided. Oliver specifies that hanging on comes off as “sad” because, to those who are “with it,” being aware and active about what is cool should not take such laborious effort. His statement evokes some of the difficulties of aging in the music industry, though workers might “age out” for reasons beyond losing touch with what is cool and current.

Approximately four years before, Oliver was working at an esteemed indie record company in New York. He recollects feeling old and broke: “I was starting to get old for it…. Being like 31-32, I’d never done anything but alternative music, you know? I’ve never made that much money! This city is getting really expensive.” He also adds, “I wanted more challenge, professionally.” Oliver had hit a plateau and could not land a senior position. His middling job led to boredom and, paired with age, motivated him to make a change: “I was getting bored there with what I was doing. And I was just like, ‘Oh my god, I’m 31.’ And, you know, I love music so much [but] maybe it doesn’t have to be what I do for my job.” Significantly, he started considering work in other fields: “I was like, ‘anything would be more exciting and lucrative than this!’” Oliver went back to school and transitioned to the graphic design field.

Although aging in a youth-oriented industry affects both men and women, the latter tended to discuss the topic with me as more problematic. Abby tells me: “There’s this idea that as you get older you get farther and farther from this idea of cool. You might be trying to capture it or reclaim it.” The very activities of the musically engaged person, Abby adds, tend to be coded as youthful, e.g., to make buying records a priority or to attend shows: “Having excess time and money to devote to music is something that might come when you’re young. Because going out late to a show might only be something that you can do when you’re young.” Older employees in the music industry tend to hold senior positions. Senior management at record
companies is primarily male; there are no female CEOs at major record companies. Abby goes on about the difficulties of aging in the music industry, though instead of reflecting about limited room for advancement, she imagines what it would feel like to attend a show as an older woman: “I think women are fearful. Imagine being the woman alone at the show? Imagine being 45 and alone at the show? That sounds horrific. Really. It sounds bleak. But for men, they can [do that].” She is 26 years old and recently saw the band Lightning Bolt play (they are very loud and tend to play in less savory venues). Abby wonders aloud whether she will feel comfortable seeing the band play in ten years:

Abby: There’s an amount of chaos in, say, a punk rock scene or a DIY scene that as you get older, maybe you’re not willing to engage in…. Ten years from now, will I want to see Lightning Bolt? And also, not even that, if I want to see Lightning Bolt, what will the audience think of me? 36 year-old Abby, going to see Lightning Bolt? That’s why it’s unfortunate to be a woman. I mean, I’d rather be something else. I’ll turn into a dragon.

AF: What?

Abby: A dragon. It’s just, it’s unfortunate, the signifiers for an older single woman involved in something that’s youth-oriented, are pretty harsh.

AF: Well, you may not be single in ten years.

Abby: Even still. Alone at a show like that at 36. Abby cannot fathom attending such a show in her mid-30s. We discuss how rare it is to see a woman in her mid-30s or older at a rock show, especially those types of punk or DIY shows. The only example that comes to mind is Kim Gordon, member of seminal band Sonic Youth, to which Abby responds: “If Kim Gordon goes, it’s her! It’s Kim Gordon, she means something.” Seemingly, for Abby, only being the member of a well-respected band could inoculate the stigma of being an older woman at a show.

Some workers de-emphasize the importance of age in the music industry. Shane, for example, stresses the importance of passion over age. He tells me he knows many people in their
30s and 40s who work at record labels and these are some of the biggest music fans he knows. In contrast, he describes a colleague in her mid- to late-20s who “you could just tell that over the course of time she didn’t seem that into it.” Over time, she stopped attending shows by the bands on the indie record company’s roster. Attending shows is not a formal requirement, but it is part of the music worker’s code of conduct and interpreted as an integral marker of engagement: “It’s not required to go to any of our shows, but if you don’t… You know, you should go to the shows and support the bands. We hope that you’d like the bands – that’s why you’re here.” Eventually, she attended no shows and Shane describes her eventual exit:

And so over the course of time she just literally went to no shows. So what does that mean? OK, you’re not that, you’re not really that motivated, at least by the music. That’s a huge thing. So what’s left then? Your actual tasks? Which she wasn’t motivated in either. And, I think, not to say that she wasn’t a music fan, she was, but I think over the course of time just kind of – I don’t want to say grow out of it because that’s not fair to say, it’s not about growing out of anything – just, I think, her interests started to go elsewhere. The writing was on the wall when she announced she was leaving. No one was surprised at all.

According to this story, age was not a primary factor. Shane concludes: “Age doesn’t really matter. It’s all about your enthusiasm.” Nonetheless, because industry employees tend to be young, it is difficult to extract age as a factor affecting disenchantment and career decisions.

Karl, an employee at a similarly small and well-respected indie rock label, describes his office as “full of young people.” Karl is 32 years old and, aside from the two people who run the company, he is the oldest person in the office: “Our radio guy is 25, our new media girl she’s 25, our press girl she’s 26-27… It’s like, I’m 32 years old and I’m an old man in the office.” He notes how in another industry, this would not be the case: “If I worked anywhere else, any other type of industry, I’d probably be the young kid.” I ask him why he thinks there is such an age difference in music compared to other industries. He responds by citing low pay compared to other industries:
Probably a big thing is just the pay factor. I mean, across the board you’ll find that people who work in the music business get paid a lot less than people who work in other industries. If I was doing the same sort of marketing at any other company in New York I would probably make twice as much money as I do.

Karl then links dropping out of the music industry and the lower pay to changing life priorities, particularly if starting a family:

So, as you get older the love that you have for the music and the fun that you have working in the music business, those things become less important and maybe, you know, buying a house, supporting a family, those types of things that happen when you get older, those become more important. Do you want to make $40,000 working at the record label or do you want to make $80,000 working at the marketing firm?

The decision between passion and money, according to Karl, shifts as the responsibilities of family life no longer make music industry work viable. With a family to feed, “you’re probably going to take the $80,000, work at the marketing firm, probably not be quite as happy at your job but satisfied knowing that your kid’s out playing in your backyard.” Like Karl, many music industry workers refer to aging out as potentially tied to low pay and changing life priorities.

I first met Colin through Karl at a bar in Brooklyn. Colin is a thin white man in his early 30s. He has worked in the music industry for over six years, mostly doing marketing. The second time I saw Colin I ran into him at a café near New York University – he told me he was thinking about attending business school, which would lead him down a non-music career path. In an interview a few months later, Colin tells me he has always loved music, but no longer sees a significant difference between working with music and something else: “I feel like I can market anything. It doesn’t have to be music.” The challenge of marketing in itself overrules all else: “I do like getting CDs, I like the marketing aspect of music, but whether I’m marketing Dell computers or Justin Timberlake, it’s all the same to me. I feel like the challenges are all the
same.” Colin recalls not always feeling this way. Speaking of a previous co-worker’s exit from
the industry, he describes the limited lifespan of music career enchantment:

It’s *awesome* to be in music and the music business lends itself to interesting characters,
people, and they’re sort of exotic in a way because they’re all weird, and musicians are
fun to hang out with because they’re weird people. Then you realize, like, normal people
don’t work twelve hours a day for free shows and free CDs. It just doesn’t work that way.

He refers to a process of disenchantment he calls an “awakening”:

I know a lot of people who right around 30, when you hit that mark of ‘normal people
don’t live like this.’ You don’t save all your money to pay rent and work all the holidays
and all the weekends just so you can pay rent. It just doesn’t make any sense.

Colin later describes how the rewards of working in music may eventually lose their appeal. He
tells me many people around age 30 have described this sentiment to him, implying a
reassessment of priorities. He says, as an example, “Oh now my friend owns a car and I can’t
even afford to buy a nice brunch.” As difficult as it is to first get a job in the music industry, it is
also a challenge to sustain such a career. Priorities change, lifestyles change, and financial
disparities with non-music industry friends may become clearer. From his assessment, the key
period when this happens is around age 30, though these changes might occur at any point.

Liam worked for a record label and at a record store into his mid-20s. After eventually
graduating from college, he now has a government job. And then, as he puts it:

Liam: That’s what’s hard about becoming older. We just become everyday Joes.

AF: As opposed to?

Liam: As opposed to being young and thinking and feeling that you can do anything, that
you can change the world, you can change something. I still can, at 32, and hopefully I
will, but it’s just not the same feeling.

Music industry workers, like Liam, are likely to eventually assume a “normal” job, become a
regular Joe, and their relationship to work might change. Post-music workers might no longer do
something that feels as important to them, nor as exciting, but perhaps they will describe, like Liam, being motivated by different things:

Well my priorities are different, that’s all. I have to think about how much money’s going into my 401k. I have to think about maybe potentially buying something, family, all of this… Not that I have to… Actually not that I really am. I should maybe focus on these things a little more perhaps… But that’s what typically and socially people do when they are in their 30s and I am starting to think about that more than I ever have.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I showed how the co-existence of charismatic/bureaucratic qualities plays out in the everyday, informal negotiation of workplace order. The lure of the music industry attracts people who want to do “important” work, though participants must convey their excitement according to an informal code of conduct and worker commitment may be short-lived. The processes of becoming enchanted and disenchanted are not unidirectional. Institutional charisma suggests a continual tension between enchantment and disenchantedment. The music industry’s institutional charisma helps recruit potential new workers and results in cycles of enchantment where an army of committed newcomers eagerly awaits the exit of current employees. In the next chapter, I consider how interns and employees construct the internship as the predominant path to prepare for entry.
Chapter 2: Training and In-between Days for Music Industry Interns

Few are chosen for paying jobs in the record industry, as laid-off employees, the select few current employees, and an uncounted ocean of aspirants can readily confirm. The imbalance between the vast oversupply of potential workers and the small number of paid positions (particularly in recent lean years for the record industry) helps explain the difficulties encountered by aspirants, but provides only a partial explanation. An additional factor is the lack of a formal credentialing mechanism to sort and differentiate between the skilled and the unskilled in this industry (Zuckerman et al., 2003). This is not to say that potential employees lack paths to develop skills, learn subcultural knowledge, and signal their interest in music industry employment: they can pursue formal education, internships, temporary work in the record industry, or take on related but auxiliary positions (e.g., volunteer or work at a college radio station, work at a record store, promote live concerts). However, there is no generally recognized higher educational credential – or no clear educational shortcut – to gain employment in most music industry subfields. The last two decades have marked the rise of specialized Music Business programs at some colleges (Rolston & Herrera, 2000), but this kind of college degree functions as a potentially helpful yet insufficient condition to gain employment. This chapter is concerned with the ways music industry interns and personnel construct the importance, structure, and responsibility of training at the start of a music industry career.

The difficulty in launching a career in the music industry is a specific iteration of a larger shift in youth employment and training. Numerous writers have described and theorized about the changing nature of work in the post-industrial era (Beck, 2000; Ross, 2002; Sennett, 1999). In recent decades, firms have become increasingly flexible and jobs have become less permanent. Kalleberg (2000) and others (Hatton, 2011; Hipple, 2001; Matusik & Hill, 1998)
document the rise of “non-standard” work arrangements, i.e., various forms of employment that deviate from the full-time, permanent jobs “enjoyed” more prominently by previous generations (Mills, 1951; Whyte, 1956).

Young workers, from 18 to 30 years old, fill a disproportionate number of these non-standard positions (Worth, 2005). Instead of describing these workers as victims of the current era, Florida (2002) describes the up-and-coming workforce as fluid, flexible, and mobile. Young workers arguably seem ambivalent about job security; after witnessing the massive lay-offs of their parents, they do not show a commitment to lifelong employment at one firm (Inglis, 2005), nor would this represent a realistic expectation. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) describe how the current generation of students has high aspirations for future work – aspirations that far outreach the projected availability of jobs. Nonetheless, as youth labor markets have grown more competitive over recent decades and career trajectories become more chaotic, the demand for higher education has increased (Livingstone, 1999a). The transition from higher education to employment, however, is neither easy nor automatic.

With roots in the work of Adam Smith and subsequently developed by post-World War II economists, human capital theory is currently the dominant approach for explaining the education-employment relationship (Livingstone, 1999a). Human capital theory argues that individual investment in learning results in superior individual and societal economic benefits (Becker, 1993). In numerous instances, individuals who invest in learning by completing an internship might see relative gains (e.g., get a job faster and receive higher salary). However, if a considerable number of individuals employ the same strategy, the competitive advantage of more education or training appears to be lost at the aggregate level and internships are added to the list
of expected educational requirements (or credentials) for getting a job – leading to “credential inflation” or “overeducation.”

The concept of an overeducated population, where skills are widely acquired beyond the number of jobs with corresponding skill requirements, is far from new. In 1970, Berg argued that educational attainment widely outreached the skills required for employment. According to a measure developed by Berg, underemployment (i.e., employment below skill level of worker) increased from 46% to 60% between 1972 and 1990 (Livingstone, 1999a). From a neo-Weberian perspective, Collins (1979) illustrated how various occupations instate credential regulations to justify and ensure both their higher status and earnings; with time, credential requirements inflate beyond the “necessary” level. While there are many studies on underemployment, overeducation, and credential inflation (e.g., Burris, 1983; Livingstone, 1999b; Van de Werfhorst & Andersen, 2005; Wolbers, De Graf, & Ultee, 2001) these works do not incorporate nor address the recent rise of internships.

As internships become more common as part of the training of workers, especially in creative industries, there is a need to further articulate how situated members of specific industries construct internships as a path towards employment. In the case of the music industry, previous theories would predict that completing a specialized postsecondary degree in Music Business would prove helpful to establish one’s employability. However, in this chapter I show how music industry personnel generally devalue formal educational as a pathway to music industry employment. Music industry employees instead privilege on-site learning as an ennobling rite of passage. Employees characterize internships (or other “on-site” experience) as the best way for an aspirant to learn, yet the responsibility for training falls on the intern and occurs under challenging circumstances. I show how aspiring and paid employees interpret and
accept what I call the “mailroom model” for training and thus reproduce uncertain and precarious work arrangements for interns.

No Educational Shortcut

In this section, I analyze how music industry interns and paid employees describe formal education – and especially Music Business programs – as an insufficient or even counter-productive route to gain employment. I find that music industry personnel describe specialized Music Business programs as an irrational choice for aspirants, portraying classroom curriculum as obsolete, and instead privilege on-site experience.

Criticism #1: Why study a shrinking industry?

Sitting in an East Village bar with Abby, we discuss her path to employment in the music industry. During the days when I co-ran an independent record company in the early 2000’s I frequently visited acquaintances working at College Promotions, a small indie-oriented firm in New York City that promotes records to college and community radio stations. On one such visit, to engage in music conversation and to receive free CDs, I briefly met an unpaid intern named Abby. Abby interned at the company for two academic years before getting hired as an employee. A junior employee was let go shortly before Abby graduated with a bachelor’s degree and the internship led to a paid position at the company. At the time of the interview, she had worked in the music industry for approximately five years. Abby later became my internship supervisor at Indie Distribution.

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8 I founded an independent record company called “Matlock Records” in 1997 and co-ran it actively until 2004.
Abby stresses the importance of her internship, and I ask her about other paths into the industry. I ask if she has heard of people studying Music Business at college. “Yes I have,” she answers as she grimaces slightly, adding that she met various Music Business majors while studying at New York University. She clarifies that NYU features a Music Business program and a recorded music program – to her, the latter is helpful to gain technical skills and become a studio employee and therefore something “you could go to school for.” However, Abby does not portray the former as positively: “Most of the people I know in the music industry totally think it’s ridiculous to be a Music Business major.” She offers two main reasons for her skepticism. First, she questions the wisdom of narrowly specializing in music business, a field with fewer and fewer jobs. About Music Business majors, she asks, “Are they not reading the papers?” To support her point, she asks me to imagine a scenario where the library field was similarly failing, with brick and mortar libraries being replaced by online libraries: “What’s going to happen? And instead we have an entire school dedicated to library science and all of these people graduating with library science degrees!” Abby switches back to the record industry, and specifies, “I don’t know if [Music Business students are] getting the message we’re putting out. We don’t know what’s going to happen.” Therefore her criticism of the growth in Music Business programs partly stems from the incongruity between a failing industry uncertain of where it is heading and a recently growing academic program (Rolston & Herrera, 2000).

Criticism #2: Obsolete classroom curriculum

Abby also questions the pertinence of Music Business curriculum, a criticism expressed in various ways by music industry employees and even by some Music Business majors. I suggest that an industry in crisis might gain from people studying it in depth, to which she
responds: “I don’t know if people going to Music Business school are really trying to innovate so much as just join.” She suggests that the curriculum in such programs, using the example of NYU, is geared towards understanding historical figures, like “the guy who found Michael Jackson or something” and questions whether this is pertinent in the current state of the music industry: “It’s not about that anymore, it’s not about the superstars, it’s about something that is different entirely.” The music business curriculum, according to Abby, looks backward and is unable to catch up to an industry that is uncertain about its future: “I constantly read blogs about ‘What are we going to do?’ What are we going to do? It’s about MySpace, YouTube, subscription services, I don’t know!”

Bela, another NYU graduate who became a music industry employee, echoes Abby’s point by questioning, in her way, the “out of touch” curriculum. Bela took “a few” courses in the Music Business program and summarized them as “kind of bullshit.” She advocates for taking one or two such classes to provide background, but in her experience the music industry is changing too fast for academic curriculum to keep pace: “Right now it’s changing so much like even people that I worked with at [a cutting edge digital music distributor] they don’t know what they’re doing. They’re making it up as they go.” She goes on, suggesting that the record industry functions as a chain of innovation through imitation (with no clear fundamentals to teach):

And people at the majors they don’t know what they’re doing, they’re doing whatever the Indies are doing. The Indies are just kind of making it up as they go too. And, in fact, iTunes is pretty much doing the same thing. Everybody at this point is just making it up as they go. Yeah, there [are] no fundamentals.

Employees and students almost universally note a disconnect between Music Business academic curriculum (in the classroom) and the fast-changing industry.
However, I formally interviewed nine Music Business majors (current students or graduates) from New York University and found varying perspectives regarding this educational path:

Much of the academic curriculum is obsolete. The professors, really by the end of the program … you’re just hearing the same stuff, ‘We don’t really know [what will happen to the music industry]. You guys are going to have to figure it out.’ Like, oh great, did I really need to pay $20,000 to be told to go forth and conquer? [Mark, recent graduate M.A. program, employed in music business]

I just feel like I’d be, even if for some reason I got my foot in the door [in the music industry], I think I’d be so behind [without Music Business classes] because, at least for me, the day-to-day in the music industry is not necessarily how I had envisioned it. So to just now be learning about – no, there’s too much to learn. [Danielle, recent graduate B.M. program, unemployed]

I feel like sometimes, I was talking to my friend the other day and we were joking about basically we’re paying $40,000 to be on listserv [she laughs a bit] where we get lots of emails about internships. Because, I mean, that’s a big part of it. [Monique, recently finished sophomore year, B.M. program]

Mark builds on the narrative that the classroom curriculum has not caught up with the chaotic, fast-changing field, later describing some of his professors as only understanding “the old way” the music industry functioned: “It’s just happened too fast for them to keep up. … It’s awesome how many times you met Bruce Springsteen, but really it’s not very valuable.” Yet Danielle stresses how she feels better prepared than a non-Music Business graduate to work in the industry. She describes taking introductory business courses, music classes (e.g., music theory, music history, composition) and studying topics like marketing, merchandising in the record industry, and music publishing. Danielle praises the undergraduate program: “It’s really well done. You get a lot done and you get a lot of experience and you get a lot of knowledge.” Danielle also stresses the importance of internships. Danielle claims she considered studying Music Business elsewhere, at Bradley University in Illinois, adding: “It’s a good program but

9 The NYU Music Business program maintains an email list (or “listserv”) featuring frequent information about internship opportunities.
where are you going to intern in Peoria, Illinois?” Monique portrays internships as a crucial part of her education, implicitly putting down the rest of the curriculum. When I interviewed them, all three of the above Music Business people had completed at least two internships in the music industry. Despite variation in the evaluation of the Music Business program’s classroom curriculum, all nine Music Business interviewees stressed the importance of internships to learn about the industry and eventually get hired.

Music Business students at NYU must complete nine internship credits (one credit equals 50 hours at an internship) at the undergraduate level and six credits at the M.A. level to complete their degree. Undergraduate students in this program are not supposed to intern until their junior year whereas M.A. students should wait until their second semester. Yet, two of the three students above interned before being officially allowed to do so. Students claim that internships are important (if not crucial) as part of the Music Business curriculum, implicitly supporting the employees’ claims about inadequate (or insufficient) classroom curriculum.

Criticism #3: Privileging on-the-job experience

A related employee criticism of Music Business programs stresses the chasm between schooling and the “real world” of work. While completing a bachelor’s degree in business at a Midwest college, Shane interned in New York City at his favorite indie record label during the summer between his junior and senior years. The company eventually hired Shane as a full-time employee shortly after his graduation. I ask Shane if the record company promotes its internship program at colleges, including Music Business programs; he answers no to both and adds, “Those Music Business programs I think we all kind of smirk at … because we all know that our
education played a minimal role.” He does not dismiss formal education altogether, however: “to a certain extent the industry could do with people who are more trained in certain technical aspects, you know, certain understandings of budgets and things, but you know a lot of that is [learned] on the job.” Shane faintly praises those who gain “technical” business skills as he did, but ultimately privileges on-the-job learning (or, to include interns, “on-site” learning).

Karl makes a similar point, though he pairs the privileging of on-the-job learning with a claim to occupational legitimacy. Karl is a sales/marketing employee at an indie record company. In the context of discussing what interns gain from doing internships in the music industry, he highlights the opportunity and necessity to learn on the job. Simultaneously, as with members of professions and various occupations (Freidson, 1970; Nelsen & Barley, 1997; Sherman, 2010), he makes a claim to dignified status. Karl first points out his annoyance about laypeople claiming to understand and providing their theories about declining sales of records: “Everyone knows all about the music business. Someone that buys a couple records a week, for some reason, that makes him [sic] an expert on how the music business operates.” However, Karl legitimizes his jurisdiction vis-à-vis the outsider through his expert knowledge of the field’s culture and situated activity:

But it operates like no other industry and to get inside it and see how it actually works… It’s one of those things that you really only learn by doing. I don’t think you can step in and work in marketing at a record label simply because you graduated college with a marketing degree. I think it’s so different than anything else. The experience is where it’s at – you’re only going to learn by doing.

The quote above reinforces the cultural industry worker’s claim to special status (Beck, 2003) despite the absence of a recognized formal training credential as found in the professions (Freidson, 1970). The music industry is an accessible topic that interests the general public, but
Karl stresses the importance of on-site experience (beyond simply a college degree) to successfully work in that industry.

Music industry employees consistently tell me that their job cannot be learned from a book. Ryan has been employed in A&R for about two years, after more than two years as an unpaid intern at that same major record company. He stresses the importance of learning through involvement: “You’ll never know this industry unless you’re in it. There’s no book, there’s no test, there’s no equation that can teach you how to survive in this industry.” He recalls meeting “a lot” of interns from Music Business programs and describes an overall mismatch between book learning and work in the music industry. Ryan portrays an intern’s reliance or focus on applying classroom concepts to the work environment as a recipe for failure:

It’s a very cut-throat business and we get a lot of interns who come in and come from that background who try to bring their workbook into the work environment and somehow, you know, articulate what they learn in class to what’s going on here. If you come here thinking you can apply [Music Business classes] to this work environment you’ll survive a day here. You know, not to discredit any of those programs, but I just feel as if there’s more to it.

Students, in a Music Business program or otherwise, can learn the vocabulary of the music industry, but to Ryan they are missing crucial context. Through his years of experience in the industry, Ryan also claims a superior status compared to the (potentially informed, but insufficiently so) neophyte.

As an example, Ryan discusses how he sometimes shows interns a contract between the company and an artist to illustrate the workings of A&R. He enacts an exchange: “I sometimes say to my interns, ‘here’s a deal on the table. This is how it’s broken down, this is what they’re saying, this is what the language reads.’” Ryan suggests that a word pops up that an intern recognizes, who responds: “Oh yeah, I know that word, my professor said it and we learned
about that” or “I took a contract course. I kind of get what they’re saying” or “Oh yeah I understand what that paragraph is…” Ryan pauses. There are no interns in the room yet Ryan continues the enactment with what I perceive as a slight look of annoyance:

That’s great but unless you’re here and you actually can sit down and break down how this contract [points downward] applies to this record company, that to me makes more of an impact than just kind of being like, ‘Oh yeah I saw it on page 36 of my book and I remember my professor mentioned it to me. Oh yeah, the words you said that’s what it means.’

Ryan’s example illustrates, according to him, the limits of book learning compared to the situated knowledge of a workplace and industry. He later adds, “Just because you’ve seen it in a book and you read about it doesn’t mean you can articulate it and go out and make a business decision.” Ryan stresses the separation between theory and practice, or school and the “real world.” The page 36 comment, seemingly an exaggeration used as a form of mockery, evokes a key difference between the perspectives of a student and a worker. Students must read a book on contracts and report on its contents; workers will not pass or fail a test based on knowing terms from books, but their standing at a company, their career, and the success of all parties concerned are intricately tied to the workers’ complex, situated understanding of contracts and their ability to make sound business decisions.

Therefore, music industry employees devalue formal educational shortcuts to paid employment. Paradoxically, employees criticize part of the formal education curriculum – they describe classroom curriculum as obsolete or far from complete – yet privilege learning through on-site involvement including internships, which are often part of an intern’s formal education curriculum.
Learning with Little Training: The Benefits of Being in the Room

While music industry personnel largely dismiss classroom learning in contrast to on-site experience, internships present an informal and uneven type of training. Although certain college students complete an internship as part of a college course, paid employees do not necessarily describe a clear training plan or curriculum for interns. An internship is not necessarily comprised of a clear curriculum — as shown below, interns primarily learn through their proactive involvement in the workplace.

During high school, Bill got a job at a record company’s warehouse and continued to pack and ship boxes, unload trucks, load trucks, and mail records for the company through college. He has since worked in music sales and distribution for over 30 years and is currently a senior executive at a major record label. Bill stresses the importance of learning through doing, noting: “No one’s going to teach you how to sell a record.” Bill emphasizes experience as helpful in managing human relationships, for example, learning how to handle “a buyer at Target and the guy’s a prick or the guy’s a real nice guy.” He continues: “No one’s going to teach you what he likes and doesn’t like. Right? No one’s going to teach you what’s important to him. You have to figure that out for yourself.” Bill focuses on the personal, self-directed process of managing relationships, something that may be learned (or “figured out”) but cannot be taught.

During the interview, he describes studying Music Business in college as potentially “helpful” for aspirants, but notes how “amongst others, this is one of the businesses where experience, being in the environment, there’s no better teacher.” Most employees and interns mention the

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10 Music Business students at NYU, for example, must write a pass/fail paper as part of their internship. Students from other programs describe taking part in a seminar related to their internship. While internships represent a promising pedagogical practice according to some scholars (e.g., Bailey et al, 2004) this section focuses on how music industry personnel conceive of internship training and the consequent experience of interns.
importance of “being in the room” to learn about the music business, though they focus on varying educational benefits to interns.

Many respondents use the example of making a phone call (e.g., to a store buyer or writer) as an illustration of what an intern can indirectly learn during an internship. Isabel, for example, stresses the importance of overhearing – or observation – as part of learning how to work in the music industry. Isabel interned at a music public relations firm before becoming a publicist at that company and later working for a major record company. Isabel stresses the importance of her physical proximity with paid employees when she was an intern at a music PR firm: “We were all in one room and I learned a lot.” She recalls not even knowing what publicity was before starting her internship; she figured that out during the internship. She privileges the importance of overhearing employees over the tasks she carried out as an intern: “Even if I was sitting there just doing a mailing I was still [aware] of what the publicists were doing and how they did it and how they pitched people on the phone.” For example, she overheard “how they managed to get somebody to come review a show” and “how they would offer people tickets” or “send them a CD or things like that. So, it’s a lot of observing.” Based on her own experience, she therefore describes training as the intern’s meaningful understanding of surrounding activities over completing any particular workplace task.

Isabel relates her experience as an intern in the 1990s to the current situation for interns at her job. She claims to have an open door policy: “I have an office with a door. I rarely close it.” Interns come into her office and “they’ll be doing stuff in my office and, you know, ask what I’m doing.” Although interns may do mundane work, due to proximity, Isabel frames their experience as educational: “Even though their task might not be, you know, something that’s so beneficial to learning … they’re just immersed in being with us so they learn a lot.” By being
immersed in an environment, the intern can construct what is happening around them, ask
questions, and derive practical and implicit lessons. Isabel describes learning as an active process
for the observer, though not one where employees necessarily direct interns’ learning – instead,
interns, as observers, must assume responsibility for deriving meaning.

Similarly, Nate also describes learning how to make a phone call at his internship through
observation of employees. He recalls sitting next to the person responsible for radio promotion
during his internship at an indie music label. The radio promo person was “on the phone
constantly just trying to sell records, trying to get ‘adds’ at radio stations.” Wheeling and dealing
with a record store buyer, writer, radio station’s music director, or other promotional outlets
involves varying levels of finesse, tact, and savvy – some tricks of the trade, it seems, can be
learned:

You listen to someone wheel and deal a lot who’s very good at doing what they do –
luckily he was also very good at doing what he did – you kind of learn ways of how to
get people wheeling and dealing, when you should nudge a joke in, when you should try
to go to a casual conversation.

Today Nate still consistently makes promotional phone calls and builds rapport with digital
vendors through his job at Indie Distribution. He describes his early internship experience as
beneficial, emphasizing the importance of his internship over his classroom education: “You can
learn a lot of terms in school, but I feel like I learned a lot more from my internship than I ever
did from school anyway. The five P’s, I never heard anyone discuss the five P’s outside of
college.” Nate recalls spending more time at his internship than at school, partly because he
could still get reasonably good grades without attending some classes: “I’d get away with B’s
and C’s without going to class easily, so I was like, ‘You know what, I’m really not learning
much there so I’ll just intern more.’” He reports interning four or five days a week and registered
for many evening classes: “That helped too. I could intern all day until 6 and then go to class if I had to.” To Nate, the benefits of being in the room outweighed attending college classes.

Therefore Nate, like Isabel, defines an internship as an educational experience, no matter what tasks an intern completes. Nate further illustrates this point at the end of a busy day at Indie Distribution (his employer and my intern host). That day was especially stressful because the department head appeared to be in a bad mood (or at least was very demanding) and pushed the digital sales team to produce a considerable amount of work. As an intern, I was charged with gathering information from multiple sources – including Nate – to produce “marketing plans” for 24 upcoming releases during the last two hours of my day. On a typical day I usually completed a few such marketing plans, among interspersed tasks. I essentially copied and pasted content I received via email from various members of the digital team. Therefore I mostly formatted information into uniform Word documents (one document for each release) and occasionally followed up with staff members over instant messenger if I needed additional details. The task involved going through several emails, looking up information in the company database, and tested my eye for detail under pressure. Upon writing my field notes I realized how this late-hour crunch would provide a less-experienced office worker a disciplining and helpful foray into the regime of office work (i.e., an educational experience). Only a few hours removed from the office, Nate and I reminisce about the day with beverages in hand. Nate expresses his fatigue from the late sprint due to the boss’s fury (and my requests to fill in the marketing plan blanks) and seems slightly surprised that I completed so many reports – a tedious task – in such a brief period of time. Yet he provides a positive angle to my challenging afternoon:

11 These documents are called marketing plans or digital plans, but are actually very short summaries of targets at various digital/mobile/video vendors. For example, under the name of a digital music store, one bullet point could read: “Pitch release for feature on new releases page”. The term ‘marketing plan’ is therefore used loosely at Indie Distribution because such documents are typically longer, more detailed, and consciously strategic.
Jesus. But, going through that repetition, seeing all of those marketing plans, seeing what’s important, what’s highlightable-worthy, what’s pitch-worthy and what not, and what people are doing, it’s going to just get ingrained in your brain as you do it. The most worthless exercise can be helpful in the end.

Although both Nate and Isabel stress the possibilities for learning through overhearing, Nate provides a slightly different variation; to him, repetitive administrative tasks in themselves, or even a “worthless exercise”, can also be helpful for the aspirant – interns learn, incidentally or indirectly, about the music industry.

Moreover, in addition to observing and completing tasks, interns can ask questions and help direct conversations. Looking back on his internship at a small, but prestigious indie rock label, Shane recalls completing many mundane tasks from the beginning of his internship: making packages, running errands, bringing postcards to record shops, handing out postcards at shows, etc. No matter what tasks he did, while he was at the office Shane remembers spending a lot of time listening:

Just sitting in the room, this open office, you hear people talk on the phone, you hear people have conversations, people don’t hide what they’re saying in the office - they say what they need to say - so I just listened. However, Shane was not completely passive, he did not just listen. He recalls trying to help the employees wherever he could and when possible he would try to converse with them. These conversations, sometimes seemingly very casual, provided much of Shane’s music industry education:

To me now I guess that was the most important thing about the internship. It wasn’t any specific task that I did as an intern, which I think was ultimately beneficial about it. It was sort of those off moments when you’re making packages maybe and then you get into a conversation with one of the [employees] about the industry or records or record producers or how did this tour happen or why is [band X] playing a Virgin Megastore in-store, which happened when I was interning…

In addition to observing day-to-day events at a host company and learning from doing, interns can initiate or build on conversations with employees. Shane adds about the “off moments” with
employees: “That’s when I think you learn a lot from the music industry – those times -- because it’s unlikely you’re going to be given anything *really* meaningful as an intern.” Therefore, paid employees stress how the intern can potentially learn through overhearing, incidentally through whatever tasks they complete, and during conversations. In all three cases, the impetus for constructing knowledge rests on the intern. As I describe below, however, the intern faces numerous potential challenges in pursuing these opportunities for constructing knowledge.

**Challenges to internship learning**

The workplace environment provides opportunities for on-site learning, yet interns also face many challenges including: (1) lack of supervision because employees are focused on and rewarded for doing their work more so than on training interns, (2) the need to be proactive, (3) numerous interns vying for contact with employees, and (4) physical distance.

During my internship at Major Records USA, a relatively rare event occurred – an employee was hired in the Sales Department. I benefited directly from this hiring because, particularly in the first two weeks, I frequently overheard considerable conversations, pep talks, training sessions, and tutorials between the Vice President of Sales (Larry) and Mara, the new manager-level Sales Department employee. I sat at a makeshift desk (or “intern station”) only a few feet away from their neighboring offices. As I looked to the right from my chair I could see Mara almost directly; I had to move back a few feet to see Larry, but sat close enough to overhear all of their conversations over Hank’s music, the assistant who sat a few feet to my left. Below is an excerpted field note from a Wednesday morning during this period. As I usually did on Wednesday mornings, I printed sales reports and brought a copy to Larry, which he explained to Mara and expanded into an extensive lesson on the retail music business:
9:45 a.m.: Larry, answering questions for Mara, explains what sales targets mean, where they come from. Meanwhile, Hank holds the weekly sales reports in one hand and provides sales figures on the phone to a senior executive. He lists the company’s top sellers for this week, naming the releases, how their sales from this week compare to last week’s, the releases’ overall sales this year, and runs through the market share numbers for the different labels at Major Records USA.

Larry provides an abbreviated history of music retail for Mara: “At its peak, in the 80s-90s-early 2000s, there were tremendous options.” He talks about when he was younger he worked as a rep for a record company, and there were many record stores in the same mall (Sam Goody, Tape World, etc.). Now the record stores can’t afford the rent needed to be in a mall, except FYE: “There’s an Apple store, but there’s no record store.” ...

He continues, on record stores becoming lifestyle stores: “[Today] we have a lot of independent record stores – they’re called record stores because they sell records but they’re becoming much more like lifestyle stores (they sell t-shirts and trend items). Now the independent stores have 40% CDs, 20% t-shirts, 20% trend... Even if the Metallica fan doesn’t buy the CD there, he might buy a t-shirt for $30, which is a better margin than on a CD. A good margin on a CD is 30 to 40%...”

Larry describes how various department stores order, distribute, and sell music. He then launches into the topic of buying music online, copy-protected music, and iTunes vs. other digital outlets. He later discusses digital vs. CD sales within the company and within the industry at large. “Sound quality is inferior on digital [vs. CD]. The New Media people will explain that to you.” Larry goes through how he listens to his iPod with BOSE headphones and it’s a great system but he’s still losing significant sound quality compared to CDs. “Record companies are seen by most people as a dinosaur – ‘why don’t you work for The Orchard12?’ I’m old school, I’m a dinosaur. Why would anyone buy a CD? People hate record companies, ‘they don’t know what they’re doing!’ CD is like a four-letter word. ... [The New Media Department] wants to release albums digitally before they come out on CD. ... That would be alright, if iTunes sold full albums. iTunes [mostly] sells singles, not albums. We sell albums. Selling singles isn’t good for the artist.” ...

He speaks specifically about big retailers and how he deals with buyers. Sometimes he needs to convince stores to take more copies of an album: “Circuit City wasn’t taking as many [Artist X] records as I wanted. Sometimes you play offense until you’ve exhausted everything, and then you play defense. [Artist Y], [stores] thought it would do well, but not like it did. We were saying it would do 750,000 the first week. All these big big artists, none of them were doing the numbers people we were saying they’d start with. The fucking thing comes out and it sold a million in the first week...”

Larry tells Mara she needs to understand the buyer’s job and what helps stores sell music: “You’re talking to J&R. What’s important to them? [A single gets added to the rotation at] KROQ in L.A., how is this important to them? It’ll probably get an “add” in New York then. As a sales rep I was told about adds in Toledo and L.A. and I didn’t understand what that meant, in

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12 The Orchard is a digital music distribution company.
context -- it means it’ll get added in NY soon... It’s important for you to know these people’s business. If you only understand one side of it, you will never understand your job.”

To argue that a record will play on the radio helps sell a record, but to say something is great is not enough: “Go to a [buyer] and say ‘it’s great’ – it doesn’t matter that it’s great. ... A buyer's job is not easy. They buy too much, they get yelled on. They don’t buy enough, they get yelled on. You have to understand the customers, the stores, what they do. Why is [a hip hop artist] big for one store and [a rock artist] bigger for another store?”

Larry and Mara’s talk ended at 10:56 a.m. that morning. Hank surely noticed that I was listening to Larry. I was clearly writing notes throughout the conversation, for more than an hour. Once Mara got up and went back into her office, Hank asked me to run an errand. He clarified that the errand was not urgent, and that is why he gave me the chance to listen in – I thanked him.

The above excerpt only represents a fraction of their conversation, yet it illustrates the rich, wide-ranging tutorial I overheard about the history and changing nature of music retail. Larry provided a lengthy account of the changing business of record stores, consumer preferences, the rise of digital sales, the unevenness of the digital music landscape, selling points for compact discs, public perceptions about CD’s and record companies, and an understanding both of what helps to sell records (e.g., a single getting added to a prominent radio station’s rotation of songs) and tips on how to interact with store buyers.

Less than four months after that conversation, approximately 10% of the floor’s employees – including Mara – were let go in a round of layoffs at Major Records USA. Despite our similar lengths of tenure, Mara received thorough training from the Sales Department, met and otherwise interacted with employees from other departments (e.g., New Media) as on-the-job training. Larry and others invested heavily in training Mara, while interns like me learned through overhearing those conversations within earshot on the days we were present. It is part of Larry’s job to train new paid members of the department; my hands-on training as an intern was much more modest. Carlos, a fellow intern at Major Records USA, showed me the ropes, walked
me through my basic duties, and served as an early mentor. Hank, the assistant seated to my left who was my supervisor, provided more training, answered my questions, and engaged in music conversations when he had time and was in the right mood. However, I received no direct training, no tutorial, of the same depth and breadth as the conversations I overheard between Larry and Mara.

During an interview with Larry towards the end of my Major Records USA internship, I mention that his training of Mara enhanced my training as well. He acknowledges what I am saying though admits he does not actively think about being overheard nor consciously think, while working, about what he says as a source of training:

   AF: The best thing that happened to me during this internship was when Mara was hired because Mara was constantly getting coached by you, you were training her. And I was sitting right there so I could hear a lot of it. And that was, for me--

   Larry: Well people say that too, even if I’m not talking to Mara, I’m a loud talker and every conversation I have on the phone you hear. … Some people would say, ‘That was great, I can’t believe you laid that guy out.’ And I don’t think about it, but I guess it’s training too in some way…

Although employees frequently refer to the intern’s training as stemming from being immersed in a workplace environment and overhearing daily interactions, Larry expresses slight surprise that I refer to overheard conversations as an important part of my training. More specifically, he claims he does not think about how what he says becomes part of an intern’s training. Larry’s reaction adds nuance to the statement that interns learn through overhearing; employees describe an internship as such an opportunity, yet their day-to-day attention is on doing their work, not providing training (direct or indirect) for interns. Larry’s day-to-day attention is focused on selling music and his concern with teaching is more salient with new paid employees compared to interns. If Mara had not gotten hired, if I had not overheard Larry’s lengthy tutorials, those
parts of my “curriculum” would not have been covered unless I thought of asking an employee for such background.

Becker (1972, p. 96) makes a similar point about the employee/trainee dynamic in the context of comparing classroom and on-the-job learning:

Because the learning situation is the real work world—an actual meat market or construction site—no one functions as an official teacher. Everyone has his own job to do, his own set of occupational constraints and rewards. The apprentice does not have a teacher’s time and attention guaranteed to him as does a pupil in a conventional school.

Similarly, an intern’s supervisor might or might not provide at-length descriptions of the music business and share insights. An intern is supervised, but a supervisor is not necessarily charged with ensuring the intern learns a thorough curriculum. Becker continues: “This leaves the actual training to the apprentice’s own initiative. … A pushy punk learns more than a quiet young man.” (1972, p. 96). Therefore, because the day-to-day activity of employees probably does not involve training a new employee within an intern’s earshot, the intern must reach out to employees and solicit their training. That is the second challenge to internship learning for the intern, i.e., finding a tactful balance between being passive and active.

Employees may not spend much time focusing on interns; therefore interns who aim to learn more about the music business (and/or working in the music business) must be proactive.

Monique is a black woman in her early 20s pursuing a Bachelor’s degree in Music Business at NYU. She recalls being relatively ignored by her colleagues and struggled to make something of her two A&R internships at a major record company: “It’s easy to just do an internship sometimes and really not [learn], ‘Oh I learned how to make 30 copies.’” She laughs, then goes on: “Or, you know, I learned how to make coffee. I don’t know, so sometimes you really need to

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13 At some companies the curriculum of interns is more thorough and organized. An A&R department at one company, for example, organizes a weekly meeting where interns learn to “pitch” unsigned artists they researched that week. Some companies organize regular speaker series for its interns or ensure short one-on-one interviews with staff members.
be proactive and make the best out of the situation, get the most that you can out of it.” Monique points out that it is possible though challenging for the intern, through individual effort, to get more out of an internship.

Shane further illustrates that challenge: “I think a lot of the learning, actually, I think you have to be … persistent, you have to really try to really get a lot out of the internship.” Shane describes his time as an intern positively, but since getting hired by that same indie rock label he has realized that some interns may sit in silence without much interaction with or assignments from employees. About being an intern, he prescribes:

You can’t do it passively. You really can’t. I’ve seen a lot of passive interns that I’ve worked with at [this company]. You really can’t because if you’re passive you’re just going to sit there. I’m going to forget about you. You know, not meanly, but you know… Shane claims an intern must be proactive, yet also warns about being too persistent: “I think there’s a balance that an intern will strike between being persistent, showing that you’re there to help, and trying to do as much as you can to help, but also not being in the face too much.” An intern who is too insistent runs the risk of seeming overbearing and comes off as annoying to employees; therefore, an intern must tactfully be proactive without coming off as too insistent.

A third challenge to internship learning is how to stand out among a crowd of interns. Mark interned at the same independent record company where Shane works. I ask Mark how many other people were doing an internship at the ten-employee company, and he is unsure but estimates there were at least as many interns as employees: “I don’t know because [interns] came on different days. There was a stable of them. At a time there were at least ten.” An intern from another independent record company claims there were twelve other interns reporting to the same person in her department. Under those conditions, it is understood that employees cannot
spend much time closely training or mentoring interns and, conversely, it is difficult for interns to vie for employees’ attention.

Finally, a fourth challenge stems from limited access to overhearing employees altogether. Based on where they sit, interns cannot always overhear conversations as I did at Major Records USA. At Indie Distribution, for example, I sat down the hall and around the corner from my department – the only free cubicle somewhat in proximity. At some companies interns sit next to paid employees, yet other interns sit in an “intern row,” i.e., a small room or section of the office dedicated to interns. Also, music industry employees tend to play music from their computers or stereos, which drown out opportunities to overhear their conversations (and grants employees a bit of privacy, particularly within an open office). For those phone calls that are within an intern’s earshot, these are generally not made over speakerphone and an intern might have difficulty constructing or understanding the conversation that is taking place. Moreover, with notable exceptions, interns are rarely invited to staff meetings and thus are not aware of many key interactions within an office. Karl, a sales employee at an independent record company, describes “hearing what’s going on” as a learning opportunity for interns at his office, but continues:

> We have a weekly planning meeting where we all get together and talk about our upcoming releases and make sure we’re all on the same page and things are getting done, the record is being set properly. Make sure everyone knows what the radio guys are doing, everyone knows what’s going on in the press world, and things like that. The intern isn’t a part of that meeting. Conversations that happen - general office conversations - they would certainly hear, which happens a lot. ‘Hey, blah blah blah, question? Answer.’

The interns at this office can therefore overhear everyday communication, but their access to information is limited.
While music industry personnel generally devalue formal educational shortcuts to music industry employment in favor of on-site experience, the primary responsibility for training at internships falls on the intern and occurs under challenging circumstances. In the next section, I analyze how music industry employees portray on-site learning as an ennobling rite of passage while the intern is betwixt and between. I show how this training arrangement (and sorting mechanism) shares similarities with the intern economy’s mythical antecedent, the mailroom.

From Mailroom to Internship

The mailroom provided a starting point for media moguls like David Geffen (Asylum Records; Geffen Records; DreamWorks), Barry Diller (Paramount Pictures; Fox, Inc.), and Michael Ovitz (Creative Artists Agency; Walt Disney Company) to launch their careers in the entertainment industry while also providing at least a modest paycheck. The mailroom is a powerful symbol of humble beginnings, low pay, repetitious work, but a route for ascent where the cream seemingly rises to the top through any means necessary. In *The Mailroom: Hollywood History from the Bottom Up*, David Rensin (2004) presents the oral history of the mailroom as a stepping-stone for entertainment industry employees, particularly for talent agents in Hollywood. Referring to the people in the mailroom both as employees and trainees, Rensin (2004) describes the mailroom as a launching pad, a type of apprenticeship program at companies like the William Morris Agency and Creative Artists Agency. In these places, mailroom trainees worked for low pay (about $37 per week in 1937, up to $400 six decades later) in “a high-pressure crap-shoot that weeds out the weaklings” (Rensin, 2004, p. xvii). There are other routes to success in the
cultural industries, but no route is as romanticized as the notion of starting at the bottom in a place like the mailroom and working one’s way up.

Since the late 1930s, and very prominently in the decades afterward, trainees in the mailroom at talent agencies have enacted their willingness to do anything in order to be taken seriously and move upward: e.g., from getting up at 5 a.m. to buy groceries for a morning staff meeting to washing the boss’s car to dropping off the boss’s stool sample at the hospital (Rensin, 2004). The aspirants are allegedly so desperate for a chance to prove themselves that they will tolerate whatever task is thrown at them – described at times by employees as a test of will – while also accepting that their industry is to be learned from the bottom up. These stories about the heroic path to ascent are inscribed in the mythical history of these industries.

However, the mailroom is not currently the main path towards establishing a career in the cultural industries. While mailroom programs still exist at talent agencies and similar training programs emerged in other industries, internship programs have become the closest and most frequent formal equivalent. An op-ed in The New York Times comments on the rise of internships: “Instead of starting out in the mailroom for a pittance, this generation reports for business upstairs [as an intern] without pay” (Kamenetz, 2006b). Anticipating this point a few years earlier, Frederick (1997, p. 302) wrote more specifically: “Tomorrow's Mike Ovitzes, David Geffens, and Barry Dillers won’t have started in the mailroom at William Morris, they will have been interns there.” Cut from a similar cloth, mailroom and internship programs share similarities. In both cases aspirants do work hosted by an employer in relative proximity to employees and get one foot in the door for potential promotion. Mailroom trainees and current interns start at the bottom and are expected to learn primarily on their own. For both roles, entrants complete many of the least desirable tasks and, if they choose to continue, aim to work
their way up. Mailroom and internship programs are also similar from an organizational perspective: both demand a low level of investment from the firm and work assignments are relatively low-risk (at least at the beginning) to accommodate for varying levels of aspirants’ commitment and ability. The mailroom and an internship are both a point of entry, an initiation, where vetting occurs on-site; according to the “mailroom model” of training, aspirants learn and pay their dues and the experience is *what you make of it*.

*Internship and paying dues*

A more recent analogue to the classic mailroom success stories is the case of Kevin Liles, who rose from unpaid intern at Def Jam in 1991 to president of the record label in 1998. In his part-memoir part-self-help book *Make It Happen*, Liles states that success stories in hip-hop music boil down to someone finding “the will, focus and drive to achieve” (2005, p. 1). Liles supports his narrative of fierce individualism with a dazzling array of success stories, including the rise of a 23 year-old employee named Walter Randolph. Interns at Def Jam, Liles writes, are not paid and “armies of kids are willing to prove their stuff for free” (2005, p. 18). Walter’s time as an intern was especially memorable since he spent part of his time interning without a place to call home. Walter worked exceptionally long hours as an unpaid intern at Def Jam and, at the end of the day, would “put his head down on a bench by the piers at Forty-seventh Street, where the cruise ships come in” (Liles, 2005, p. 18) or would sleep on the subway. Liles adds, “He didn’t have enough money to buy food. Not eating properly gave him an ulcer” (2005, p. 18). The details about the spectacular hardship Walter overcame are paired with instructions about how to act: “No matter how tough it got, he never complained” (Liles, 2005, p. 19). In short, in
the face of adversity, interns must remain persistent, humble, and hard working. Liles (2005, p. 19) describes Walter as an astute observer and portrays the record label as a site for learning:

> Every day, he’d sit at the workstation outside my office taking in everything around him. When I dropped knowledge, he was there to catch it. He’d listen in on meetings and study the major players as they walked and talked through the halls. He was one of Def Jam University’s best students.

Even when the record industry was economically more robust, Liles recounts, most interns left the company before getting hired as employees because “they got tired of doing the stuff that nobody else wanted to do and eventually realized that making it in the music industry was just too much of a challenge for them” (2005, p. 19). Despite facing considerable adversity, Walter the intern worked longer hours than most paid employees at the company and became indispensable. Eventually, when Liles got a job at the Warner Music Group, he brought Walter along and hired him as a paid employee.

Liles’s book illustrates the Horatio Alger narrative about paying one’s dues in the music industry, which also includes a moral script for an intern’s behavior. Not only must aspirants work hard, be persistent, and likely overcome challenging conditions, they must also demonstrate a positive attitude. According to this narrative, interns control their destiny because an internship is what you make of it. On one of my days as an intern at Major Records USA, an executive told me: “I’ve seen a million interns here get jobs in marketing and whatever and I think that it’s what you put into it.” The executive, Larry, knew about my dissertation research and suggested that Liles’ book could be helpful for me to understand early careers in the music industry. Larry uses Liles’ story – or his recollection of it – to build on the internship is what you make of it trope:

> [As an intern, Liles] used to get bagels and lox for this guy every morning, and coffee, and there was [sic] a ton of interns that thought that was beneath them. Not only did he
not think it was beneath him, he made sure that he got him the best bagel and the best coffee and got it to him hot [...] and that was his attitude. And he would do anything. Larry’s retelling takes liberties with the story’s details, but he summarizes Liles’ basic point that an intern should work hard and not be overly proud: “He writes about how he set out to be the best intern in the world compared to the people that thought it was beneath them and knew that he would be noticed that way, which he was.” If one follows this script, according to Liles’s book, success theoretically ensues: “To get noticed, all I had to do was play my position and serve my boss to the best of my ability. If you do that, you'll shine no matter where you’re at in the food chain” (2005, p. 118). Employees describe internships as what the intern makes of it and as a rite of passage, though success is not guaranteed and, as the case of Ryan illustrates, the path can be difficult.

From dream to reality: The case of Ryan (interview note)

Ryan is 26 years old and has been employed at a major record label for two years. He was an unpaid intern at the company for over two years prior to getting hired. As an intern, Ryan came into the office nearly every weekday for at least three hours, went to college in his native New Jersey, and worked at a department store on evenings and weekends. He describes the internship as his path into the music industry.

Ryan reminisces about his late teens, when he remembers hanging out with a hip-hop group that lived in his hometown in New Jersey. The group was under contract with a major record label. He would go to the studio with them and generally be their “runner.” This was his first inside look at the music industry.
He recalls a night in the fall of 2002, when he was 20 years old and studying Business Economics at Rutgers University: “I’ll never forget this night. This is probably what changed my life. It was the most random thing, and I think it happened for a reason.” At the time, Ryan was beginning his sophomore year. “I wasn’t doing too well academically at the time. At the time I think I was out hanging out too much…” He pauses briefly and smiles. I smile back. The “random thing” he describes is the airing (and his watching) of a television show at 3 a.m. focusing on a day in the life of an A&R person. “I started kind of feeling like, man, the music industry, maybe there’s something I can do.” Very few people I’ve spoken with have portrayed such a clear moment of epiphany, but this was, as Ryan narrates it, a definitive starting point in his music industry career.

He describes the TV show, which featured an interview with Tina Davis who was then Senior Vice President of A&R at Def Jam, a record label that included big acts like Jay-Z, Ja Rule, and DMX. Ryan goes on:

They interviewed her and she described what an A&R is, what an A&R does, and literally – I’ll never forget this – I didn’t sleep that night and I just remember I was sweating, just laying down, I was like, ‘I figured out what I want to do for the rest of my life and now I have to figure out how to do it.’

He recounts that his grades were lower than his school’s GPA requirement to take part in an internship program, which he refers to interchangeably (incorrectly) as a co-op program.

Ryan worked hard to turn his grades around: “I bust[ed] my ass, went to school year-round, literally took classes in the summer, winter, spring, fall, if there was another season I would have took [sic] a class and turned my grades around, you know what I mean?” The hard work paid off. He recounts completing one subsequent semester with a 4.0 GPA. He then recalls looking for a record company where he could intern. His school’s career counselor did not have contacts at
record companies so Ryan went online himself, searched for internship contacts, and cold-called companies himself. Eventually, he secured an interview:

I was able to get an interview for basically the beginning of my junior year and that happened in November [2003]. I came out to New York with a suit on, I’ll never forget that I came into the city with a suit. Basically you interview with the woman who […] runs the internship program at [the company] and she goes, ‘What do you want to do?’ And I go, ‘What’s available? I’m looking into marketing, A&R.’ And she goes, ‘You know what, I think there’s an A&R internship that might be available.’

She made a phone call and told him to go to another building a few blocks away.

“So I ran to the building, I didn’t know anywhere around New York. She’s like, ‘This is the address,’ I’m like running…” Ryan gestures as if he were actually running and looking around him. “Where’s [this street]? Where’s [that street]? So I hop in a cab. Literally it was like a two-minute walk, but I had to get in a cab, I can’t miss this interview.” He made his way up the elevator of the building and met with two men.

I sat down for my interview […] and I talked to the guys. You know, they’re on their computers looking at me, still typing away, asked me random questions. […] I told [the main interviewer] flat out. I looked at him, like, ‘This is where I want to be. Please take me as an intern. You can do whatever you want to me, but just promise me that you’re going to teach me. Just any small thing, I’m willing to do it.’ They’re like, fine, come on board, start January.

Ryan’s retelling brings up important points. There is a sense of desperation in his plea to the main interviewer. There is monumentality to Ryan’s plea – this sounds like the most important thing in the world to him. Although his desire to be in the music industry seemed undeniable to him, it was not greeted as enthusiastically. He recounts how the employees who were interviewing him kept typing away at their computers.

After such hard work and anticipation, as he retells it, Ryan’s beginnings as an intern were difficult:
It was a struggle. It was an absolute struggle because, you know, the reality is you’re an intern. The reality is you’re not getting paid and you can come in here and spend six hours and do nothing and sometimes that would become frustrating because sometimes there’s no work for you to do. You’re just there, you copy something, you staple something, and sometimes you just sit there and like, ‘damn I spent X amount of dollars to get these credits and I’m not doing anything.’ You know, that was kind of my first week here. I was thinking about quitting. I’m like, ‘I’m coming in here and doing nothing.’

Ryan tells me his boss apologized because there was very little for him to do early on. This did not fully alleviate his disappointment. He recalls thinking to himself, “‘Man, what am I doing here? This is definitely not for me.’ You know, you start becoming, like, bored, frustrated, and you have two dollars in your pocket because you spent the other twelve to get here.”

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An intern sometimes goes to great lengths to secure an internship and might bring considerable excitement to the position, yet the case of Ryan illustrates how being an intern comes with a mix of humility and pride, accomplishment and doubt. As Ryan recalls it, he made a plea to interviewers that he would do any small thing and they could do anything to him, in a sense striking a deal with his supervisors. As described regarding the mailroom, “I will do anything” (and, by extension, I will tolerate anything) has been a prominent narrative among entrants in the cultural industries for decades. Kevin Liles, Larry, and various cultural industry workers also promote the “no task is too small” narrative. The no task is too small narrative helps to build Horatio Alger myths about the cultural labor force paying its respective dues and also sets the script for the intern’s rite of passage.

Employers also use “you will do anything” to train aspirants, like artist and executive Sean Combs aka P Diddy (an ex-intern himself) who famously asked an intern to walk from Midtown Manhattan to Brooklyn to fetch him cheesecake (Making the Band, 2003). An
employee (Patrick) at a record distribution firm describes what he sees as hypothetical yet plausible instructions given from employee to music industry intern, illustrating the day-to-day iteration of this phenomenon:

I have a 325-piece mailing that needs to go out by tomorrow afternoon. So we need you [i.e., the intern] to cut open all the 30-lbs boxes [of CDs], make sure the CDs are OK. We want you to put black dots next to these three tracks on each CD so they know which tracks are our key tracks. Put [the dotted CD] in this envelope. Put the insert in there. Seal it and we’re going to print out 325 labels, why don’t you stick them on there and then go to the postage machine, put the postage on there, and then we need you to basically put them in mail crates, walk them over to the post office. Do that three times a week.

Part of what Patrick is communicating with this example is that the person in the position of intern often serves the purpose of doing what employees consider to be undesirable grunt work. Patrick captures the unglamorous and tedious nature of this hypothetical intern’s tasks: opening many heavy boxes, putting 975 black dots on CDs, stuffing envelopes, applying postage, and lugging packages. To make things worse, all of this is done repeatedly. The “three times a week” implies that these tasks must be done for many weeks, seemingly indefinitely (or until the internship ends).

Patrick continues: “Who wants to do that? You get horrible paper cuts, I mean, and if you can listen to music, great, but a lot of interns are stuck … in the worst possible place you could possibly fit them because, you know, ‘who cares, they’re interns.’” Patrick paints an unglamorous picture of intern life. Since higher education in itself does not constitute paying one’s dues and music industry jobs cannot be learned from a book, music personnel portray a strong “learning by doing” orientation and aspirants must “do anything” to pay their dues.

Interns may or may not have much work to do, employees may ignore them, they may be delegated uninteresting work, and they may suffer financially from the unpaid experience.
Nonetheless, internships represent an opportunity and employees frame the intern’s challenges as ennobling and part of a rite of passage.

*In pain, ignored, and broke*

Nate was an intern at an independent record label for over two years before getting hired as a full-time paid employee. He has since supervised interns for more than five years. Nate recounts starting to pay his dues immediately as his internship began – he was asked to stuff envelopes for promotional mailings even though one of his arms was in a cast:

I’d go through mailings [really quickly] so I was taking, whatever, 500-piece mailers to the post office no problem with a cast on. And I wasn’t complaining - it was dead in the middle of summer. So they’re like, ‘OK, this kid works hard.’ So [an employee] took me under his wing.

The internship, as with other rites of passage, marks the potential shift from one status to another (intern to employee) through trials demarcated by pain (van Gennep, 1960). Music personnel portray a strong “learning by doing” orientation and aspirants who appear to try to skip paying their dues, by means like education, face adversity. Nate later colorfully demonstrates the importance of paying one’s dues by mocking Music Business students:

I hate the kids that come in with this like, ‘I study music business at Berklee College of Music’ or whatever. I don’t care dude; you don’t know what it’s like on the trenches. You ain’t even interned before; you need to be in the trenches. You need to know what it’s really like. You need to have ran a master to a fucking engineering studio at 3 in the afternoon in August heat by foot and subway and felt that pain and brought back boxes of promos… You have to *feel* that to really understand what it’s like to work in the music industry and appreciate it.

Nate’s attack summarizes the rationale for the internship as rite of passage, i.e., aspirants must learn by doing, but more so they must demonstrate their willingness through doing low-level
tasks (no matter how small) as a rite of passage. Being an intern is framed, from the hindsight of success, as a heroic feat.

In this context, many employees construct it as normal for interns to be ignored or treated with less respect than they might expect. Isabel, an executive at another major record company with over twelve years of experience in the music industry, admits to “either lumping [interns] together as ‘the interns’, like, a group of people … or kind of not really directly focusing attention towards them as much as I should be.” She provides two reasons for doing so: “Part of it is I might be too busy and part of that is just ‘ah well, it’s the interns’.” While Isabel’s bluntness regarding her neglect of interns may seem surprising, she situates the plight of interns (as do many other employees) as a common rite of passage:

You know, but the thing is that anybody, like 90-some percent I’m guessing, of the people who are saying [‘ah well, it’s the interns’] were an intern and they [understand] you go through that. Everybody’s pretty much gone through it and you know what it’s like to have to go to Starbucks and get coffee and be like ‘what am I learning? Nothing. I’m learning how to order a mochaccino.

The intern is therefore a position recognized by employees as low-status. Employees may explain or excuse their low level of investment in training interns because they also faced similar challenges in the past.

Lastly, Jerry is a senior executive in A&R at a major record company. When discussing how one works her or his way into the music industry, he vehemently denies the value of higher education except for law, finance, and possibly marketing employees. I ask him if he knows about Music Business programs, to which he responds: “I give [guest] lectures on it. And when people tell me, ‘What’s the fastest way to get into the music business?’ I say quit taking classes like this.” Instead, Jerry suggests that aspirants should get involved in the industry, through an internship or whatever other experience they can find. I mention how unpaid work can represent
a financial burden for interns. He agrees, yet describes the cost as a test of will: “It’s a test. How bad do you want it? Remember that awful Don Henley song, How Bad Do You Want It? I mean, it’s a test.” He adds, “If you don’t want it, a thousand people do.” Jerry points to the vast oversupply of potential workers and therefore extremely competitive process of gaining music industry employment.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I showed how music industry personnel generally devalue formal educational shortcuts to music industry employment. Music industry employees instead privilege on-site learning as an ennobling rite of passage. Employees also construct internships (or other “on-site” experience) as the best way for an aspirant to learn. Yet, the responsibility for training falls on the intern and occurs under challenging circumstances. Aspiring and paid employees interpret and accept the *mailroom model* for training and thus reproduce uncertain and precarious work arrangements for interns.
Chapter 3: The Intern as an Elastic Role

By accepting the mailroom model of training, interns agree to do unpaid work. O’Mahony and Bechky (2006) refer to doing free or reduced-pay work as “discounting.” Discounting is one of many tactics individuals use to overcome the “career progression paradox,” the catch-22 wherein workers need skills to secure a job, but must first have the job to gain those skills. Studying contract workers from the high technology and film industries, O’Mahony and Bechky found that workers achieve mobility through acquiring “stretchwork,” a type of work “whose content mostly fits within a person’s base of competence but that also contains a smaller component with which a person has no experience” (2006, p. 924). These authors argue that all workers face the career progression paradox to some extent, though this challenge is more salient for non-permanent employees as they may not benefit from organizational guidance and a firm’s longer-term investment in on-the-job training. Also, attempts at stretchwork are not necessarily successful, which can cause frustration for the aspirant, e.g., they quote a film crew intern who was asked to assemble fruit baskets for an entire week (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006).

Industry and workplace conditions affect the ways workers resolve the career progression paradox (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2006). In this chapter I will focus on one such condition – flexibility of the work role – as it relates to both the promise and challenge of music industry internships. To O’Mahony & Bechky (2006, p. 933), “roles that are open to interpretation foster opportunities for stretchwork.” Some work roles are more constrained, or more difficult to change (or stretch), than others (Bechky, 2006). Individuals can seize or challenge an ambiguous role to simultaneously “fit in” and “stand out” (De Clercq & Voronov, 2009). Ambiguity is defined here as “an on-going stream that supports several different meanings at the same time,”
when “multiple … explanations are plausible” (Weick, 1995, p. 91, 134, as cited in Long Lingo & O’Mahony, 2010, p. 52). It is not uncommon – and certainly not new – for a workplace role to be highly flexible. Over 50 years ago, Dalton (1959, p. 27, 68) described the “Assistant-to” position as an “elastic role” or an unofficial jack/jill of all roles that officially “serves to relieve the executive of routine work” yet also fulfills numerous other purposes:

It serves as a reward, as an unofficial channel of information, as an informal arm of authority, as a safety valve for the pressures generated by a necessary surplus of able and ambitious developing executives, as a protective office for loyal but aging members rendered unfit by changes they cannot meet or from other failures, as a training post, etc.

Similarly, I argue, the intern is an elastic role providing many official and unofficial purposes and benefits. In theory (or, legally) employers derive no direct advantage from interns’ work, yet I detail several company benefits below. There is ambiguity as well regarding what interns do and what they achieve from the experience. Therefore, an internship represents an opportunity to build one’s employability and launch a career, but it is a role rife with challenges.

The cultural industries have been among the major users of unpaid interns for some time (Frederick, 1997; Neff, 2012). Aspirants are guided into doing internships as a strategy for career entry, yet most interns do not gain music industry employment. Why? And how does this work? By focusing on the characteristics and challenges of the intern role, I find that interns perform provisional labor. Internships are provisional as in temporary, conditional, and ambiguous (“what you make of it”). Interns embody a flexible pool of labor for a host company, allowing for a range of formal and informal benefits for all parties concerned. Internships represent a liminal and indeterminate period during which aspirants form a reservoir of excess workers before potentially getting hired as paid employees.
The following analysis begins with a description of what interns do, what interns might achieve, and why employers host interns. I then detail how the characteristics of unpaid internship programs in the music industry constrain the work opportunities presented to interns, and more generally, the enactment of the intern role. Taken together, this chapter suggests how ambiguity plays a central role in the production and maintenance of the intern economy.

The Promise of Internships

A morning in November: Obama won (part 1 of 2)

Intern tasks tend to be mundane, even tedious, as the morning of November 5, 2008 demonstrates. On that day I arrive at the Major Records USA office shortly after 8:30 a.m., a few minutes later than usual. Upon entering the office building I show the security guard my Major Records USA ID as I sign in. He hands me a scribbled piece of paper, a sticker with today’s date on it, which grants me access to the building for the rest of the day. I show the sticker to the security guard standing nearby (blocking access to the elevators) and walk to the elevators. I make my way to the offices of Major Records USA.

As I walk in I see Hank sitting at his desk, speaking on the phone. He shaved his beard off since I last saw him and is sporting a very thin mustache, almost a pencil-line mustache directly above his lip. As usual, his shoulder-length hair is straightened, slicked back and he is dressed up; today he is wearing a shiny blue button-down shirt, a darker/grayish blue tie with thin brown stripes, and a light brown suit. As I walk down the hall I stop in front of his desk and extend my hand for a handshake. I do not usually greet him with a handshake, but I expect him
to look at me triumphantly after Obama’s general election victory the night before. Instead, I receive a weak handshake and a brief look; he seems focused on that phone call.

I take off my jacket and bring it to the nearby walk-in storage closet. The few hangers are occupied so I fold my jacket and place it on top of a box in the left corner of this small L-shaped room. I walk from one end of the L to the other extreme, the shorter end, where we keep cans of soda and bottles of water; in the process, I brush by wall-length six-foot tall shelves packed with hundreds of empty padded envelopes of various sizes, sweatshirts, records, and recycled boxes to be used for shipping. I grab one of the stacked six-packs of Fiji water bottles and make my way to Bill’s office (Senior VP of Sales). Uncharacteristically, there are more than six bottles missing from his fridge. I return to the storage closet for a second pack of bottles. I tear the bottles out of the six-pack’s plastic wrapper. I bend down on my knees and pull out two rows of cold bottles from Bill’s refrigerator, place the room-temperature bottles towards the back, and put the colder ones to the front as I was trained to do. I also stock the refrigerator in Larry’s (VP) office, then the one in Mara’s (Sales Manager) office. For each of these short refrigerators I am careful to add bottles of water and replenish the correct types of soda: two kinds of diet Dr. Brown’s soda for Bill, Diet Coke for Larry, and various types for Mara’s fridge, which is also used by Hank, Carlos (the afternoon intern), and me.

Once this is done I walk down the hall for about 30 seconds, around the corner past the International Department and some offices and cubicles of people working in marketing, to the place where I usually get reams of paper piled up next to the photocopier. There is no paper next to the copier this morning so I cannot replenish Hank’s paper supply yet. As I walk back to my desk I hear Larry speaking in the background – he has just arrived, around 8:45. With Larry within earshot, Hank tells me to get to work on Larry’s reports. I print sales reports from the
Internet. I then print reports summarizing radio airplay for Major Records USA, which I alphabetize and staple together. By 9 a.m. I am done and have completed my morning work responsibilities, i.e., the bulk of my work for the day. I break down a few errant boxes to keep busy and go through old emails. Mostly, I transfer emails from the Inbox to other folders. I open sales reports for the week and, out of curiosity, study how the company’s releases are doing. On and off Hank and I talk about politics and Larry chimes in. Susan (Director of Sales) walks over a bit later and describes her excitement over Obama’s victory. I feel the beginning of a celebratory day.

I ask Hank, as I do many times every day I am in the office, if there is anything else I can do. As he often does, he tells me, “Not right now, thanks.” So began one of my days as an intern. In fact, with minor variations, so began most of my days as an intern at Major Records USA: stocking refrigerators, fetching reams of paper, printing reports, checking emails, maintaining brief friendly conversations, and trying to get more work to do for the day. Like other interns, I struggled to find helpful tasks to do. Many employees and some interns describe the potential vice which is down time for interns as a virtue; interns are given the opportunity (and time) to learn by overhearing, occasionally following up with questions, and to prove themselves by making the most of their internship.
Mundane and professional tasks: “What you make of it”

Record industry interns report doing mundane\textsuperscript{14} (or clerical/administrative) tasks as well as professional duties similar to the higher-level tasks of their supervisors. The bundle of tasks done by interns varies from one company to the next, between departments, and even within a company’s department, though interns and supervising employees report some general features: A&R interns tend to listen to, research, and prepare reports regarding potential artists; Publicity interns gather press clippings, i.e., they flip through newspapers and magazines page by page to cut out pertinent articles; Sales interns generally create (or assist in creating) reports tracking company performance. Additional tasks reported include low-level assignments like stuffing envelopes for mass-mailings, making copies of CDs, organizing or cleaning storage rooms, ordering lunch or coffee, running errands, to more administrative tasks like filing, making photocopies, answering phones, to professionally-focused endeavors like doing research, writing press releases, managing artist MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, calling stores regarding sales, contacting radio stations or regional press (promotions or publicity), and scouting potential bands (A&R).

Most interns interviewed report considerable down time during their internship, their workload being organized around routine tasks with intertwined gaps. Some report being assigned long-term projects to help fill these gaps. These routines can be broken by urgent or various idiosyncratic tasks, e.g., an unexpected errand. Monique interned for two summers in the A&R Department of a major record company and describes her routine: “I had a lot of down

\textsuperscript{14} The distinction between “clerical/administrative” and “professional” tasks comes from studies on internship tasks (see for example NACE, 2011) whereas the terms “mundane” and “higher-level” (or close equivalents) were used by participants in the current study. I do not suggest that the tasks called mundane are necessarily easy; my field notes and interview data suggest many tense and challenging moments doing things as simple as ordering lunch for a department of employees (some more urgently hungry than others) and screening phone calls (with some callers more patient with an intern’s lack of knowledge than others).
time, but I just kind of would sit on MySpace and look up all of these bands.” Adding, “there were definitely times when I was just kind of sitting there, checking Facebook [she laughs].” I ask Monique whether her supervisor appeared to mind her periods of inactivity, to which she responds “no” and clarifies:

I was in an office by myself and whenever [my boss] gave me something to do I’d do it and I’d finish it in a timely fashion until she had something else for me to do or until there was something else in the daily routine that I had to do. OK, mail’s going to come at 3. You get up at 3 and check the mail and be in the mailroom by 5 so I can meet the UPS guy, kind of thing. I don’t know, there are certain things that happened every day, but between the gaps in time between the daily routines sometimes I wouldn’t have too much to do.

Employees may or may not know, notice, or care when interns have nothing to do. According to some employees, interns may not mind a light workload. A junior employee at a major record company’s A&R Department who supervises a group of interns describes the range of interns he has worked with, including interns who showed little interest in doing work: “There’s a lot of people you can tell just … don’t want to work in the music business. They have no interest in it.” He adds, shortly thereafter:

And I think this internship is, you know, totally what you make of it. We’ve had people who come in here and sit here and watch videos on YouTube. If that’s, you know, your prerogative, awesome, do your thing, I’m not going to stop you.

The uncommitted, or uninterested, or shy intern may be ignored or forgotten by employees. It is often tolerated for interns to do nothing, but the burden rests on the intern to proactively seek out additional work.

An internship is presented to the intern as a vague promise. An internship coordinator at a large New York City college describes how she prepares students beginning an internship in the music industry:
We try to impress upon our students that no matter where you go [in the music industry] you’re going to be doing mundane tasks. … At some companies they’re not really good at gauging a particular student, but we always tell them – go in, do what you can, whatever job that they give you, you do the best that you can do at it because if you do this job well they’re going to move you up to do the next job and just continue on.

Some interns are told specifically to expect considerable mundane work, but are often promised potential improvements to their position (as described in the quote above) under the heading that an internship is what the intern makes of it. However, there is variation in the types and levels of interns’ interests.

**Intern benefits**

Doing an internship provides the intern with many potential benefits. Previous studies find that completing internships correlates positively with superior postsecondary academic performance (Swail & Kampits, 2004), improved “soft skills” (Divine, Miller, & Wilson, 2006), career clarification (Rothman & Sisman, 2010), and a heightened chance of securing career-oriented employment after graduation (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Coco, 2000). Respondents in the present study identified additional benefits, describing internships as a credential attesting to the intern’s practical workplace value (e.g., a line on the résumé); a way to learn about the world of work and more specifically about the music industry; an opportunity to meet people (ranging from a helpful contact to a mentor/champion); and an opportunity to experience meaningful involvement within the music world, potentially as an extension of fandom. Regarding the latter benefit, some interns emphasize the “psychic rewards” (Menger, 1999) they derive from the internship, i.e., the intangible benefits from involvement in the production of something they
consider especially meaningful, as well as receiving tangible “free stuff” (McClain & Mears, 2012) like CDs, t-shirts, and tickets for shows.

Interns do not necessarily aim to gain imminent employment in the music industry. In the case of Greg, he describes only becoming a job seeker as his intern career progressed: “At first I wanted to know what [the music business] was all about. And then once I knew what it was all about and wanted to do it, I needed to keep interning if I wanted a job.” Job-seeking interns try to convince paid employees they are serious in their efforts and attempt to stand out as exceptional, since many interns claim interest in music industry employment. One high-profile intern was Carlos, whom I met when we both interned at Major Records USA (where he was eventually hired as a temp). He interned for approximately three hours nearly every weekday afternoon after a full shift at his paid job. On numerous occasions I noticed Carlos walk in holding fast-food or coffee for employees and, upon asking, I realized he routinely sent text messages to employees while on his way to the office, offering to pick up snacks and drinks for them. An employee on a different floor of the building took note: “You can tell that Carlos really wants to be here and will do anything to stick around.” Interns must seize the ambiguity inherent in their role, elevate their status, and demonstrate their commitment and interest to employees.

Why Companies Host Interns

The ambiguity and varied interpretations of internships’ benefits apply not only to the intern, but also to the advantages derived by host companies. Employees and interns claim that companies host interns for numerous, overlapping reasons: interns provide an inexpensive source

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15 Similarly, Lloyd (2006, p. 132) suggests that service sector workers in a culturally desirable haunt describe working for the “community” over the pay.
of labor; an influx of youthful energy, information, and ideas; and internships train the next
generation of record industry professionals while providing a pipeline of qualified candidates to
music firms. However, respondents predominantly stressed the “inexpensive labor” rationale.
While the literature would predict that relative newcomers must complete mundane t
asks as they
attempt to become full members of the record industry’s workplace community (Grugulis &
Stoyanova, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991), interns are constrained by the view that they primarily
serve as a source of inexpensive labor.

*Interns as inexpensive labor*

Sitting on a black leather couch in his Chelsea apartment, Nate recounts managing interns at
an independent record company. According to him, some of these interns were not very smart,
but still of some use:

There’s always shit work to be done and no one else is going to do it. And if [the intern]
is that dumb, there’s always something like cleaning up the store-room that you should
make him [sic] do… There’s always shit to be done. Always.

The above statement is a typical one in that interns provide a source of inexpensive labor and
companies use this resource. Nate’s claim that “no one else is going to do it” is not always
correct, however; if an intern does not clean the storage room, a paid employee will eventually
do so. Nearly everyone interviewed in this study claims that companies take interns to benefit
from inexpensive labor, but answers differ in emphasis: many portray interns as facilitators for
the company; others tell stories about how interns – if well-managed – help further employees’
careers, while some describe interns as crucial to ensuring company operations.
Karl worked in sales and marketing for an independent record company for approximately three years until it went out of business, followed by a few months (at time of interview) for another small label. At both companies the number of interns has varied from one semester to another, mostly between one and three interns at a time. Karl occasionally spent time without intern support since, as he describes it, interns are assigned work based on their interests and the company’s immediate needs. When asked to imagine how things would be different without any unpaid interns, Karl answers, “I feel like we wouldn’t get as much accomplished.” He clarifies his point by describing interns primarily as extra hands:

A lot of our work is very grassroots and, frankly, labor-intensive that having those extra hands around is a tremendous asset, but I feel like without them, you know, we’d get by. We’d still sell records, but it’s just sort of the little extra oomph to really complete things and allow us to do all the things, at least most of the time, that we want to do.

According to this view interns are facilitators, but they are not necessary for a company to function. Many employees speak in these terms, as do some interns. Emily interned at two major record companies (one in A&R, the other in Publishing) and claims that without interns many companies “could function but it would be not as… They’d have a lot more mundane tasks for people who are being paid.” Monique, who interned at a major record company’s A&R Department for two consecutive summers, echoes those words. She suggests that record companies could survive without interns: “I feel like they could do it. It’d be hard. [Employees] are busy already, more or less, and we do the stuff that would make them borderline insane probably.” Monique adds, having interns “makes things run smoothly.” In this sense, both emphasize how interns facilitate the work of employees for the sake of getting things done.

As facilitators, employees describe interns as a resource for the company to apply as a solution to almost any low-level staffing issue. In an extreme case, since allegedly “no task is too
small,” an employee I interviewed had two interns film his wedding. Another employee described seeing no issue with interns fetching his dry-cleaning. At Major Records USA, Hank portrayed interns as a flexible resource during an interaction about the department’s sole employee in the Los Angeles office. The West Coast sales employee asked Bill (senior executive) to sign a travel pre-approved form after travel had been completed. Hank handed Bill the form, which was greeted with discontent. Bill gave Hank a hard time about it, told him that was unacceptable, and blamed him for the oversight since Hank is the main administrative employee for the department. With Bill out of earshot, Hank discussed the incident further with an employee (Kendra) who sits nearby:

Hank: I don’t have anything to do with [that employee]. He’s in L.A.
Kendra: He doesn’t have an assistant.
Hank: No! He needs to get himself some interns.

The solution to the West Coast employee’s lack of administrative support, Hank reasoned, was to get interns. According to employees’ depiction of their utility, interns are a flexible source of facilitating labor.

Nancy, an A&R employee, provides a slightly different emphasis on the contribution of interns:

The reason I’ve always taken an interest in interns, having them and mentoring them, is because several jobs ago I assisted this woman who … was able to figure out a way so that she only focused her day on things that were going to really help her with her job and help her move forward… As I was sort of coming up and trying to figure out how to get out of the cubicle and get into an office I started really relying on college kids and taking the time to train them on things that I did so that I could really focus my time on keeping my boss happy, but also making time so I could work on things to get out of that cubicle.
Now out of her cubicle and sitting in an office with a window at a major record company, Nancy boasts that she loves her company’s internship program, notably because in the last year “I ended up signing two artists out of that internship program based on college kids that I’ve met and trained to do A&R.” Therefore Nancy’s answer emphasizes how employees can personally gain from intern labor; according to this view interns are still facilitators, however, the benefit is for the individual employee’s career progression.

Finally, some participants – interns and employees – go so far as to claim that intern labor is crucial to company operations. Mark [employee] says that public relations firms specialized in music are “the worst” places for interns: “Their entire business model is built upon free labor.” At such companies, he adds, interns do “grunt work” including “emailing a thousand people…, mailing things or putting together packages. So, PR places are from my experience the ones who have the most turn-around with interns, who require the most interns to maintain their business.” Moreover, Larry has worked in the music industry for over twenty years and is now a senior employee at a major record company, where paid positions in the last decade have been routinely cut:

The role is, I think, so important because we have a lot less staff and one person is doing the job of two or three, that an intern’s services whether it’s researching something or putting together agendas, answering phones, is now a pivotal part because if we didn’t have [interns] I think that a lot of stuff wouldn’t get done the way it should.

Per the quote above, an intern routinely answers Larry’s phone. Also, people in Larry’s previous position had assistants, which is no longer the case:

That went away a long time ago. So [assistant duties] became internalized and people did a lot of the stuff that their assistants would do. My assistant was busy all the time, but that was a luxury that never will be back.
In this way Larry suggests that interns better support the work of ever-leaner record companies, going so far as to suggest that interns buffer the loss of paid positions.

When discussing the distribution of tasks in the office, employees indirectly support Mark and Larry’s statements. For example, when I ask Nate what was similar and different when he transitioned from intern to employee at an indie record company, he demonstrates how intern tasks still trickled back to him between semesters: “If there wasn’t an intern around, I was the intern. And if there were interns around, I was corralling them or hiring them.” Therefore his promotion to office manager and assistant to the head of the label was, as he calls it, “Internship B.” Similarly, Shane explains that interns do a lot of administrative tasks at a prominent indie record company, as he did before being promoted to a paid position. Shane describes asking interns to mail packages and file documents, then adds: “Those are big roles because if they’re not doing it, [the employees are] doing it. … If we don’t have interns in the office for whatever reason for a week or something I’ll do that 300-piece mailing.” Even though employees may not state it directly, they frequently describe interns’ work as important to everyday business.

**Interns as source of youth, information, and ideas**

Ben is a 19 year-old college student and a scout for a major record label in New York City. His job consists of bringing artists to the attention of the A&R (Artists and Repertoire) Department, the part of the label charged with adding new artists to its roster. He confirms how some companies or departments draw heavily on the subcultural savvy of interns, though this benefit overlaps with the inexpensive labor rationale. Ben and I speak one-on-one for about an hour, interrupted briefly by email and instant messenger windows on his computer. After the
interview, both of us chat with his boss and an intern. Ben describes the live performance he attended the night before, which he seemed to enjoy. His boss holds a large smile throughout his animated descriptions, punctuated by his statement that the music was just like it was in the 1990s.¹⁶

Ben selects interns for the A&R Department and describes passion for music (or displays of passion, as he performed) as central to his intern selection process: “I don’t care about your grades. I don’t care what you’re majoring in. Are you a music fan?” Ben’s department exemplifies a particular (and rare) type of intern host that is especially focused on interns’ insights and cultural knowledge. Referring to the internship program, he says, “I think first of all it’s kind of an awesome focus group…. I think it’s good to get the view from a bunch of college kids. You know? I am not an average college kid.” While respondents at various companies told me they like to run things by interns, e.g., ask them if fellow college students would be interested in contest x or promotion y, Ben’s department organizes its internship program around leveraging their musical knowledge.

The department’s interns primarily listen to music and compile charts for A&R staff. Ben describes maintaining a list of dozens of music websites, which interns go through every week. The extra hands and ears, Ben assesses, are invaluable: “There’s no way we could do that. You know, individually [he laughs as he says] there’s no way all of us have the time to go through all that stuff!” Of the various websites, the company most notably uses the music and networking website MySpace to locate emerging musical talent, with the help of interns. While MySpace produces a top 10 chart of its most popular content, Ben assigns the country’s 50 states to the

¹⁶ Perhaps the employee was smiling, as I was, because Ben was born in the 1990s and was an infant when that performer hit the scene.
various interns and they input the top 10 artists for each state into a document to help A&R find local trends, “So you get to see that local band [that] is doing awesome in Wyoming.” On a weekly basis, interns build a database of popular bands: “I get this chart that prints out to about 30 pages and I just … cross out the bands I’ve heard of or know or have listened to and end up highlighting anything I haven’t heard.” Through this process, Ben narrows the 30-page document down to a one-page list of bands for A&R to check out.

Culling charts and web content is the intern’s basic responsibility, though Ben hopes to gain additional knowledge: “I want interns who are trendsetters and who are, you know, just totally on top of their stuff. And, who are the people who other people look up to.” The department aims to find interns with a keen sense of current and imminent music trends. He asks, “Where’s that kid who’s going to find me the next awesome band?” However, the case above is relatively exceptional.

Employees sometimes describe an influx of youth, information, and ideas as an added benefit provided by interns. For companies, the shape of this benefit ranges from indirect contributions to the company atmosphere to direct sources of information and ideas in the form of a built-in, informal focus group. In terms of the former, employees note how interns make their office “more vibey,” i.e., their youth, enthusiasm, and subcultural savvy reinforce an informal workplace culture, even if purely at an ornamental level. However, some employees go slightly further in pointing out their interns’ youth-specific contributions:

As I get a little older, unfortunately, I’m not so in tune with college-age kids as I used to be. I don’t think of myself as that old, but there’s a big difference between me at 32 and, you know, the 19 year-old in college. When those are some of the people I’m marketing records to, to have someone there, part of the team that is that person and relates to those people because that’s what they are… I find that to be helpful. I remember having an intern a couple years ago that introduced me to Facebook. You know, at that time it was
only available to students. I didn’t even know it existed. ‘Like, oh, Facebook!’ [I] started promoting some records and some shows and events on Facebook, which I never would have discovered until years down the road on my own. [Karl, employee]

Later in the interview I ask Karl if interns also help him stay informed about new bands. He flatly denies this. Karl adds, “It’s part of my job to kind of keep my finger on the pulse of what’s going on. I’m not that old yet.” He gets more animated as he continues: “I’m not that out of touch where I need someone a little younger than me to tell me, you know, what the kids are listening to. I feel like I still have a pretty good grasp on that.” Karl claims he stays sufficiently abreast of new music partly since that is integral to his job.

Danielle is fresh out of college, has completed three internships, and is searching for a full-time job. I ask her why companies host interns and she immediately answers “free labor.” After a brief silence she adds:

If they listen they can get the word from the streets. If you have an intern who really, like somebody who really loves music and is out there and is looking at what’s going on – a couple times I would hear my boss talking about something and I’d drop in, ‘Oh I saw them on this [show]…’ ‘Oh my 17 year-old sister loves this…’ You know? Just like a little ‘bloop’ because they’re in their world under high-rise [buildings] being 50 years old. The fact of the matter is that they are not where we are, in the same bars, at the same clubs, listening to music, going to shows. Or they’re going to shows in like [the] V.I.P. [area]. They’re not experiencing it like we are. So if they’re listening [to interns] they can get important insight.

Interns may therefore provide a source of youth, information, and ideas to host companies, though these resources are unevenly acknowledged and used by employers.
Internships as training ground and pipeline for job candidates

Several respondents stressed that the internship represents a training ground as well as a foot in the door for potential employees. Since music industry employees do not necessarily consider schooling a sufficient source of experience for employment, nor does a college degree generally represent a satisfactory credential to sort between potential employees, internship experience helps employers prepare and test aspirants. After first noting the benefits of inexpensive labor, Larry [employee] stresses the “training” component and presents it as a service to schools and students: “[Internships] provide a valuable service to schools and people like you that you can have practical experience.” According to a senior publicity employee at a major record company with over ten years of experience, if an intern “works in the company for even a couple months, you know, they’re already one step ahead” towards getting hired. The training/pipeline reason tends to be the publicly acknowledged rationale for why companies host interns (Muhamad et al., 2009; Perlin, 2011). However, many interns and employees make skeptical or cynical claims about this view.

Agatha is doing her second internship at the same major record company. She reached out to the company’s main contact for interns and recounts how this person portrayed the internship: “She said, ‘Listen, that’s why we encourage students that are really serious about music to take internships at [this company] because we will hire our interns. If you get really good feedback from your employer, we will hire a lot of our interns.’” In this way, the carrot of employment is waived in front of prospective, current, and ex-interns. Yet Agatha continues by summarizing why companies host interns for economic reasons: “And they might say ‘Oh yeah we want interns to come and learn’ but think about it from the capitalist perspective. It’s free!
It’s free labor.” The training/pipeline answer is not deemed incorrect, but Agatha questions whether it is the companies’ primary benefit.

Interns like Agatha are not alone in skepticism about the training/pipeline benefit to companies. Nate [employee] makes the same point:

People can sit there and say like, ‘We’re trying to harbor careers’ and all that, but the essential reason is to get that shit work done and then hopefully you’re going to find that diamond in the rough, ideally, but essentially it’s that reason, it’s shit work to get done.

Companies do hire a small minority of their interns as paid employees; in the case of Nate’s employer, he estimates at most 10% (i.e., four, including himself) of the more than 40 interns were hired as employees during his five years with an indie record company. Nate describes the use of intern labor as “a pretty efficient system” for companies. Interns he deems “unhirable” for paid positions are not dissuaded from interning. Laughing slightly, Nate adds: “You can stick around and just stuff envelopes and waste your time. We’re not going to hire you, but we will use you for the other crap.” Similarly, Mark [ex-intern, current employee] goes further by saying internships are, for companies, solely about free labor:

It’s all about free labor. I mean, anyone who says [the opposite] is completely deluded or rationalizing. It’s not about getting people opportunities, it’s about getting things done without paying for it. … That’s not to say that it’s not a great filter for finding good fits for your organization. And people like myself do get hired out of internships. So I’m not speaking without having had some success there.

According to this view, the training/pipeline benefit of internships is no more than a by-product to the company receiving inexpensive labor.

Thus, interns and employees describe three primary company benefits for hosting interns, but they emphasize their importance differently. Almost every person encountered in this study mentioned “cheap labor” or “free labor” as part of why companies host interns. The other two
reasons are more contentious since not everyone agrees that companies host interns for the “youth/information/ideas” reason and many participants are outwardly critical of the “training/pipeline” reason as a public rationalization for inexpensive labor. Significantly, regarding attempts at gaining career entry, participants primarily describe interns as a source of inexpensive labor and frame on-the-job training as a secondary benefit.

Characteristics and Constraints of the Intern Role

The intern, as an elastic role, provides many official and unofficial benefits to the aspirant and the host company, though these may or may not be congruent with the intern’s expectations or hopes. Ambiguity stems from the internship’s varied interpretations by all parties, but also from characteristics that constrain the intern’s range of tasks, and more generally, the enactment of the role. These factors become clearer when considering whether (and how) employees delegate tasks.

Shane has worked for a small indie record company for more than three years. Four years ago, he was an unpaid intern at that same company before getting hired as a full-time employee the next year. Shane describes how employees delegate tasks to interns, noting how his understanding of this process changed when he went from being an intern to an employee under the same roof:

[Employees] are not exactly good at telling you what to do or showing you how to do things. Or even to have time to do any of those things. And I feel it’s the same now with the interns that I have where I work. … You’re so busy, you’re so wrapped up in what you’re doing, you know you’re really appreciative if you have the help and you definitely take advantage of it when something comes up, but you’re not exactly spending much of your day finding interesting tasks for them to do.
He describes managing interns as an opportunistic endeavor – employees are not necessarily good at, nor do they prioritize, training interns. Instead, Shane portrays employees as delegating the easiest tasks, partly because they do not spend much time reflecting upon what to delegate. Looking back at his time as an intern, he continues:

I came into this internship and there were definitely things immediately that I would do, like make packages and stuff like that obviously, run errands and all that stuff. So, I did a lot of sort of street team stuff too; they’d give me postcards to take to the record shops, to hand out at shows, I would do all of that stuff and they’d be good about delegating *that* work. But as for doing bigger projects, they didn’t have a whole lot, really.

There are constraints apart from being busy that shape this distribution of tasks. To employees, interns generally possess three interrelated, limiting characteristics: (1) *low status*, (2) *presumed incompetence*, and (3) *temporary nature of position*. These factors pose interactional challenges between interns and employees, notably in reaching an agreed-upon division of labor, social interaction seen as mutually respectful, and – for interns – potentially, a substantive learning experience leading to possible employment.

*Low status*

The low status of interns is built into the physical structure of the workplace. The intern’s lower status is perhaps most visible in terms of workspace. At Major Records USA, for example, status hierarchies are represented in the organization of office space: managers and above sit in offices (often with windows), assistants have desks or cubicles in alcoves along the wall of the hallway, and interns sit in makeshift workspaces – at small metal tables in the hallway. Immediately to their left or right sits the supervising assistant, separated by a four-foot-tall partition between the assistant’s desk space and the intern’s, leaving the intern unambiguously
alone in the hallway for a few feet (until the next “intern station”). As someone walks down the hall it is easy to “read” people’s positions. On different floors, at different companies, there are other spatial complexities, but in the vast majority of cases the dynamics are similar. Of course, spatial hierarchies in the workplace are extremely common, yet in this case these are especially pertinent because interns are supposed to learn from and develop rapport with employees. However, the two groups are literally and symbolically segregated.

Sometimes the spatial and physical markers of status are more subtly evident. Interns might get the worst computers at the company and sit on the least comfortable chairs. Some interns need to bring their own laptops to their internship. Other interns sit in cubicles much like employees, but this space is shared and no seat is officially (or consistently) assigned. To share space might lead to unexpected forms of stress. An intern at an indie record company recalls sharing a room with more than ten other interns, which she describes as a “really really long cubicle.” During the day, the interns would “just wander around, but there was never a place to put our stuff. … Half the time I’d just carry my bag around with me or leave it in the intern room and pray no one would take it.” Greg recalls an internship at a major record company where he did not have his own desk: “I just sat in a chair, like I didn’t have one specific place to sit and I didn’t have my own computer.” He describes feeling left aside, literally and figuratively: “They just sit you in a chair next to [your] boss and don’t have a computer. That sucks. You’re not doing anything. You feel like you’re not really a part of it.”

One of the perks of interning includes getting into shows for free. Nonetheless, the distribution of free tickets is typically done through respect for hierarchy. On one morning at Major Records USA, Kendra (junior employee) gushes about the show she saw the night before. The artist performing is one of the record company’s biggest acts. She tells Hank she was
surprised not to see Carlos (intern) at the show since they both got tickets from the same person. Hank explains, “Interns don’t get those types of tickets.” Hank notes in a matter-of-fact way that Carlos surely sat further back and, similarly, people more senior than her had even better seats. I later learned that if someone needs to go to a show as part of their job, they receive a ticket before the intern. If someone of a higher status wants to go to a show, they will get a ticket before an intern. Sometimes employees get an email with information about an upcoming show and if space is limited the email will include the words “No Interns.” If an intern does get a ticket or is put on the guest list for a show, their lower status may be marked by getting lesser tickets, a lack of “plus one” (i.e., no extra entry for a guest), or they may not get access to the V.I.P. area.

The low status of interns is also made clear by the very tasks they complete as well as how people describe typical intern work. I found considerable variation in the types of tasks interns complete – and a significant part of my sample did not report fetching coffee or meals – yet the role powerfully implies a low standing and stereotypical expectations about intern responsibilities. On my last day as an intern at Major Records USA I updated the “intern guide,” a document with which new interns in the Sales Department are greeted. As I re-wrote this introductory text, a senior employee (Susan) walked by and joked about what should appear in the guide: “Enjoy learning about all the kinds of lattes Starbucks makes!” Adding shortly thereafter, “Soon you will be able to fix any paper jam that the photocopier will throw at you!” I fetched coffee for a group of six people on most Friday mornings, doing a “Starbucks run” and did only occasional photocopying – combined, these tasks made up less than 5% of my time as an intern. Many interns do not have to make photocopies and fetch coffee as part of their music industry internship; however, employees and interns nevertheless refer to these tasks as representative of the very basic, low-level, sometimes humbling work done by interns, i.e., as
many people put it, “typical intern stuff.” Interns must accept that in the eyes of a number of employees, no task is too small. The title of intern provides employees with the license to delegate menial tasks, without explanation, as the vignette below illustrates.

A morning in November: Obama won (part 2 of 2)

After a relatively idle half hour, a thin white woman who works in the Publicity Department walks over to Agatha and Stephanie, two interns sitting at a workspace a few feet behind me. The woman, perhaps near 30 years old, asks if either intern is 21 years old. Agatha says she is 20, Stephanie says she is 21. I overhear the woman instruct Stephanie about a series of errands to run. Hank looks closely to his right, seemingly monitoring the conversation, and after a few moments he asks the woman if she needs any assistance. The woman and Hank have a bit of an exchange, where Hank insists that his intern (i.e., me) could help carry things. She asks him if that is “alright” and implies that help is not a necessity. Hank insists slightly and asks again whether she would like me to come. Looking at Hank, not me, the woman says, “Well, yes. If you don’t mind sending your intern out. Do you mind?” Hank replies, “Of course not.” Throughout the exchange the woman never addresses me directly, never asks me if I would like to go, she always works through the intermediary of Hank. She never asks me for my name, and in the process I never have the chance to ask her for her name. Their discussion took place, in an odd way, as if I were not in the room.

Once it is agreed upon that I would go, Hank turns towards me and before he makes another sound I enthusiastically say, “Sure.” After all I cannot complain about going outside; no one seems to have much work for me to do.
Hank and the woman try to decide where Stephanie and I should buy alcohol. Hank suggests one place and Kendra, sitting nearby, chimes in and suggests a different liquor store where the company gets a slight discount. When I see that the conversation is winding down I get up, retrieve my jacket from the storage closet, and walk towards the group on my way to the door. On my way out, Hank asks me a question no one has asked me since my first day at the internship, two months before: “You’ve got your I.D. so you can get back in?” I say, “Yes, of course,” a bit surprised by the question since I have carried my I.D. with me consistently since my first day.

Stephanie and I walk out together and chat away. This is our first extended conversation together. Our mission for the morning is to buy two bottles of Veuve Clicquot, two bottles of peach nectar, one set of New York newspapers, and two CDs.

Stephanie tells me she studies at NYU with a major in Art History. She says she wants to work in the music industry, but wants a “balanced” background (thus, studies Art History and takes some business classes). We talk about the staff at the label, mostly the people she interns under. We arrive at our first stop, a record store, and go straight to the CD aisles. We have two CDs to buy: Led Zepellin “II” and AC/DC “Back in Black.” I am never told why we need to buy these two CDs. Stephanie looks for AC/DC and I pick up the Led Zepellin CD from a rack; the CD costs $18.99 for nine re-mastered songs. As I hand it to Stephanie I joke, “$18.99 for an old CD, and they wonder why people don't buy CDs anymore?” Stephanie, with similar bluntness that might unnerve the employees in my Sales Department answers: “Yeah, I don’t even care how I get it, digital or CD, I just want the music.”
We walk out and head to a magazine store a block south. Stephanie buys the Daily News and what looks like Newsday; I do not get a close look at the second newspaper since I am going through piles of newspapers searching for the sold-out New York Times. She calls the office to say we are having a hard time finding newspapers. Her boss, or an intermediary, tells her to keep looking.

Our path brings us east to a liquor store. The store is out of regular bottles of Veuve Clicquot champagne. We are told they only have magnums of Veuve Clicquot in stock. Stephanie calls her office again to ask if she should buy a magnum. Magnums are the size of two bottles, but about $15 more than two smaller bottles combined. She is told to buy the magnum and does so using a senior employee’s credit card.

We walk south towards a deli to buy two bottles of peach nectar. We notice the newsstand on the south side of the street. A lucky find! They have one last copy of the New York Post, which we buy. I point to the New York Observer, a weekly publication I had ignored earlier, but one I had just realized comes out on Wednesdays. I suggest we should buy it even though it is a weekly publication. She is unsure and before either one of us says a word I see her bring her phone to her ear – she is calling the office again (yes, a third time). After the brief call she hangs up and picks up a copy of the New York Observer presumably repeating what she was just told: “Buy a set of all New York newspapers.”

Armed with four newspapers, a magnum of champagne, and two CDs we walk into a deli, which sells salads, sandwiches, soups, muffins, coffee, and various juices, but on this day and in this location it does not sell peach nectar or peach juice. Stephanie and I walk a bit east to another deli, which also seemingly discriminates against peach nectar. We walk further east to a
supermarket, and I assure Stephanie we will find peach nectar there. In fact, the grocery store only carries fairly large bottles of peach nectar, seemingly bigger than we expected. So, should we buy one or two? Stephanie grabs two bottles and says somewhat testily in the general direction of our morning adventure, “We’ll get two and if it’s a problem I’ll pay for the extra juice myself.”

Upon returning to the office the woman behind our series of errands greets us (and our full arms) with a smile. The woman, a senior Publicity employee, wanted personal copies of newspapers to commemorate Obama’s victorious day. By the end of the morning the champagne and peach nectar are used to make Bellini’s and the Publicity Department (along with select friends, like myself) has a bit of a party.

Although interns must “do anything” to pay their dues, learn, and potentially gain employment, their low status in the workplace limits their access to doing more advanced tasks. Interns can be sent on extended personal errands without explanation or explicit educational value (and perhaps no true benefit to the organization). Throughout the process, interns may suffer bruised egos due to employees who do not address them directly, be asked to complete tedious assignments that may in fact prove impossible, and spend much of their limited time as interns on unessential duties through which it is difficult to excel beyond perhaps seeming merely competent.

The low status of the intern is so recognized that it is sometimes strategically deployed to manage interactions by using “the intern card.” As an intern, Greg sometimes needed to cover his supervisor’s phone when she was out of the office. He recalls using the intern card to explain his lack of knowledge:
Greg: People were like, ‘Hey, who do I call?’ Or, ‘Is the master in to make the watermark?’ And if I knew I’d help them out, you know. And I played the ‘I’m Just the Intern’ card if I didn’t know.

AF: Intern card?

Greg: You know, if I’m being the assistant for the day and somebody asks me about something that I just had no idea … I’d say, “I’m sorry I’m just an intern. I’ll let [my supervisor] know.”

Moreover, supervising employees can use the low status of interns to manage interactions as well. Below is an example from a day at Major Records USA:

Hank’s phone rings and it is a number with a “773” area code. Instead of picking up, Hank complains about this person who keeps calling and speaking incessantly. Hank’s depiction makes this man seem very erratic. Bill pawned this person off to him – we are charged with kindly brushing him off. The next time the person calls, Hank instructs me, he will give me the phone and I will tell the person that Hank is in a meeting.

Later that day, when the person calls, I pick up the phone and the person, as Hank predicted, starts talking and talking and talking. He asks when he could reach Hank and I tell him I do not know, but he could leave a message. He does so yet does not stop there; he starts talking about how he manages an artist whose music he wants to send to us and continues to ramble on about the past, who he is, etc. He keeps talking and I cannot really understand most of what he is saying – he sounds very old and possibly on drugs.

Eventually, needing to get off the phone, I use the intern card and the next time he asks about Hank’s next availability I respond: “I don’t know. Sorry sir, I’m just Hank’s intern.” The person suddenly understands. After I inform him of my intern status he immediately accepts that the conversation should end and agrees to hang up.

The intern card can also be deployed strategically to gain information. Greg remarks further about being just the intern: “Sometimes my boss would use that to our advantage. And she’d be like, ‘Someone’s in the hall, go find out who it is. Tell him you’re just an intern.’” Or she would ask, “Call this person and find this out… They wanted me to find out what was going on and use me.” The intern card signals the low status and explains the finite competence and power of the intern.
Presumed incompetence

In addition to their lower status, employees do not typically assume interns to be competent. Interns are to be used as a resource by employees, though often employees do not trust them enough to delegate much work. As Patrick, an employee at Indie Distribution, put it: “A good intern knows where to put a stamp on an envelope. A bad intern, I’d say, wouldn’t.” If an intern makes a mistake, it falls on the shoulders of the employee above them. The work delegated from employee to intern is ultimately the employee’s responsibility. Employees and many interns know stories about “bad” interns who did little or no work, were fired, quit, or simply stopped showing up. Jerry describes a mundane task he delegates to interns and potential mistakes in execution:

‘I need you to get in a cab, go down to Sterling Sound, tell them who you are, you need to meet this girl, you’re going to pick up this CD, you’re going to make sure it’s got these three songs on it, here’s 20 bucks and I want you to come back and I want you to have two receipts.’ Now, a fucking orangutan can do that. But by the way, there’s [sic] people who will lose a receipt, they’ll lose the change, they’ll go to the wrong place, they’ll go to Sterling Sound and they’ll get the wrong disc because they went to the wrong person who still knows me and hands them the wrong CD. They don’t check the back of the CD and make sure that the right songs are on the disc so it’s the wrong CD because they didn’t do what I asked them to do, they came all the way back up here and it’s missing a song.

Jerry’s depiction captures how some interns might come off as incompetent, though by describing this task as something an orangutan could do – and the inability of some interns to get it right – his statement also highlights how the perceived incompetence of interns is mutually related to their low status.

The status of particular interns can change with time, but employees describe playing it safe upon meeting them by assuming that interns are relatively incompetent. Larry [employee] from Major Records USA told me the following in an interview:
You come in not as somebody I know who you are now, but you come in as another intern. […] Intern A comes in, Intern B comes in, one of them is good, one of them is bad, and you don’t know what they’re capable of doing. So automatically you just generalize and say, ‘OK, it’s an intern.’ And then all of a sudden by the time we get to know you, you’re gone.

Moreover, Bela highlights the relationship between presumed incompetence and low commitment on the part of interns. Employee distrust towards interns, she suggests, comes “from past experiences with interns that may not have been that competent [or] dedicated.” Bela tells me about an intern who somehow “blew up the copy room.” When the intern left the copy room, ink from the photocopier was everywhere. The intern, Bela recounts, hurried to her supervisor and said, “Uh, I have to go, I forgot I have an emergency…” She left that day and never came back!” Bela laughs as she finishes the story, but adds more seriously:

I think there’s an underlying assumption that because that person’s not a permanent employee and they’re not getting paid that they don’t have the same dedication as an employee that is getting paid. You know, so I think part of it is a question of competency and another part of it is a question of somebody’s dedication.

Since interns are not assumed to be very competent nor dedicated, interns must seek to distinguish themselves as more than just the intern to potentially do higher-level work. This may cause frustration among the more motivated interns who want more high-level tasks; for the job-seeking intern hoping to eventually get a paid job in the music industry, their intern career is affected by the variation in other interns’ commitment.\(^\text{17}\) In this way, “unserious” interns pollute the pool of interns. The problem of lack of commitment (or ability) of some interns is dealt with, organizationally, by assuming in practice that all interns possess a low level of commitment (or ability) and therefore keeping the responsibilities of the interns low.

\(^{17}\) Additionally, the part-time status of most interns also signals their potential lack of commitment, warranted or not, akin to the way it does for part-time employees (Epstein, Seron, Oglensky, & Sauté, 1999).
Temporary nature of position

Interns are limited by their brief tenure in the workplace. The stigma of the temporary worker, as Brooks (2011) shows with project attorneys at law firms, limits access to permanent positions. The limited investment of employees towards training interns is a “practical” manifestation of this stigma. Internships are typically part-time endeavors and last two to three months, approximately the duration of an academic semester (or summer break). Some employees describe being reticent to train interns beyond doing obvious, mundane tasks because by the time interns have potentially mastered a complex task, their internship has concluded. Many employees I spoke with find it frustrating and time-consuming to oversee interns, because they describe them as prone to making mistakes. While the educational narrative stating that internships exist to provide work-based learning prevails as the official description of internships commonly used by colleges and companies, closer scrutiny reveals a built-in tension in the role of the intern. While an intern is ostensibly undertaking an educational or training venture, the paid employees around them are not prepared nor necessarily rewarded for being educators; they are acting as managers (Becker, 1972). Similar to other studies of work-based trainees (Fine, 1996; Marshall, 1972), the music industry employees interviewed and observed in the present study acknowledge that their main day-to-day focus is on doing their job, not on training interns. Interns operate simultaneously as both “students” and “workers,” leaving them in ambiguous standing.

Several employees point out that some tasks take significantly more time to teach to interns than to simply handle on their own, and therefore are not worth delegating. The limited

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18 Respondents describe some variation in the internship experience depending on the time of year. For example, summer internships are often full-time (as opposed to part-time during the fall/winter) which can enable an intern’s more intensive and substantive workplace involvement. However, record companies report hosting most interns during the summer which makes “sticking out” and consistent contact with employees more challenging.
range of tasks employees delegate results partly from the overlap between interns’ temporary standing and presumed (or demonstrated) incompetence. Complaining about how hard it is to work with interns, Rita [employee] describes her frustration regarding having to repeat instructions to a new group of interns:

I want them to just jump on it. You know, I say, ‘Hey, this is how you publish this on the Internet.’ You know? And then tomorrow I walk in and say, ‘Hey publish this on the Internet’ and not have to refresh them.

But, alas, she has to refresh them. She does not recall being as incompetent as an intern: “I don’t remember being that dumb. It just feels like every day I’m spending less time doing my own job and more time teaching them how to do theirs.” To spend time on training interns is a necessary counterbalance to the free or inexpensive labor companies receive; however, employees describe limited ability or desire to do so.

One day at Indie Distribution I ask Oliver, an employee who sits nearby, if I can help him with a document he is preparing. He thanks me and explains that my help would not be “worth it” because it would take over an hour to get me “up to speed,” but likely take him less than half an hour to just finish the task. On a different day I ask him what tasks are “worth” delegating to interns and he answers:

If it’s something that would be recurring. For example, if I knew this was somebody who would be able to help me out regularly and I could count on [the intern] for a while to do it, it’d totally be worth it. Absolutely. But, like a one-off where it might take longer to explain than to actually just do it? Sometimes it’s just not worth it.

Therefore, employees will only train interns for tasks they perform regularly, though a few exceptions exist, as my field note from a day at Major Records USA suggests:

As I walk in Hank tells me that today will be a little different: ‘I want you to do everything that I would do today, including the reports.’ He says he wants to see what I know. I hurry and stock the refrigerators, get paper from the photocopier area to stock Hank’s workspace, and get to
work. I ask him if he would like me to start with the sales reports or radio reports. He says ‘sales’ and informs me I can use his computer. Pointing towards his chair, he adds, ‘If I’m not here, you should sit here.’ He tells me he almost did not come in today, but wanted to make sure I could handle his tasks – ‘I wouldn’t do that to you.’ I remind him that I did spend a day alone at the office two months ago, but he claims he does not remember.

I slowly work my way through the sales reports. I run a report and then it becomes a question of creating/altering three Excel documents. Meanwhile, Hank sits at Kendra’s desk and plays around online. Mara comes in and asks what we are doing. I answer, ‘He’s showing me how to do his work, to make sure I know how to do everything.’ ‘That’s a great idea,’ she exclaims, adding that she is surprised to see Hank. She says Hank gave her the impression he might take the day off.

After I print three copies of the reports, now it is time to print Bill’s calendar. I print today’s calendar and next week’s. I print one copy for Bill and one copy for a plastic sleeve on Hank’s desk.

I tell him that, looking back, I made a mistake or two the last time I did these tasks, but Bill did not say anything. He answers that Bill would not have said anything because I just did it once. If I were to do this work often and make mistakes he would say, ‘This is how Hank taught you to do it? It always comes back to me.’

Hank confirms his limited impetus to delegate tasks to interns since, as the supervising employee, he is ultimately responsible for the work. Because interns are temporary, employees might not bother correcting them if they make mistakes. Hank provides additional training that day solely because he plans on taking a day off soon; I am to serve as a one-day replacement as I did earlier during the internship.

Conversely, interns often complain about a lack of supervision. Danielle recounts receiving only brief training at an internship in music marketing, where as she puts it: “you were just in. … One day I wasn’t there and one day I was there and I was supposed to all of a sudden always have been there.” Nonetheless, after three internships Danielle claims to understand how employees might be frustrated by interns as temporary and potentially incompetent workers: “Their lives keep going whether I’m there or not. … I guess I sympathize.” She continues, noting how an employee must prepare for a meeting and might not want to depend on her as an intern:
“If you have a meeting at 3, whether or not I know what I’m doing, the meeting’s still at 3. You need to be prepared. Business keeps going. They can’t be holding my hand, you know?” Even though she is a student, Danielle accepts some of the limitations of the intern’s role as worker.

Conclusion

While internships provide a path through which aspirants attempt to gain entry into the business side of the music industry, most interns do not secure paid employment in this industry. In this chapter, I ask why this is the case and offer an account of the ways interns and employees depict and enact the intern economy, focusing on the characteristics and challenges of the intern role. I find that in the context of a highly competitive labor market without a clear, formal mechanism for entry, interns perform provisional labor – internships are temporary, conditional, and ambiguous. Interns embody a flexible pool of labor for a host company, allowing for a range of formal and informal benefits for all parties concerned. Internships represent a liminal and indeterminate period during which aspirants form a reservoir of excess workers before potentially getting hired as paid employees.

Previous studies suggest a disparity between the expectations, perceptions, and experiences of interns and host employees. The current study incorporates the viewpoints and subjective experiences of numerous actors involved in internship programs and finds that ambiguity plays a central role in the production and maintenance of the intern economy. Ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations – as a result, both interns and employees can maintain very different (and varied) interpretations of the role. The ambiguity in the intern’s role is organizationally useful for host companies because it simultaneously allows for labor of many
kinds, ranging from mundane work and professional tasks, completed by individuals with varying levels of commitment, interest, and ability (aspirants and non-aspirants to employment). Employees use interns as a resource and express frustration at needing to closely supervise these potentially (or presumably) incompetent workers, generally deciding to delegate easy tasks. There is also ambiguity about what the intern will achieve; internships are described as a vague promise and it is up to the intern to make the most of the experience. The negotiation of tasks and attempts to make the most of the internship are made more challenging by the characteristic constraints of the role – low status, presumed incompetence, and temporary tenure. Thus, the interns’ vetting slowly occurs within the workplace for an indeterminate period of time as they assume the costs for their training and firms put them to (some) productive work.

Hesmondhalgh (2010, p. 279) cites “desirability of creative labour and the over-supply of workers” as key reasons why people want to do unpaid internships in “media industries.” Hesmondhalgh may generally be correct, however, this chapter suggests the complexity of benefits individuals potentially derive for doing internships. Among other benefits, music industry internships present an opportunity to gain a credential, learn about the world of work, derive meaning as a music fan, and be better positioned to seek paid employment in a highly competitive labor market. The multiple possible benefits as an elastic role suggests a complex negotiation of the intern’s work identity. What strategies do interns use to move beyond being just the intern? How do employees define and identify a “good intern”? For interns to gain trust and be considered a “good intern,” as the next chapter shows, they must go beyond or “stretch” the boundaries of the role. The next chapter addresses these questions and analyzes how the intern economy reproduces social inequalities.
Chapter 4: The Chosen, the Choosers, and the Others

By describing how interns and employees construct the intern economy, the previous chapters primarily stress the challenges characterizing the intern’s career: interns must enact or quickly learn how to act “industry cool,” assume the responsibility for training and accept that no task is too small, and overcome the ambiguity and limitations of the elastic role (low status, presumed incompetent, and temporary). Yet, an internship truly does represent an opportunity to get one’s foot in the door for future employment. Several of the interns I met did eventually become employees in some part of the music industry, though most did not. This chapter addresses how people become interns and potentially move up or down the status hierarchy of the “reservoir” of available employees. I detail the process and factors involved in getting an internship, how to be an intern (i.e., what employees perceive as a “good intern”), and how to stretch the limits of the intern role.

I find that respondents convey a very informal intern selection process, which accentuates a vetting process during the internship as opposed to before. However, the informality of intern selection belies and facilitates a series of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventions that obscure the reproduction of social inequalities. An employee at an indie record company tells me, as several others did, that he lacks clear criteria when he selects interns because these young workers, many of them college students, lack extensive professional experience. He does not have a checklist per se and instead he reasons: “With an intern, it’s really just someone who’s got a willingness to do it and seems driven. You have to go with your gut assessment [whether] this person can handle it.” Hiring decisions are prone to “homosocial reproduction” (Kanter, 1977) or “cultural matching” (Rivera, 2012) where an interviewers selects candidates similar to them;
informal hiring decisions based on “gut feelings” or perceived “fit” are particularly prone to such unthinking biases.

Several career contingencies facilitate or limit an intern’s career and may dictate whether a person will have a music industry internship in the first place. These include conventions about age and race. Regarding the former, to be an aspirant attempting to find one’s career footing implies youthfulness. With some exceptions, interns outside the professions (e.g., medicine) are typically undergraduate students or recent graduates between 18 and 25 years old\(^\text{19}\). While some people do internships later in life to facilitate a career change, these cases are still relatively rare, as the tone of newspaper articles on this phenomenon supports (e.g., Casey, 2011 and Kelly, 2012). Full-fledged adults are not usually interns, despite the recent rise of serial interns (Perlin, 2011). The recent comedic film *The Internship*, starring Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn, starts with the incongruity of 40-somethings doing internships as its premise (predictably, a flurry of age-related jokes ensue). The title of a recent article from the advertising industry even announces, “Meet the Richards Group’s 71-Year-Old Intern,” with a picture of an unlikely senior citizen intern (Parekh, 2013). In a youth-oriented industry like music, being young is a salient part of looking and sounding right (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001).

Therefore, while possible, getting an internship in one’s late 20s or older is difficult. As Ben, who is 19 years old and selects interns at a major record company remarks: “I get emails from people who are out of grad school being like, ‘Can I come intern for you?’ It’s like wow … you’re way too far ahead for this! Like, what are you doing?” While this might smack of discrimination, unpaid interns are not employees. Without employment status, unpaid interns do

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\(^{19}\) It is certainly possible for someone to pursue an undergraduate degree after age 25, but this is a rare profile among music industry interns.
not benefit from the same legal protections from sexual harassment and discrimination as employees. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 notably protects “employees” from workplace harassment or discrimination, but has not been found to cover unpaid interns (Fox, 2013; LaRocca, 2006; Ortner, 1998; Yamada, 2002). Internship sponsors, like colleges and universities, are also unlikely to be deemed liable in such harassment or discrimination cases (Edwards & Hertel-Fernandez, 2010). Such a standing leaves student interns “in a legal void, falling between the cracks of legal protections for workers and legal protections for students” (Yamada, 2002, p. 2). Companies are free to discriminate based on notions of “appropriateness” relating to characteristics including age, gender, and race.

Moreover, I found that race and music are closely linked categories. Rock ‘n’ roll acts from Elvis to The Beatles to The Rolling Stones borrowed or stole heavily from rhythm and blues; current African American hip-hop superstars fill up arenas with primarily white audiences; yet, somehow, music industry personnel generally follow more distinct (and predictable) racial categories. Karl describes his indie rock co-workers as “at least somewhat affluent, white, middle-class people.” When I ask him why that is, he tells me that in the “indie rock community, you know, naturally you find that we’re all a bunch of scrawny little white kids. I’m sure if I worked at some hip-hop label it [would] be different.” The rock/white and “urban”/black pairings are accepted, “naturally” linked categories in the music industry. These categories reflect the race of artists typically affiliated with each genre and respective musical community. Indeed, the vast majority of hip-hop artists – at least the commercially successful ones – are black whereas most current rock artists are white, though notable exceptions exist (Frere-Jones, 2007).
The racial coding of American music extends at least as far back as the 19th century, though as Roy (2004, p. 272) argues, the music industry’s formal recognition of racial categories like “race records” and “hillbilly music” in the 1920s was “the result of straight-forward business logic, not the fruit of an overt racial project.” Since the 1960s, major record companies further separate the management of “urban music” (previously race records, “black music” or rhythm and blues) from other units by using a technique Negus (1999) calls portfolio management. To separate the management of music based on genre makes it easier for companies to capture performance and accountability by division, but also encourages stasis where commercial artists must clearly “fit” genre boundaries (Negus, 1998). Artists who do not fit with expected symbolic categories (e.g., a white rapper or black rocker) suffer an “illegitimacy discount” (Zuckerman, 1999) and therefore must contend with issues of “authenticity” (Grazian, 2003; Peterson, 1997), less favorable aesthetic judgment by critics (Schmutz & van Venrooij, 2013), and inferior economic potential (Waterman, 2000). I found evidence of a similar illegitimacy discount for aspiring music industry personnel.

When I ask why indie rock labels (or rock departments) tend to be populated by white employees or why urban labels (or departments) mostly hire black employees, I generally receive tautological answers like Emily’s:

I think musical stylings dictate the race of the people working there. Like, at Rock Department it tended to be rock and pop and stuff like that, versus Urban Department, which is more hip-hop. So it tends to be more white people working at Rock Department and black people working at Urban Department.

Emily, a white woman, interned on the rock side of a major record company and claims she could quickly identify her urban colleagues based on race. Agatha, a fellow intern at Major Records USA, points out the same thing, but adds that the company must cater to its artists and its listeners, therefore summarizing some of the benefits of portfolio management. Agatha
further tells me, “Labels are sectioned off to cater to the genre. Once they’re sectioned off they’re specialized because somebody from the urban department can handle an urban artist better.” By “handling” an artist, interns and employees refer to two overlapping facets of a worker’s competence and presentation of self: conveying legitimacy and embodying a musical community.

Monique interned at a major record company with a prominent urban music division and evokes the company’s brand: “I guess you think Urban Company, you kind of get an image in your head and I think that they want [employees] to seem legitimate.” Similarly, Jerry (senior A&R employee) considers the importance for companies and its workforce to represent a particular musical community: “When you’re dealing with music, you’re dealing with culture. What a record label tries to do is have employees that represent cultures because if you understand a culture an artist will realize [whether or not] you know your culture in a minute.” Better than the black/white distinction, he claims, is the distinction of specific music cultures. Jerry’s use of “culture” is similar to Finnegan’s (1989) understanding of “taste communities” where genres may convey strong class, race, age, and/or gender connotations; Frith’s (1996) “genre worlds” where discourses and practices are bound to musical genres; and Lena’s (2012, p. 31) “musical communities” which she defines as artists, fans, and intermediaries forming a genre-related subculture, often with consistently “idiosyncratic grooming, dress, demeanor, and argot of members.” In essence, record companies want to employ workers who “get” artists and their music – even though this perpetuates racial stereotypes.

Workers in the music industry are channeled into “race appropriate” departments (Negus, 1999) through the suggestion of “fit”; sometimes this occurs subtly, like Danielle, a black intern who claims she has not noticed any prejudice in the music business, yet also tells me employees
“assume I’m more into hip-hop than other genres.” Several employees also described a gendered division of labor where men tend to dominate A&R and women work in publicity as well as administrative positions. These and other perceived differences, as I show below, shape the process of intern selection and the ways employees judge intern performance.

**Getting an Internship**

The process of finding and selecting interns varies tremendously between and even within companies. Due to sheer size, major and indie record companies operate differently. At major record companies, a large-scale screening mechanism is necessary; two human resources employees from different major record companies estimate they host over 500 interns nationally each semester (culled from a pool of thousands of applicants). Employees from respective departments fill out forms to request intern résumés from HR workers, who screen candidates and direct résumés to appropriate department employees. Some aspiring interns communicate with department-specific employees at a company, directly or through an intermediary (colleague, family or friend). Conversely, at indie record companies, typically without a dedicated HR Department, a junior employee (or an intern) usually assumes full internship coordinator responsibilities.

At major record companies, final intern selection is generally relegated to each department’s most junior employee, partly out of pragmatic logic. Isabel, for example, works in the Publicity Department at a major record company where interns are found through the social networks of employees and from the Human Resources Department. Her assistant picks the interns since “he’s the one who primarily is on top of them, giving them their responsibilities.” A
junior worker also tends to handle selection due to the interns’ low status, while also shielding the higher-level workers from needing to interact with interns. Nancy recounts keeping her job during a round of layoffs at a major record company because of her good working relationship with interns – she came back from vacation only to realize her A&R job now involved selecting and supervising 10 to 15 interns each semester:

I kind of got saved by that. [My superiors] were like, ‘OK, you’re going to run this program and supervise these college kids.’ So I happened to be on my honeymoon, I found this out, I come back and I was like… I felt totally demoted. My job is to supervise college kids? I was like, fuck…

Nancy felt demoted by suddenly becoming in charge of “college kids.” After signing two artists she learned about through the company’s interns, Nancy now praises the program. However, she has since delegated intern selection to a more junior recent hire.

Internship programs vary based on their level of formality, though typically programs at small companies are less formal. Among her various roles, Grace is the internship coordinator at a prestigious indie record company. I ask her to describe what she does as part of the company’s internship program, and she responds by stressing the program’s informality: “There really isn’t a program. If we feel that we need an intern in whatever department we get one.” The indie record company’s 40 paid employees currently host 15 unpaid interns, each coming to the office at least two or three days per week. Internships follow the semester system in the majority of cases, though at times Grace’s employer decides to take on more interns mid-semester. Though the company does not pay its interns, finding mid-semester interns is possible because they do not require interns to receive college credit, and, as Grace says, the company “has a huge following. It’s really easy to find interns.” Contrary to indie companies, major record companies are publicly traded corporations with more stringent written rules; bureaucratic measures require
interns to receive college credit though I saw numerous examples of employees sidestepping this requirement (one intern I interviewed simply signed in as a guest every day, as a visitor would).

The stories of Grace and Nancy introduce the informality of internship programs, which is in part due to the role’s low status within companies (i.e., perceived low stakes). The informality, I find, spreads to the decision-making process in intern selection. The sections below focus on the three most salient factors in intern selection: time, informality, and demonstrable passion for music. I find that the intern selection processes disadvantage those with less economic resources (time), mask nepotistic and other preferential hiring practices (informality), and reproduce racial music categories (passion).

*Time is everything*

Perhaps the most basic factor in selecting interns is the applicant’s own schedule. Academic coursework, part-time jobs, and other internships or time constraints affect whether they will be selected. When aspiring interns submit their résumé on a major record company’s website, HR employees distribute these to workers in various departments. Staffers fill out an intern request form specifying what they are looking for, including competencies, and then submit the form to HR. Looking back at his recent HR job at a major record company, a respondent summarized: “A lot of them just wanted somebody who could do the hours that they needed. I mean, on the form it’s required that you list the tasks, but the most important thing for them was the hours.” Similarly, Isabel describes the process of choosing interns as a question of scheduling: “If we have four kids that want to work only on Wednesdays that’s not going to work. We need somebody there on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.”
Selecting an intern, Isabel continues, “could even come down to if they’re only available two
days a week but we already have two people those two days, like, we might not be able to say
yes.” An employer arranges interns’ schedules so they are complementary. In this way, Nate (an
employee) recalls feeling like he managed a sport team when putting together a semester’s intern
roster at an indie record company:

I was literally like a basketball coach. I had my roster of interns…. There were so many
of them, we wanted to get so much stuff done while we had them, I would just gauge
them at what they’re good at and divvy up the certain things to people.

The process of choosing interns is also tied to the time of year. There are far more potential
interns available during the summer and, almost uniformly, companies host more interns during
this season. Consequently, the interns I encountered in this study could afford being an intern
while going to school in New York or spending a summer living in the city.

 Critics claim that unpaid internships reproduce class inequality because only those with
economic resources can afford to work for free (Frederick, 1997; Klein, 2000; Perlin, 2011).
However, to do provisional labor, including building a portfolio of experience and gaining
connections over an extended period of time, implies broader effects of class beyond financing a
brief unpaid internship. Significantly, being available also implies affording to be flexible. Time
is a critical factor in narrowing down a large applicant pool into only the most available (i.e.,
wealthy) applicants. To start and sustain a career in the music industry via unpaid internships
and, subsequently, low-paid work, requires financial resources and time flexibility.

When I ask interns how they support themselves, they mention a combination of part-
time work outside the music world, savings, student loans, and – primarily – parental support.
Mark moved to New York City to pursue a Master’s degree in Music Business at NYU, armed
with some savings and financial support from his parents. Both his parents work in high-paying
professions. I ask Mark how people can survive while doing unpaid internships and he answers with a question, “How can you do an internship in New York if you’re not subsidized? I mean, seriously, there’s no logical way to answer that question.” While it is taboo to discuss family support among peers, he states it is “an unspoken thing … to exist in the music industry … my sense generally is that you have to be [financially] comfortable.” Although unspoken among peers, some interns and employees tell me they have noticed differences in various colleagues’ buying habits (clothing and electronics) and real estate options. An employee tells me he cannot help but suspect some colleagues of being trust fund kids, notably a friend from a different company: “It’s never been exclusively talked about, but the dead give-away is where they live. … [A colleague] told me she moved to an apartment on Sixth Avenue and 20th… There’s no way she makes enough to afford an apartment there.” Interns commonly told me their parents help pay for their apartments, though others receive significantly more.

Families offer support in the form of money, but also security. Some interns recall receiving only minimal financial support, but with the knowledge that they could ask for more if necessary. Others received considerable support and the promise of more if necessary. Sustained support helps foster a sense of security to pursue one’s interests without worrying about money. For example, one intern moved to New York after college and told me her parents offered to pay rent for one year so she could find her footing. Another intern, Danielle, just graduated from NYU and does not yet have a full-time job in music, but will extend her music-focused search at least for a while longer: “I’m very lucky in that my parents can support me. My parents are paying my rent until I get a job.” Although she eventually did find music industry work, Danielle considered broadening her search: “If something doesn’t look promising [by the end of the summer] I’m just going to have to get a job so that my parents don’t have to pay my rent
after they just paid for my education.” Without student loans to repay, and support from parents, certain interns can sustain their search for music industry work (including other internships) well beyond graduation.

A potential alternative to family support is a part-time job paired with a strong social network. A few interns I met held part-time jobs such as babysitting, retail work, and bartending, though mostly for additional spending money (or “pocket money”). Those who recall depending on part-time jobs to support themselves also describe helpful contacts along the way. When Shane moved to New York for a summer internship, for example, he had a friend who already lived in the city with a bedroom to sublet. This friend helped Shane get a job at a popular restaurant: “I had never worked in a restaurant in my life, but he put in a recommendation… So I got that job… And it actually paid really well.” By balancing paid and unpaid work, Shane was able to afford a summer internship. However, I met only two interns who balanced full-time coursework, an internship, and a part-time job (and they lived with their parents).

Informality

Internships can be very competitive (e.g., at the most extreme, one company had twenty applicants per intern opening) yet the vetting process to secure an internship in music is generally not described as long or ambitious. With some exceptions, interns and employers depict the selection and interview process of interns as informal. For example, Emily held five different internships and recalls interviewing for all of them, though she reflects back on the process as “super casual.” At a major record company she met with an HR employee who said, “‘You’re interested in publishing? OK, great let’s go meet the guy who’s the assistant publisher.’
I met him and the next day he called me and said I got the [internship].” Emily portrays her interactions with the employer as a meeting more than an interview. Karl, an indie record label employee, also depicts a casual process from the perspective of the employer:

We’ll go through an interview process just like hiring anyone else. It’s obviously a lot less stringent. A lot of times it can just be done via email as well because sometimes people aren’t around. You know, they might be home for the summer or whatever, and you don’t have the opportunity to meet them ahead of time. Definitely try to at least meet with them first [and] do a quote-unquote interview, at least so you can spend a few minutes with them and kind of get their vibe and make sure that they’re going to be a worthy part of the team.

The selection process is “obviously” less stringent for interns than it is for paid employees. The intern selection process Karl describes is among the more informal I encountered, where a brief email exchange might suffice. Nonetheless, I interviewed other employers who described more demanding processes wherein interns must demonstrate a certain level of professionalism and interest. For example, one told me she abruptly ended an interview when the potential intern admitted he had never visited the company’s website. During my interview at Major Records USA, I was asked to name some of the company’s executives as well as some of its roster of bands.

A few employees claimed their departments did not absolutely need interns so, if no one seemed a strong fit, they could afford not to host any interns for a semester. However, most employees reported “settling,” if need be, on whomever is available since they need the intern labor. At one of the most popular (or iconic) indie record companies, Grace describes receiving a considerable number of applications: “We get at least one application a day. You know? At least. So, the selection process becomes a lot more competitive just because there are so many people.” Conversely, some companies cannot afford to be picky and the selection process becomes less strict when fewer people apply. Karl describes receiving few internship applications at one indie
record company. Nate, from a different indie record company, portrays the smaller pool of applicants during the school year: “In the fall you’re just stuck with the kids who go to school in the city, pretty much, or near the city area.” Therefore, the company receives many more résumés for summer internships. At companies such as these, applying for an internship during the school year almost ensures securing an internship. According to respondents, prospective interns tend to be given a chance somewhere – though not necessarily at their preferred company or department. Not all internships are created equal and some interns must do numerous internships to work their way up to more prestigious or promising internships.

The bar for selecting interns is much lower than it is for hiring paid employees, for many reasons. Interns in the music industry are generally unpaid. Interns are temporary and easily fired if needed. A mid-level employee describes interns as easy to fire: “You can ditch [interns] if you’re not happy. It’s a little bit different than hiring [an employee].” After being an intern four times and working for nine months as a paid employee, Greg looks back at the difference between intern and employee vetting:

The bar to get in the door as an intern is not as high as it is as an assistant. If somebody’s like, ‘Hey this is my assistant’ then it’s like, ‘OK this is probably a person that’s going to be around for a while, I’m going to get to know, I’m going to see every day and I’m going to be dealing with a lot and has been pre-screened very thoroughly.’… An intern is like, ‘This is someone that we hired.’ And it’s like, you just don’t… If they go out of their way to talk to you then you will maybe come around to them, but right away, first impression, you’ll be like, ‘Alright this is just another intern. Nice meeting you.’

To employees, interns come in and out of the office every semester, even if interns might interpret their experience differently. Greg claims only fully noting this difference once he became an employee who oversees interns, “You just kind of realize how, like, dealing with the interns, they’re very insignificant. [Laughs a bit as he speaks] It’s like, my boss I don’t think he even knew our intern’s name this summer.” Since interns are low-status, temporary, and
presumed incompetent (i.e., just the intern) the selection process accordingly is not described as stringent; the vetting occurs once the intern is within the organization and the internship progresses.

In many cases, employees prefer applicants who come referred by people they know and trust. On one hand, employers praise the merits of choosing recommended interns since the trusted source helps mitigate risk. On the other hand, most of the people I interviewed derided nepotistic intern selection. Ben selects interns for a major record company’s A&R Department and notes how it is understood that he must choose certain interns:

Ben: There’s a lot of times when it’s the daughter of so and so or the nephew and you have to hire them.

AF: You do?

Ben: I mean, you don’t, but you do. [He laughs]

AF: Yeah… Yeah…

Ben: No one’s saying ‘hire them.’ But you’re hiring them.

While interviewees stress the importance of contacts to land positions and freely mention nepotistic practices at other companies, only a few employees admit selecting interns as a favor to others. Isabel, an executive at a major record company, provides one exception:

We’ll always do somebody favors if it helps us. Like, we have [an intern] who’s related to one of the employees at Letterman. You know, obviously [Late Show with David] Letterman’s a big deal for us [so] ideally take somebody like that over, you know, a random person on the street just because like ‘yeah, we’ll do you a favor. Like, your cousin wants to intern? Sure!’ Um, you know and the intern tasks aren’t, you know, like… You don’t need to be a genius to do them.

Isabel describes the position of intern as being so easy that the bar for entry can be low. The explicit easiness, the “you don’t need to be a genius” nature of numerous internships, itself helps
explain the low bar for entry and legitimates selection based on nepotism or other preferential treatment.

A recommendation, depending on whom it comes from, might not guarantee securing an internship. At a company where securing an internship is very competitive, Grace tells me that among the 15 current interns, only two came recommended: “There are a couple interns I had to hire because, you know, one of them was a friend of [the label founder], another one that was [an employee’s] friend.” Yet she did not select an applicant who is related to one of the label’s inactive bands because she considered him completely unsuitable. Therefore, recommendations or some sort of “in” can greatly enhance an intern’s application, though success (securing the internship or doing well at it) is not guaranteed.

Lastly, the informality and low status of internship programs allow for other types of non-meritocratic selection. One factor, rarely explicitly stated, but visually evident, is a candidate’s looks. An employee I interviewed from an indie company refers to a new crop of female interns as “fresh meat.” Another indie record label employee, Karl, tells me about a co-worker who possibly abuses (or at least really enjoys) his authority with interns:

He’s always got a lot of interns. It seems like every day I see him walking around the office with a new hot young intern. And he’s kind of one of those … cheesy, suave kind of guys, you know? … Here he is, like, the older guy, [voice takes on a whispery sound and sarcastic quality] he’s in the business, ‘You listen to me all you young girls because I know what I’m talking about.’ That sort of thing. I don’t know if he’s getting any sort of relations out of it, but I can at least see that he uses it to stroke his ego.

However, Karl also admits: “If I needed one intern and I have two girls submitting a résumé and both are equally qualified and one’s very attractive and one isn’t, I have to be honest I would probably take the one that’s attractive.” He specifies shortly thereafter: “But I think with hiring an actual employee, really qualifications are the most important thing, just because there’s a lot
at stake there.” This comment is consistent with the analysis of an internship supervisor for a New York college who helps students get internships. Yet, according to this supervisor, the smart, but “mousy” looking, unstylish student struggles to land an internship whereas the less smart, very “pretty girl with the Dentyne smile goes on four interviews and gets four offers.” The informality of the position and low bar for entry may allow a potential intern’s appearance to trump qualifications. As I show below, physical appearance includes an aspirant’s overall “look” (Mears, 2011), and therefore selection can consist of finding applicants who conform to (or “fit” with) scene- or genre-specific conventions of dress, argot, and even race.

Passion and knowledge

A third significant factor in securing an internship is demonstrable passion and knowledge for music. Employees describe preferring interns who are knowledgeable about a company’s roster of artists; such awareness serves as a proxy for passion, enthusiasm, and commitment to achieving a company’s organizational goals. Employers see an aspirant’s apparent passion as reassurance the latter would be willing to happily complete tedious work. Intern selection is based on finding music fans, preferably of the company’s genre; this factor is informed by and reproduces racial categories of music taste.

Nate, for example, was an intern at an indie dance and hip-hop record label. As Nate recalls, the interview was highly informal yet offered an opportunity to display detailed knowledge of the record company’s influence in the genre: “I expressed my interest in hip-hop music and I knew all of the history of [the company] and how they managed DJ X and everything so [the interviewer] was kind of impressed by that.” Nate treats his display of
knowledge as a minor detail, but he later discusses the importance of passion and knowledge when, after becoming a paid employee, he selected dozens of interns for the company: “It’s very easy to tell from a résumé if the guy’s a dance fan.” He describes the interview as another way to gauge musical interests because “if they were into dance music … there would be that automatic passion.” If the intern is interested in dance music, he reasons, “We could pawn off jobs.” For example, he could convince interns to work at a record company event until 2 a.m. with the promise of proximity to artists they like. Nate continues, as if he is explaining the terrible task to an excited intern: “‘You’ll be in the VIP area at 2 in the morning.’ [He laughs] You know, ‘We’ll take you into the DJ booths to work the guest list all night.’” Working the door of an event, determining who is allowed entry, late into the night is a job they could delegate to an intern who is enthusiastic about the roster of artists and would want to attend such an event.

Employers also stress markers of interest and dedication to music. Karl selects interns at an indie record company and occasionally encounters an applicant who “seems like they really don’t have the passion for the music and they’re just looking to do something, like, get to work somewhere.” While he sees nothing wrong with such applicants, he prefers interns who seem enthusiastic and show proof (through some experience) of their passion for music:

When you’re comparing that type of person to someone who’s like, ‘oh yeah, I work at my college radio station and I’ve helped promote shows on campus…’ People who are already actively involved in doing something music-related, it’s great having those people on board. … You know that they love doing this sort of thing. Those are the people I want.

Interns do not need prior work or internship experience, but employers look for some evidence of music involvement.

At indie record companies, even more so than at major record companies, I found that employees require interns to know about and care for its roster (i.e., to agree with the company’s
“mission”). There are some ways, as Shane describes, to ensure reaching potential interns who are passionate fans. First, Shane’s employer does not promote its internship program beyond the company website “because if someone’s coming to your website they care about what you’re doing. … The people who come to your website, like I did when I interned, care about the label. That’s the most important thing.” Shane sharply contrasts potential interns with a general interest in the music industry and those who are passionate about the specific record company:

Sometimes we get people who … clearly are just looking to get an internship in music. And that’s fine. Those people can work out. To me it’s much better when it’s like, ‘I love Band X!’ Maybe even they don’t even know that many bands, which is fine, but even if it’s just one or two that they’re into. ‘I love Band Y!’

Other methods to attract passionate and knowledgeable interns include reaching out to the local college radio station and industry colleagues. Shane continues, “One source we had for a while, we were getting a lot of people who were involved at WNYU, NYU’s radio station. We would just simply ask [the coordinator], do you know anyone?” Also, without “stealing” another company’s intern, Shane describes sharing interns with other likeminded companies: “We’d ask people at other companies. Do you know anyone? You know, sometimes interned are shared. We had an intern that was interning at [another indie label] and also [with us], which is fine.”

Therefore, employers tend to choose and attempt to find interns whose tastes fit with the company’s roster of artists since such aesthetic overlap would more likely lead to commitment.

Taste and notions of “fit,” as previously described, tend to overlap with racial categories. Before employees select from a pool of interns, aspirants tend to self-select into racially appropriate departments or companies. As an intern told me, “I’m better at marketing in an urban place. … I grew up in an urban neighborhood. I know how to market to an urban environment. It’s not like, you know, I grew up in Minnesota or somewhere like that.” Brandon interned in the
HR Department at a major record company and he noticed a racial divide: “The R&B department, with the hip-hop, the rap, all that, you have more African Americans, the Hispanic, and then you had the Caucasians sitting with the rock bands and that’s basically where they were split.” Similar to Tilly (1998), Brandon notes how the categorical distinctions help resolve organizational challenges:

This is where maybe it wasn’t a racial divide; it was more of a taste divide. Like what your taste in music is. And it’s basically the ones who listen to rock were mostly in the rock marketing, pop/rock, and if you listen to hip-hop, R&B, you were doing marketing for that. And it just worked out better that way, I guess, it was very productive.

I ask him how this “taste divide” happened, and he further details the mechanics of intern self-selection:

Brandon: [African American candidates] specifically said they wanted to intern for urban marketing.

AF: Oh really?

Brandon: It’s one of the things I thought was weird because Caucasians, like the whites, they were more like, ‘Whatever, I’ll take an internship in marketing.’ … I mean, I would recommend being wherever you feel more comfortable. … And then when it came down to [choosing], the ones who were specific and said they wanted urban marketing got hired over the kids that were just generalized as marketing. So there was that racial divide as far as that’s concerned, but it’s not like we had segregation again where everybody was split up. Everybody was like hanging out and stuff, everybody would talk to each other.

Therefore the intern’s self-selection based on taste generally matches racial categories; this specification is consonant with the music industry’s search for passionate, committed interns and results in the reproduction of racial categories in music.

Employees expect interns to seem passionate and embody enthusiasm for their company’s specific iteration of industry coolness. The preference for interns who demonstrate commitment to a record company’s mission limits selection or success for those who seem to be a poor aesthetic fit. Therefore, by looking for signs of passion, personnel limit entry to members
of other genre subcultures, inadvertently limiting diversity through the very criteria for choosing interns. For example, at an indie rock label Grace tells me, “We’re not a racially diverse company.” She explains that non-white candidates do not display sufficient passion for indie rock: “one Dominican Republic kid and two African American kids came in to interview for internships and they weren’t familiar with the label. They weren’t that keen on working with indie music.” They were interested, Grace recalls, but not sufficiently interested in the label’s roster: “They just wanted to be part of the music industry.” Shane works at a similar indie rock company and also tells me he would love more diversity in the office, but applicants are almost universally white (with some Asian exceptions). It is necessary, he argues, for interns to be excited by the label or at least some of its bands. Yet, he recalls the company temporarily expanded its internship program for New York City area teenagers over one summer. During that time, the company hosted an African American intern who seemingly showed little knowledge or passion for the label, but things worked out:

[He] didn’t know any band on the label. Didn’t care to know any band on the label. But did his tasks, was fine, didn’t really want to do anything outside of work, didn’t want to go to any shows, but when he left he was like, ‘This was the best internship I ever had! You guys are so cool!’ You know? But, like I said, he wasn’t naturally motivated by it and I’m sure simply because of the [indie rock] music, he wasn’t that into it, which is fine.

Intern tasks often require little or no knowledge of the specific genre since they are administrative in nature; therefore an intern who is a poor musical fit could still complete the tasks, but is not deemed ideal. Dana, the head of my department at Indie Distribution, similarly chooses only interns who display knowledge for the music the company distributes, yet overestimates the importance of this demonstrated passion: “I’d rather have the person know what the music is so I don’t have to explain it. … Marketing is [about] knowing what the consumer is looking for, where they are, who they are, what’s their demographic.” Nonetheless,
my intern tasks were administrative and did not require prior knowledge of the music – rather, I had to use Microsoft Office, memorize the company’s roster of artists, and helped her file expense reports.

Therefore, I found three main factors in intern selection: time, informality, and demonstrable passion. Each factor disadvantages certain aspirants. People with less economic resources are disadvantaged in securing an internship (let alone thriving as an intern). Even the most competitive internship programs I encountered in the music industry operate under a perceived culture of informality where other factors, like nepotism, can replace meritocracy. For an aspirant to get an internship it is important to look and sound right (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001). Employees use evidence of “passion” to select interns, though an assumption of strong subcultural or genre affiliation often implies racial categorization. Due to the need for intern labor at most companies, it is possible for several “mismatches” to still secure an internship, however these candidates encounter more difficulties in successfully enacting the intern role.

**How to Be an Intern**

Being an intern can be deceptively difficult. As Goffman (1959b, p. 38) suggests, performing a role might involve playing up “ideal values which accord to the performer a lower position than he covertly accepts for himself.” Although low in status, possibly bored, and occasionally humiliated, interns must keep a positive demeanor and perform enthusiasm. As the field note below illustrates, interns must seem to accept, if not also accentuate, their position as just the intern and their mostly mundane set of responsibilities.
It is getting close to lunchtime and Hank’s phone rings. He picks it up and promptly hangs up the phone as he swiftly comes to his feet. Hank feverishly moves away from his desk and then down the hall as he giddily blurts out, ‘Food on the fourth floor. Be right back!’ During his absence I stand up and start talking to Mara, a new mid-level sales employee at Major Records USA. Larry walks by shortly thereafter and tells us there is free food on the fourth floor. These are leftovers from a meeting he just attended. ‘Cuban food,’ he adds as an apparent incentive. I thank him and Mara asks me whether I am going. Larry chimes in again, suggesting we should hurry up ‘before all the interns run down there.’ I tell Mara I should wait until Hank returns since I am covering the phones in case someone calls the head of sales. Mara waits as well.

Upon Hank’s prompt return with hefty plate in hand, Mara and I immediately head to the elevators. As we walk into the fourth floor conference room we see eight people waiting to serve themselves. There are trays of food lining much of two walls. Most of the trays are still more than halfway full, with meat, beans, plantains, salad, and desserts. I only see two other interns in the room. One of them, Elise, is an outgoing 22 year-old woman who often chats with sales and publicity employees when she walks down the hall. Elise is among the most personable interns I have met and she later tells me she hopes Major Records USA will hire her as an employee. Yet today as she stands in line with her immediate supervisor (a paid employee) she is unusually quiet. Eventually, I hear Elise say to her advisor, ‘I’m so tired.’ As if rehearsing a previously agreed upon script, the advisor corrects her: ‘No, you feel great and you’re happy to be here.’ Suddenly smiling and correcting her posture, Elise loudly voices her agreement, ‘Oh, yes! That’s right!’

As this brief episode suggests, the eager, smiling, helpful intern who is happy to be there is more than just a stereotype, it is a role that employees and some fellow interns reinforce daily. However, performing a positive stance requires considerable work and careful presentation of self.

Reminiscing about his two years as an intern followed by two years as an employee at the same indie record company, Nate reports treating some interns harshly and investing considerably in training others. Overall, he sympathizes with interns: “There really is nothing as awkward as an internship in this world, I think.” An internship is an expensive and exhausting opportunity, he explains, that may lead nowhere. He recalls an intern system where even motivated aspirants would slip through the cracks: “Kids would commute from Long Island twice a week and they wouldn’t get noticed. It was a shame.” Interning might be awkward because even though interns might relish the opportunity to be active contributors to the
workplace, employees often do not take them very seriously, and interns sometimes do not take their performance seriously.

Amanda is 22 years old and now employed (with pay) outside the music industry. She looks back at her two recent music industry internships and recalls experiencing them as stressful auditions: “You’re just uncomfortable being there because you’re always performing in some way. Like, performing being a lot more cool and relaxed than you really are or just pretending to be much more… I don’t know, something else.” Only now that she is employed, she adds, can she articulate the challenges of performing as an intern: “At my job now, people think I’m so interesting and funny and I felt the opposite [as an intern]. You know, you’re always the least interesting person and you *always* had to be proving something.” Interns attempt to properly perform being just the intern while also moving beyond the limits of the role.

As Amanda expresses, performing the intern role therefore requires an elusive mix of humility and coolness (or industry cool): “You’re supposed to be, at the same time, very humble and very quiet and very put in your place, but then also very cool and interesting, and endlessly fascinating…. I don’t know how you mix those two together.” Making matters worse, interning is a sort of ‘long-term job interview’ requiring an ongoing and challenging presentation of self:

When you’re an intern, you’re constantly thinking, at least I am, about what are other people thinking about me and I try to perceive myself through the other people’s opinions and eyes. And usually I’m sure that nobody gives as much thought about the interns as I [think]. Like, if I said something that was kind of dumb, I’m sure nobody actually thought about it, but it’s the kind of thing where, ‘Oh my god, they’re probably thinking *this* and *this* and *this* about me and that’s going to affect my future in *this* and *this* and *this* way, because when you’re an intern you’re always thinking about, like, this *has* to lead to something stable, I’m going to have a real job one day, and this is my way there. It’s terrifying and you feel like if you mess it up, you know, then you’re screwed.

Despite the overall neglect from employers, interns like Amanda feel stress from being watched and judged, especially with so little time to prove her worth, yet she may in fact have
underestimated how closely employees quietly scrutinize interns. I saw evidence of this firsthand, on my first day at Major Records USA, when Hank warned me that paid employees walking down the hall could see my computer screen. He told me he sometimes receives emails from fellow employees saying, “Do you know what your intern is doing?” Even if interns have no work to do they must attempt to stay in role (Goffman, 1961) by continuing to look busy and seem enthusiastic.

In the following section I detail the two main criteria employees convey in describing a good intern: dedication to organizational goals and ability to balance quiet deference with proactive, intuitive work. Both factors overlap in that “good” interns tend to master soft skills, i.e., are able to understand and anticipate expectations, come off as deferential, while also confidently knowing when to speak up. Finally, these notions of competence underscore or may produce inequality.

Contrasting the good and the bad

During my first interviews with people in the music industry, with little prompting, employees often contrasted “good” and “bad” interns. I eventually started asking all interviewees what characterizes a good and a bad intern. A good intern, most claimed, is engaged and enthusiastic compared to the bad intern. Isabel demonstrates this contrast: “We definitely have interns who just come in and go through the motions and do the job and walk out the door. But then we also have interns who will question everything they’re doing and ask why.” A good intern shows interest, asks questions, and understands – or comes to understand and accept – the significance of the mostly mundane tasks to the organization’s goals. Even if an intern is stuffing
envelopes, a good intern will show enthusiasm in the face of tedium. Similarly, Nate tells me he
tries to explain why preparing packages for promotional outlets is important even though it is
boring. The good intern works quickly whereas the bad intern considers this task a waste of time:

Nate: I don’t know how many times I’ve explained to kids why we do promo mailers, where they go, and why they are actually really important to get out. One out of every seven kids will really understand that. A kid is like, [making dumb-sounding, slow voice] ‘Why am I sitting here stuffing envelopes?’

AF: They say that?

Nate: You can see it in their faces, their body language, how they’re doing it. You see the enthusiastic kids; they speed through that shit. They get it out because they’re like, ‘Oh this is important! I need to get stuff to the media outlets. I need to get these promos out.’ Or they want to get it done quick because they realize they could be doing other things. But then you see the kids who are just sitting there half-assing it and it’s just like, you’re wasting your own time, you’re not really wasting my time. I could care less when those things get out, to be completely real with you. You’re just wasting your time, making that job longer for yourself. You might as well finish up and go home early if you want.

The good intern will show dedication and even some happiness in doing the most mundane tasks,
thus accepting the “no task is too small” part of their role as just the intern. Interns who do not
perform the role in this way are marked as lazy, entitled, or both.

Shane similarly portrays bad interns as unenthusiastic about their work: “We have a lot of interns who think what they’re doing is not what they want to be doing, like making packages… You can just get the sense, maybe they’re really slow.” Shane pretends to tell off such an intern, suggesting a sense of moral outrage at the disinterest and implicit sense of entitlement: “Well, I have to make [the packages] if you don’t. So you think you’re better than what this task is?” Conversely, he portrays a current intern as good, praising him for doing the work, asking many questions, and showing engagement. According to certain employees, some interns do not want to do work; these interns appear to embrace the just the intern label too dearly, expecting to do little. Nancy recalls interns’ plea for less work: “I’ve definitely had some kids that come in and
they just sort of want to phone it in and are half-assed about things. And then when I actually push them to work really hard they’re sort of like, ‘Uuugh, this is an internship!’” Some interns appear to expect easy credits, or display distaste for the work, or decide this internship is not for them and cut their losses.

The discrepancy between good/bad can be found in evidence of commitment to organizational goals. Isabel portrays some interns as leaving at 6 p.m. exactly: “Some will [leave] at 6, like, ‘see ya.’ … I get you’re not getting paid and you don’t really have a responsibility to stay, but…” In contrast, some interns show more thoughtfulness. She appreciates “the [interns] who ask, ‘Is there anything else that I need to do? You need anything before I go? You want me to run those packages downstairs on my way?’ Just kind of being conscious of our department.” Slight instances of thoughtfulness convey commitment to the goals of the department and the company more broadly. To a more extreme extent, Jerry contrasts interns who act as “students” compared to those who already view the music industry as their life. The intern acting as a student might be “15 minutes late to get in, skipping every other week, leaving early.” Jerry depicts no moral outrage. Instead he seems to view such internships as an opportunity to gain a credential and provide career clarification: “OK they’re just looking for college credit and then they’re going to move on to something else. Which is totally fine, you know what I mean, they have to find their path.” In contrast, he describes those committed interns who “get it,” come in more often, and want to attend shows. Therefore, Jerry praises interns who already embody the ideals of the passion job.

A good intern is construed as a good worker. Every intern makes mistakes, for example: one intern recalls accidentally hanging up on the president of the company while trying to transfer a call; another portrays mixing up piles of CDs as he stuffed envelopes for two different
mailings; another stocked a refrigerator with the wrong particular combination of beverages. Danielle was often assigned higher-level, writing-oriented tasks, but recalls struggling with “no-brainer type stuff” like navigating the FedEx website: “I can’t even understand that website. [She laughs] I would send things, products to foreign countries, and bill them instead of billing us.” While these mistakes might cause annoyance, an intern who repeats the same errors is particularly maligned. Some interns commit such a blatant mistake, or memorable displays of incompetence that they leave a lasting, unfavorable impression. As Nate recalls, one intern he oversaw had difficulties changing a light bulb, which then precluded assigning anything but mundane tasks:

Nate: There’s a three-light [fixture] in the women’s bathroom. ‘Could you change one of the light bulbs in there for us?’ And one of them is out. We only had two light bulbs going for some reason because we’re ghetto like that. [Pause] He changed the one that was working. [He laughs] That was the end for him! From that day on he only cleaned the storage room, pretty much… [He laughs out loud.] And organized promos. That was the end of his life as an intern, officially.

AF: He did not come back after that one semester?

Nate: No.

The intern that employees deem incompetent will complete only the most basic tasks. Despite the structural constraints of the intern role – low status, perceived incompetence, and temporary – interns can negotiate the delegation of tasks to an extent. Better interns are more likely to be assigned more advanced or pleasant tasks. Employees are less likely to bother with interns they identify as incompetent or those with a negative attitude – i.e., those interns whose performance does not advance organizational goals.

Even while doing mundane work, interns can display competence and gain employees’ trust through interaction, ranging from swiftly completing tasks to intuiting when to be seen, not heard. Oliver, for example, describes a good intern as someone who asks pertinent questions and
therefore “catches things.” He recalls an intern filing documents and realizing there are two differently placed files for a company: “Just going, ‘Hey wait a second, this is marked Company X but there’s another file that exists in another folder with this… What should I do?’ It’s like, awesome that you ask. Fantastic!” By being thoughtful, Oliver says, the intern displayed competence, gained his trust, and potentially saved him future trouble: “If [the intern] had just decided to [file] it in one, it could have been the wrong spot. If [the intern] weren’t here on the day I needed to find it I’d be in a world of trouble.” Similarly, the good intern can save employees time by anticipating tasks. An employee portrays a good intern similarly as someone who “thinks on their feet, can juggle a bunch of different balls in the air” and “sometimes will take the hint to just figure out, solve a problem themselves rather than ask a million questions, but also has the insight to know once in a while you do need to stop and ask.” Taking a hint requires soft skills like tact, awareness, and intuitiveness.

Interns must learn when to fade away into the background and when to step into the foreground. Danielle described how this dynamic played out at a music marketing internship where she sat near two vice presidents (separated by dividers, not walls). She learned to know when to be quiet and when to chime in: “Part of your job is knowing when you overhear something and you can … acknowledge it, or knowing when you’re supposed to pretend you’re not there because they’re pretending you’re not there.” She describes the employees expecting her to promptly jump in when needed:

I could just tell - if it’s something where we need to gather research, a phone call needs to be made, just like all of the gathering of the basic foundation of a new project or campaign. They’re kind of casually talking about how they have to travel. I’m supposed to know whether I’m doing something or not, that that means start looking on American Airlines because he’s going to need to blah blah blah. You know, and they get impatient if you’re not on top of that.
The intern must therefore act as a fly on the wall, waiting for appropriate moments to tactfully interject. Danielle describes the vice presidents signaling when she should pretend not to overhear: “If they’re talking too detailed about money or they’re talking about other employees … the voice kind of lowers and it’s kind of just a change in tone, a change in volume.”

Therefore, to play the role of the intern requires tact and awareness about the limits of the role.

Respondents describe several challenges to properly performing deference and organizational savvy as an intern, including age. Mark was pursuing a Master’s degree in Music Business and was able to intern (for credit) at a prominent independent label at the age of 26. As his recollections illustrate, to be an older intern adds another layer of humility to the intern experience:

I was there with 19 year-old kids. I just felt like an asshole the whole time because, you know, a lot of times they don’t have anything for you to do so you’re just kind of waiting around for someone to, you know, maybe someone who’s younger than you to give you some task, you know, it’s kind of humiliating in a way.

Humbly yet enthusiastically seeking work challenges one’s ego to an extent, but to do so surrounded by younger people potentially of higher status creates another level of difficulty. Although he is only 22, Brandon felt much the same during his recent internship at a major record company where management-level employees are 25 and assistants are between 20 and 22 years old. He tells me it was “weird” that his supervisors were his age or even younger: “I needed to be able to take orders from them, it’s hard to explain, without getting mad because I’m taking orders from someone a year younger than me.” Brandon refers to accepting this odd hierarchy since his supervisors might not be as competent as him, “but I have to understand my place is not to correct them, but to just do what I’m told.” It may be more difficult, as Mark and Brandon suggest, for an older intern to accept her or his “place” and act accordingly.
Like age, race can be a challenge to performing the intern role and “mismatched” personnel appear most aware of racial/musical expectations. When I asked a white woman working in hip-hop how race can affect music careers, she tells me there are ethnic and racial stereotypes “but the lines do cross.” She begins speaking at length about the popularity of hip-hop among the white population: “A lot of white adults may not realize how many white kids listen to hip-hop. They have been the biggest buying segment of hip-hop for years and years now. And rappers know that, for sure.” Emily, a white intern, tells me she never felt as white as during her internship at a hip-hop label. On her second day at the internship, it was freezing outside:

I get in their elevator and I’m taking my hat off and gloves and jacket and whatever and a black guy is in the elevator with me and he looks at me up and down and he’s like, ‘It’s cold out.’ And I was like, Yeah! He looks at me up and down and was like, ‘You people are used to the cold aren’t you?’ And I got comments like that on a regular basis.

Although the comment bothered her, she was most struck by the assumption of her ignorance about urban culture:

Emily: It was one of those things where I’d be sitting next to a girl and she’d be like, ‘You know what 106 and Park is, right?’ And I was like, ‘Yeeah, I do…”’

AF: Why would she ask that?

Emily: Because it’s a B.E.T. show and, I don’t know, I got really annoyed. They pointed out the fact that I was white every day. … I think since it’s a lifestyle company and I’m not at all hip-hop. At all. So I think that contributed to that.

Because she does not look and sound like members of the “hip-hop” musical community, Emily remarks on the additional challenge of being an intern in a mismatched setting. (I could not find a black intern within the rock realm, but would hypothesize the presence of a similar dynamic.)

I found some evidence of uneven levels of institutional support for interns from different New York City area schools, which in turn affects the intern’s ability to develop the soft skills
necessary to thrive. Large private schools like Columbia and NYU, which tend to attract more students from wealthy backgrounds, appear to offer better resources for aspiring interns. Various internship coordinators from record companies told me they send internship announcements to Columbia, NYU, and sometimes New School, but not City University of New York colleges. Of course, students from any school could still apply directly on the companies’ websites. Two NYU professors told me their students appear to treat internship seminars as a chore, though they are offered to students in several departments. Nate recounts disliking his mandatory seminar, though in hindsight it helped him learn how to behave as an intern:

At NYU we had internship classes that they *made* us take. These seminars, we hated them, but they would tell us this corny stuff like, ‘Ask them if they want something done. Don’t be lazy. Be diligent. Always be working. Make them get to know you.’ I learned that kind of stuff at the NYU seminars, ironically.

Conversely, when I interviewed an internship advisor at Hunter College I asked whether they offer such a seminar. The advisor told me students are technically supposed to show up for a weekly seminar, but students are instead told to spend more time “networking” at their internship since they likely have limited time due to other work responsibilities.

Although music industry personnel put down the importance of “book learning,” they tend to link the prestige of a school with an intern’s preparation for basic tasks. During a follow-up interview with Greg, when he had been working in the Sales Department of a major record company for nine months, he complained about his interns’ performance. He implicitly links interns’ education, class, and race:

Greg: I had a couple interns over my time, ranging from some awful, awful, awful interns to some *decent* ones. I don’t think I ever had one that I was like, ‘He’s great!’ I had one that I liked the most... The other ones I wasn’t as invested in them, but I could tell right away that they weren’t going to work there so it wasn’t worth my time to invest in them at all.
AF: How could you tell or sense that people were not interested in working there?

Greg: We weren’t interested in having *them*. You could just tell right away. Even just not being good with the computer, not being able to write and speak well. It’s like really basic stuff…. A lot of interns that would come in from more of those inner city schools and they basically didn’t jive with us that well. … I don’t think [HR] did a good enough job getting interns from some of the better business schools around. That place should have been fully staffed with NYU kids from the Tisch program and from Stern school of business every semester. And they always got kids from Brooklyn College.

I ask Greg what he means by “inner city schools” and he corrects himself, saying he means community colleges. He then provides an example of an intern who “didn’t have a great educational background” but was graduating in six months and seemed highly motivated to get a job in the music industry:

I said – ‘Get out there and meet people and make connections.’ And he just didn’t really. He would [walk away, come back] and say, ‘I just talked to the head of promotions!’ And I’d be, ‘alright tell me what he does’… I’m a big believer, I usually know within a minute if I want to hire somebody or not. I know that’s really crass to say, but it’s just, not based at all on any racial or… But just talking to them about their experiences and what they understand about the job and if I can tell that they don’t understand the job, that they’re capable of explaining the job and see if they can do it, but it’s just, whether or not their personality will click with what they want to do, I can usually tell pretty quickly.

The intern was unable to convey a sense of competence to Greg, who attended one of the country’s more prestigious colleges. As with other research on cultural similarities in the hiring process (Rivera, 2012), Greg’s evaluation of “jive” and “click” or lack thereof suggests potential limitations in the intern’s soft skills which may belie differences in background.

**How to Stretch the Intern Role**

In the essay *A School Is a Lousy Place To Learn Anything in*, Becker (1972) compares classroom and on-the-job training as differently structured opportunities for learning. Becker
(1972, p. 95) contrasts the student’s steady introduction to the curriculum in the classroom compared to the disorienting, if not overwhelming first day of the apprentice: “the [apprentice] sees the kind of work he is to learn in all its tangled complexity from the first day, instead of being introduced to those complexities a step at a time in a carefully constructed curriculum.” Similarly, several interns told me they felt scared, intimidated, and humbled at the start of their internships. Even after five internships Emily refers to the disorientation of a first day, “because you don’t know what’s going on. But it’s something you have to learn.” She goes on, “I don’t know anybody who has come back from their first day at an internship that [says], ‘I kick ass.’ Everyone [says], ‘I’m a terrible intern!’” However, interns eventually learn to understand the activities, personalities, and expectations around them, though their paths after the initial disorientation vary.

Interns are told that their internship will be what they make of it. As internship programs are presently configured, interns expect to do mundane work and it will be up to them to improve their situation, but this is not necessarily an easy task, especially due to the structural characteristics and constraints of the intern role. Employees may not spend much time thinking of interns and for various reasons it can be difficult for interns to take on increased responsibilities. As Becker (1972, p. 96) also describes, training, including the assigned bundle of tasks, is tied to the learner’s initiative: “An ideology common among journeymen suggests that if an apprentice is any good, he will make you teach him; if he does not push, he probably does not have what it takes.” As discussed previously, an intern must be a bit of a pushy punk to make the most of the experience. However, being a pushy punk as a music industry intern implies finding a tactful balance between being passive and proactive.
Monique calls an internship a “weird position” because “you kind of need to push to have something to do instead of just busy work. And you always kind of have to ask questions and be proactive.” Monique points out that it is possible for interns, through their efforts, to get more out of an internship – and to an extent her statement reflects the notion that an internship is what one makes of it, though not necessarily under conditions of one’s choosing. Brandon, an ex-intern who now works at Indie Distribution, echoed her assessment: “When they’re giving you, ‘Go get me a coffee,’ then you have to stand up and say, ‘I can do more than give you a coffee. I could go write a [marketing] plan, I could do one-sheets, I could…’” However, the intern must be careful not to come off as too aggressive. Nate describes how he has supervised (or dealt with) “entitled” interns:

It used to annoy the hell out of me when these kids would come in and think they were all entitled. They’d come in with a sense of entitlement that I used to like to beat out of them. … Mostly I would just give them hard labor. If they came in with that attitude, coming in already entitled, I’d give them hard labor. ‘Really? You want to do a marketing plan? Go clean up the store room, I’ll see you in a few hours.’ That would be it.

Interns must tactfully gain a sense of what is expected of them. If interns appear to be too insistent on doing “more important” work or give off the impression that they are not willing to pay their dues by doing mundane tasks, employees can ignore or discipline them as Nate illustrates above.

The sense of an intern’s “place” is recognized and reinforced by employees as well as fellow interns. For example, at Major Records USA I overheard two interns and two employees complain about a problematic intern in their department; this intern, absent at that moment, started the internship with considerable music industry experience and seemingly expected to do higher-level work than what he and fellow interns were routinely assigned. Not only can it be
difficult for employees to manage such an intern; such behavior potentially offends fellow interns. When I later asked one of the interns, Elise, she described the problematic intern as “full of himself” for complaining about doing low-level tasks as if they were below him, while she completes them daily. An employee at the same company described a similar case and compared his department to a basketball team: “You’ve got to play your position.” To play one’s position means to fulfill one’s work responsibilities, but also act according to the formal and informal expectations of colleagues.

Similarly, Greg told me about a Major Records USA intern who did not act according to the intern role though he showed considerable enthusiasm: “He didn’t really know his place. He was really eager, but sometimes in the wrong way.” Interns are expected to complete their basic tasks and then might be assigned further work. In the A&R Department, interns might suggest artists to their supervisors who research and develop relationships with potential new additions to the company’s roster; however this task is only part of the intern’s responsibilities and viewed by employees as somewhat of a perk. Greg told me about a fellow intern who failed to grasp the intricacies of his role: “He would be like, ‘Hey check out this band that I brought in,’ and not do stuff that [the boss] had asked him to do.” In addition, the intern did not understand the informal code of conduct in the office. At Major Records USA every computer comes equipped with speakers. Due to proximity between workers, interns less frequently play music and, when they do, they make sure not to drown out other people’s music. Yet, Greg laughingly re-enacts the problematic intern playing music too loudly and concludes: “You shouldn’t be blasting music from your computer. You have to be kind of self-aware.” Therefore, the intern showed enthusiasm, but failed to live up to the basic formal and informal rules of the role.
According to employees, however, most interns fall into the other extreme as *overly* quiet or shy. Interns who are overwhelmed, humbled or scared may attempt to play it safe, keep their head down, and quietly excel. This approach may work for a student in the classroom, but it yields few dividends during an internship. Greg specifies that the behavior of some bad interns like the one above is a disservice both to themselves and the company. Nonetheless, it is possible for interns to be “bad” for themselves, but still useful for the company: “A less good intern for himself will be really quiet and not meet anybody… And that kind of person can still be a good intern for the company because they do what they’re told and they never mess up.” Isabel diagnoses the problem similarly, referring to potentially “nervous” or “scared” interns as less likely to get hired as employees: “personality’s a lot of it…. We’ve had really kind of faceless, you know, quiet interns who do a good job, but I might not remember who they are the next semester.” To move beyond or stretch the limits of the role, interns must be entrepreneurial. I observed and heard of four main tactics for interns to distinguish themselves and increase their workplace responsibilities without being perceived as entitled or disrespectful: (1) find small tasks to do, (2) agree to extracurricular work, (3) network, and (4) extend internship.

According to Greg, the intern must refrain from being too insistent and instead do modest, thoughtful things to impress employees:

You get in there the first day and at first you want to be like, ‘I want to help with this, help with that.’ But it’s … about *realizing* what they want you to do. … It’s not always good to [suggest], ‘Hey can I do this?’ because you might just be getting into somebody’s way. But then you have to realize like, ‘Hey, every time my boss orders lunch he asks me to get him a plate, so maybe I’m just going to bring him a plate with lunch.’ Stupid things like that go a long way.

Others recall doing things like tidying up the storage room and nearby areas or checking their record company’s website, looking for and reporting any incorrect content. By finding small
tasks like these to do, and executing them, interns tactfully come off as eager and enthusiastic without seeming entitled.

Another strategy is volunteering for “extra” work. For example, Agatha asked a Publicity employee if she needed help with an industry showcase and ended up helping with on-site logistics that evening. Shane recalls agreeing to do anything, even beyond his normally scheduled hours: “Just anything extra, [I’d] just jump at it. I would always offer to do more and stay as late as they needed me. If they asked me to come in specially to do a mailing I’d always do it.” Some interns help employees in other departments, e.g., a marketing intern helped the Major Records USA Sales Department mail t-shirts to stores. Isabel praises how some interns agreed to hand out promotional items at 6:30 a.m.:

I had Artist X on the Today Show and we had a handful of interns come at 6:30 in the morning and hand t-shirts and posters out to the crowd. … At the end of the day I’ll remember those handful of interns that pony it up, got up at 5 in the morning to come and do that.

Interns who show willingness to do anything and expand the boundaries of their responsibilities tend to stick out.

**Networking**

Small, thoughtful gestures and extracurricular work help build employees’ trust and the perception of the intern’s commitment. However, a crucial part of stretching the limits of the intern role and possibly gaining paid employment rests in the intern’s ability to network and subsequently develop relationships with employees. Connections are generally important in finding work (Granovetter, 1974); thus the importance of social networks is especially salient in
the cultural industries where there is a low educational barrier for entry and hiring decisions are strongly tied to trust (Becker, 1982; Blair, 2001; Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2012). Interns describe three practical challenges in developing networks: make sure employees know who you are, meet more people, and maintain relationships after the internship.

As I began as an intern at Major Records USA, working under the assistant to a senior executive, I started with the assumption that senior personnel would not learn my name. Several interns I interviewed reported feeling ignored, especially at major record companies, and suspected that no one except their direct supervisor had bothered to learn their names. Nonetheless, on my second day at Major Records USA as I was shuffling papers on my desk in the hallway the senior executive in the department put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Excuse me Alex” as he walked by. Earlier that week I was introduced to the senior executive briefly and he addressed me by name continuously. Of course, my case is not representative – the PhD student intern is rare. Interns like Monique report needing to train employees to learn her name: “At the beginning of the [Major Records USA] internship I kind of had to [say], ‘I’m Monique! I’m Monique!’ ‘Monique, sorry I forgot your name.’” In this way, interns must make sure that people know who they are, as Ben describes: “I think more than anything the point of an internship, at least in this industry, is networking and it’s getting your name out there.” Although interns generally describe fellow interns as role models, friends/buddies, or partners in crime, Ben (an employee and recent intern) portrays an implicitly competitive dynamic: “It’s almost like a reality show and it’s about rising to the top... There’s always going to be one in a group of interns who really stands out.” Whether interns feel a sense of competition and/or camaraderie, they need to self-promote in the office and beyond.
Interns at Major Records USA are encouraged to walk around and introduce themselves to employees. Although this sounds promising, even outgoing people remark on this challenge because they fear interrupting employees’ work. Shortly after getting his first paid job in the industry, Greg tells me it is much easier to meet people as an assistant, while as an intern “you have to have a lot of balls to do that kind of stuff. I actually did [introduce myself] a couple times as an intern, to varying results.” Another intern recalls approaching an employee at an indie record company’s kitchen area during lunch. The two had a conversation where she (intern) asked him (employee) about what he does and they had what she thought was a pleasant talk. However, she was horrified to read an email from her supervisor later that day informing her not to bother employees during their lunch break.

Therefore, breaching the symbolic order, approaching employees as an intern, can be intimidating and even counterproductive. Some interns ask their supervisors to facilitate introductions. Agatha recounts using a fellow intern as an intermediary to meet the head of marketing, whereas Isabel tells me about an intern who walked into her office to allegedly ask a question, “forgot” the question, and nonetheless sparked a conversation (Isabel seemed impressed by the intern’s boldness). Nate recalls being an intern in the “wrong” department at a record company, but would approach people in the [urban-related] department that interested him. The desirable department in question was located next to the supplies closet, therefore:

Every time I’d go in to get [envelopes] I’d try to comment on whatever hip-hop record was playing, whatever was on the radio. I’d be like, ‘I love that record. I hate that record.’ Then we’d start talking and if there were promos out we’d start chopping it up, and that’s how I got my in. So I would just go in there to shoot the shit if I wasn’t too busy and I’m going to take on work they needed done.

Interns can develop relationships with employees outside their immediate surroundings, though this requires some courage and will yield uneven results.
Nonetheless, even if an intern meets and even develops a strong rapport with employees, these relationships become weaker quickly due to the temporariness of the position. As Karl puts it, “It’s a fleeting relationship.” After a few months, interns leave and, due to strong turnover, employees like Karl struggle to remember and differentiate the various interns:

There are some interns that I had that, say [four years ago], that if they wrote me and said, ‘hey I need a recommendation for this job’ or whatever, while I would still probably do it I may not even remember anything about what it was like working with them. You know, you’re talking, you know, six-seven-eight interns a year over the last four years, naturally there are some of them that I don’t really remember.

Some job-seeking interns, however, are aware of this challenge. Monique describes the benefit of keeping in touch with industry contacts: “you meet people and when you graduate at least you have something to fall on. You know, send out an email to everyone you’ve interned for asking if they know anybody or if they need anybody, if they’re hiring.” She tells me she occasionally emails former intern hosts, “Like, ‘hey I saw Artist Y’s album. Blah blah blah.’ So they remember who you are.” Brandon does the same, but he also sends cards for holidays, birthdays, and whatever else he thinks might be well received. Maintaining relationships can lead to employment, as Isabel and Shane would confirm. Isabel’s assistant was first an intern for approximately a year and eventually needed to find paid work; he found a job outside the music industry, but kept in touch, until eventually getting hired at the record company. Similarly, Shane finished his summer internship at an indie record company and volunteered to continue helping with the label’s website over several months. Upon graduating, a position opened up for him at the company.
Extend internship

Interns use the three tactics above to overcome the structural challenges of their role, elevating their status, demonstrating their competence in the workplace, and still being perceived as “knowing their place.” However, interns’ bundles of tasks are limited due to the temporary nature of the position. Employees and ex-interns overwhelmingly claim that the primary way for interns to move up the hierarchy, gain visibility, and do more meaningful work is to extend their internship (or to “stick around”). An intern who stays for numerous semesters and/or comes in more hours or days than others typically gains in status and seniority compared to fellow interns. At many companies or departments there is a clear hierarchy of interns where one or two interns become “head interns” (or “super interns”). Interns in this special class may not only be assigned preferred tasks; in many instances they train new interns, are chosen as the representative for other interns, and act as the intermediary through which employees delegate work. In some cases the more senior intern is first in line for perks like concert tickets or even job recommendations. Interns may rise to this status through seniority, though in some instances they are chosen after a brief period of time (plausibly due to hard work or by showing what is described as early promise). If this happens, interns must assume and grow into this iteration of the intern role.

When Bela interviews interns she stresses the importance of extending their hours as much as possible:

I tell them, ‘Look, we can’t pay, but it behooves you to be there. The more that you’re there, the more that you’re going to get out of it. And the more you’re going to feel like an employee. The more people trust that you’re going to be there the more that they’re going to give you to do.’

Her advice is consistent with Ryan’s experience. After his first semester at Major Records USA, the third person in the A&R Department left and instead of hiring someone else, the position was
eliminated. Ryan jumped at the opportunity to take over as much of the work as possible. Because he was already trained, by staying for several semesters Ryan could complete many of the department’s tasks: “I kept interning and I all of a sudden became the third guy in that department where any time I came in, my next semester, instead of teaching me what to do I knew what to do going in.” Not only did he help keep the department running smoothly, he eventually met several more employees along the way: “Once you’re [around] for so long, you start to meet different people in different departments, people know your face. You realize how small the company is.” Extending the internship, Ryan argues, led to more work responsibilities and elevated status around the company.

By “sticking around,” interns also develop stronger relationships with employees. Greg recalls: “It just takes some time for people to warm up to you more because right off the bat no one’s going to give you the benefit of the doubt.” As an intern at Major Records USA for over seven months, Greg reports attending shows several times each week and, eventually, “when I was there for a little longer people would realize, ‘This intern, he’s here all the time, he talks to people, he goes out of his way to meet people and go to shows.’” During the second semester at the company, he concludes, “People start to trust you.” By staying at the internship for a second semester Greg was able to overcome some of the characteristic limitations of the role (e.g., presumed incompetence). Meeting people can be helpful, but Ben adds, the rewards from meeting people are limited since the intern must also develop trust: “There’s a lot of people who go out and give out their cards… And there’s no point in that. You know? Sure she’ll know your name – awesome. And then what?” Ben vehemently stresses the importance of mentors, or even champions within a company: “When it comes time for another internship or to graduate, it’s those people who’ll vouch for you and say, ‘Hey, let me help you.’” To build these relationships,
Ben recommends that interns stay late. Before becoming a 19 year-old A&R employee, Ben was an intern for over two years at the same major record company. He stayed late, came to the office several days a week, and eventually became friends with fellow interns and employees:

What I think attributes to a lot of where I am now is the fact that I was friends with everyone I worked with and worked for…. We would all hang out and Friday nights we’d be here until 9 o’clock sitting in someone’s office having a beer and like… Those people then all liked me and then we were friends and, you know, you help out your friends.

Ben became a trusted, competent, and amiable fixture in the office, i.e., a super intern.

Some interns and employees describe sincere friendships across the intern/employee line. I often observed interns and employees together at shows and bars, but despite the head interns’ comparatively higher status, they are still not quite employees. Bela recounts her days as a head intern at an indie record company (her third internship) and her inability to completely overcome the intern/employee boundary. By the end of that internship she came to the office every weekday, managed the department’s interns, and took on higher-level tasks. She recalls considering herself an employee in every sense, but the official title (and the commensurate pay). She describes how she often stayed late to finish work, but on one occasion when almost everyone had left, an employee walked by and seemed surprised to see her: “[He said] ‘Intern, go home! We don’t pay you, go! Leave! Get out of here!’ And I was like, ‘Um, I’m just finishing something.’ And he’s like, ‘Everyone has gone home. And we pay them.’” The employee’s statement disappointed Bela because she was referred to as “intern” despite her status as head intern and efforts to move beyond the intern role. What is more, while employees complain about insufficiently committed interns, it is not uncommon for dedicated interns to be told they work too hard. In this way, whether it is the employees’ intention or not, the more dedicated or head interns can feel that they are hitting their heads against their position’s symbolic ceiling.
To be chosen as head interns, or a more subtle variation thereof, marks their preferred status and elevates their position within the office. Appointing a head intern is organizationally efficient in that paid employees save time and energy that would be necessary to train and interact with newer interns. Since the lower-level interns have a lower status than the head intern, employees can be saved from interacting with people so distant in social status. Perhaps inadvertently, this hierarchy makes it more difficult for newer interns to prove themselves because head interns consolidate the power of delegating tasks and they limit or monopolize the interactional space between other interns and the employees.

Finally, it is especially difficult for interns who must work part-time, in addition to school, to become a head intern. Nate tells me about two interns who worked as a bartender and waiter, respectively, before getting hired at a record company, though these were exceptions: “I look at a lot of these kids and it’s a shame. It’s a disadvantage because they have to go do this part-time work.” While he acknowledges his fellow interns were at a disadvantage because he could afford to work for free almost full-time for several semesters and became a trusted part of the office, he would not necessarily do things differently:

Am I ashamed to exploit that disadvantage? No. I’m going to use it every way I can get. That’s why I say it’s a shame. I’ve seen a lot of people who could have done better who just didn’t have the time or the money to be able to do it.

However, the internship as an ennobling rite of passage and the mailroom model of work obscure the “shame” or waste Nate describes. Instead, some employees construe those who cannot afford to intern for free as insufficiently committed. Ben tells me about a promising intern from the previous semester who had to leave:

He was awesome and everyone loved him and he ended up going… You know, ‘my parents are cutting me off, they’re not going to pay for me anymore…’ You know, ‘I owe
money to my credit cards’ and whatever. ‘I owe money from being in this band’ and… We said to him, look, if this is what you want to do you’re not going to find a job, you’re not going to just get miraculously hired. There aren’t a ton of jobs open in this industry… And it’s like, ‘Yeah but I can’t afford…’ No, you can afford to. You just can’t afford to do that and, you know, have the lifestyle to which you’re accustomed. I know a ton of people who, you know, leave here and then go work elsewhere and, you know, work on Saturdays and Sundays and do it… And then hustle, do anything you can because this is where they want to be. So I think it is possible, it just doesn’t make it easy.

Therefore, it is possible for job-seeking aspirants to extend their time as interns – potentially a productive approach – but it is a strategy that advantages those with economic resources.

**Conclusion**

It is possible for interns to elevate their status and move beyond the characteristics and constraints of the intern role, though notions of race, class, age, and gender inform the selection and evaluation of interns as well as interns’ ability to succeed. I described three main factors in intern selection (time, informality, and demonstrable passion); these disadvantage aspirants without the means for extended periods of unpaid work, mask nepotistic or other preferential selection, and reproduce racial stereotypes. To be a “good intern” and stretch the role, aspirants must look and sound right, show deference while deploying soft skills, and be entrepreneurial. Taken together, the above suggests how the intern economy exacerbates class and other forms of inequality while nonetheless allowing some “mismatched” or especially skilled interns to secure advancement.
Conclusion: Back to the Future?

Over the past three years, something surprising yet quite overdue happened – people became increasingly critical of the intern economy. As the Great Recession exacerbated the plight of the young and the jobless (Shierholz & Edwards, 2011) the unpaid internship suddenly began drawing the ire of politicians, educators, labor rights activists, students, and their worried parents (Greenhouse, 2010; Harris, 2013; Mosley, 2013; Perlin, 2011). Before 2010, only a few newspaper articles (mostly op-eds in The New York Times) occasionally questioned the fairness of the intern economy. The only consistent source of critical analysis of the intern economy over the previous decade can be found in legal reviews pondering whether unpaid interns should be considered employees (e.g., Curiale, 2010; Gregory, 1998; Ortner, 1998; Yamada, 2002). It is in great part this legal grey area that has brought the intern economy to the forefront as a social issue. There were more than 20 intern lawsuits filed in 2013. The increased public scrutiny over internships reached its most recent peak in June 2013 when Federal Judge William Pauley handed two unpaid interns, Eric Glatt and Alex Footman, a summary judgment win against Fox Searchlight Pictures. The two ex-interns worked on the film Black Swan and filed a lawsuit against the company in 2011 for violating federal and state labor laws. The judge not only agreed the plaintiffs were misclassified as unpaid interns instead of paid employees, but also certified a class action suit investigating unpaid intern practices at the parent company, Fox Entertainment Group (Greenhouse, 2013). Companies, interns, and even the courts appear to be increasingly unclear about how to define and justify a legal unpaid internship. Employers have since scrambled to catch up with the threat of litigation, though the Black Swan case is still awaiting a decision by the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals.
Maurice Pianko is an attorney who represents interns suing companies for back pay (including a lawsuit against the Warner Music Group). During an interview in December 2013, Maurice told me that companies sometimes ask him for advice about how to run an unpaid internship program and he usually responds, “Don’t do it.” He adds, with confidence and humor: “That’s the answer. You want guidance on how to do it? Don’t. Just pay $7.25. That’s the guidance I give them. It’s very good advice! I don’t even charge them.” Maurice claims to be shocked that companies have drawn from a pool of unpaid labor for so long. He filed “a dozen” intern lawsuits over recent months and appears certain he will earn sizeable fees from the companies involved: “I don’t know why they aren’t just paying [interns]. Whatever. If they want to make me rich off of it, you know, I’ll take it.”

To conclude this dissertation, I focus on what changed over the past three years and speculate about how major stakeholders might further alter the intern economy. In the previous four chapters I provided an account of why so many people want to intern (and work) in the music industry; explained how the internship is construed by workers as an ennobling rite of passage (though it can be educational experience devoid of student learning); argued how the internship’s inherent ambiguity and characteristic limitations imply numerous challenges for the aspirant aiming to get hired; and lastly, described how it is possible for individuals to rise beyond being just the intern, yet the path to do so advantages those who culturally “fit in” and can likely afford extended periods of unpaid work. I conclude with a look towards the future of the intern economy, which necessitates closer attention to its past. I begin with a brief history of work-based learning and describe how these antecedents inform the intern economy. I describe how it is legally possible for interns to work for free. I conclude with an analysis of legal challenges to unpaid work and current intern activism.
History of Work-based Learning: From Apprenticeship System to Intern Economy

Throughout most of history, teenagers and young adults have engaged in training for occupations via work-based learning opportunities, primarily in the form of apprenticeships. Work-based learning is consistent with the idea of “learning by doing” and therefore can be linked to the larger pedagogical philosophy of experiential education. The idea that a student should learn based on active, situated experience and interaction with the world – in this case the workplace – is often identified with John Dewey’s philosophy that life and learning should be integrated: “The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling” (Dewey, 1916, p. 51). Dewey provided an intellectual argument for experiential learning in *The School and Society* (1899) and *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), arguing that a child’s education must be linked to experience more than abstract thought. However, individuals started learning within work contexts far before Dewey’s writings.

The history of work-based learning starts with the apprenticeship and leads to the internship. An apprenticeship is much longer and more educationally ambitious than an internship – usually lasting a few years compared to a few months or a few weeks for internships. Apprenticeships are referred to as the oldest form of training and have been a traditional part of the life cycle at least since the Middle Ages (Rorabaugh, 1986). For centuries apprenticeships have provided a way to train people for crafts and trades, but should also be understood as a complex social and economic system. Apprenticeships have always involved the exchange of training for labor. Skilled masters host apprentices in the workplace for an agreed period of time. Until the 19th century, the relationship between a master and apprentice in some ways resembled the relationship between parent and child. The training provided during an
apprenticeship went beyond simply learning a craft or trade. Masters ideally took on the role of parents to serve the apprentices in learning their craft, but also taught them religion and morality (Smith, 1981). Apprentices were expected to obey their master much as they would a parent, providing valuable labor as well as loyalty and child-like love. It should be noted that this relationship did not always live up to its ideal form, notably because the relationship was bound by a contract (i.e., indenture) whereby the apprentice served the master for numerous years before earning the right to become a journeywoman/man (Smith, 1981).

The arrangement between apprentice and master has varied historically, partly based on era, geography (including local laws and customs), and type of craft or trade. In Snell’s (1996) analysis of the apprenticeship as a cultural institution in Britain, he notes a general tendency to group apprenticeship systems into three distinct historical periods: the guild apprenticeship period (12th century to 1563); the statutory apprenticeship period (1563-1814) which was marked by the decrease of guild influence; and the voluntary apprenticeship period (1814-present) where arrangements have come in a variety of forms, often articulated between employers and unions. The key marker between the three periods is the Statute of Artificers from 1563, an Elizabethan enactment that helped formalize the apprenticeship system, though several important clauses were later repealed in 1814. The introduction of the statute brought together the various apprenticeship systems then in existence in England and established their legal standing. The enactment set the length of apprenticeships (usually seven years, as opposed to three to five in countries like France and Germany), limited the number of apprentices in certain trades, prohibited poaching of apprentices by other masters, and in the name of “social order and hierarchy” (Snell, 1996, p. 304), it restricted access to profitable trades to the children of masters and owners of certain property. The Statute of Artificers made it statutory for parents to
apprentice their sons for craft or agriculture unless they could afford to educate them for a profession. Therefore, until 1814, the Statute of Artificers brought considerable formality and legal structure to an apprenticeship system that trained youth (mostly men) employed outside the professions.

Adam Smith was a vocal critic of the then-prevalent 18th century apprenticeship system, arguing that it served as a mechanism to restrict the supply of workers and confine knowledge to the hands of a select few. And yet much like interns today are limited by a high intern-to-employee ratio, masters sometimes took on more apprentices than desired by their pupils, particularly in those periods and areas where apprenticeship regulation was scarce (Snell, 1996). Part of Smith’s dismay about apprenticeships can be linked to his criticism of guilds, the corporations of masters that (along with local governments) used to regulate apprenticeships. Smith famously portrayed guilds as “a conspiracy against the public” (Epstein & Prak, 2008, p. 1) since they served the masters’ interests to the detriment of the free-flowing economy. Smith’s argument about labor market monopsony (i.e., lack of free-flowing labor market) held great weight for some time, though historical research calls for a slightly more nuanced view; it was relatively easy and not uncommon to sidestep restrictions on apprenticeship numbers and the statutory lengths of apprenticeships were sometimes negotiable (Epstein, 1998).

Some apprenticeships were better than others, of course, and parents vied to arrange the best possible placement for their children. Since apprenticeships were a crucial mechanism to ensure a child’s economic future as well as moral upbringing, parents would give money to masters for some apprenticeships (e.g., law) while paupers and orphans might end up in less lucrative areas like farming (Snell, 1996). The apprenticeship system Adam Smith criticized has nonetheless been defended as the best solution available during a period noted by the absence of
compulsory schooling (Epstein, 1998). Yet the apprenticeship system and the institution of enforced indenture did not translate as well in American society.

Apprenticeships thrived in colonial America, a time when the Statute of Artificers mandated the colony’s apprenticeship system; however, this institution was organized differently than in Britain. The tradition of guilds never held the same authority in the New World as it did in Europe. In the face of increased demand for skilled workers, colonial America was marked by a scarcity of them. America was a land of settlers in search of opportunity and thus was the site of continual immigration, including that of adult laborers trained elsewhere. America had a considerable rural economy, one where settlers worked their own land. None of these factors were conducive to building strong guilds or otherwise enforcing an indenture-driven apprenticeship system since youth (as well as adults) could usually enter skilled occupations without certification (Elbaum, 1989).

An additional reason why apprenticeships did not flourish in America was the country’s culture of independence, notably during and after the revolutionary era (Rorabaugh, 1986). The rhetoric of independence and belief in governing one’s self permeated all aspects of political and economic life, even the deference in status necessary to pursue apprenticeship training. In this way, according to Rorabaugh (1986), authority based on contractual control weakened the position of masters; apprentices challenged the apprenticeship system that was imported from Britain. Elbaum’s (1989) study of apprenticeships in America supports this reading as he also notes the problem of runaway apprentices; in fact, apprenticeship laws were passed in twelve states between 1783 and 1799 to address this problem, though with very limited effectiveness. By the end of the 18th century, apprenticeships in America became increasingly rare; it seems
like the enforcement of written indentures was difficult and/or ineffective. Youth was therefore trained for occupations much more informally than in previous generations (Elbaum, 1989).

*From apprenticeship to internship*

In his study of the intern economy, Perlin (2011, p. 54) praises the Fitzgerald Act (or National Apprenticeship Act) of 1937 because it “finally stabilized and revived apprenticeship[s] in the United States.” The Act marks an effort to formalize apprenticeships and stipulates as its goal “to formulate and promote the furtherance of labor standards necessary to safeguard the welfare of apprentices and to cooperate with the States in the promotion of such standards” (50 Stat. 664; 29 U.S.C. 50). Instead of a precursor, others argue more plausibly that the Act was passed as a *reaction* to the revival of apprenticeships between 1880 and 1920, when the number of apprentices in America more than tripled (Jacoby, 1991). Apprenticeships were becoming so popular – and the threat of low-paid or unpaid aspiring workers so unwieldy – that this surge led to the passing of the Fitzgerald Act. The government established standards for apprenticeship programs with the aim for employers to recognize apprentices as employees – and therefore to ensure pay as well as training in crafts and trades deemed “apprenticeable” (U. S. Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training, 1964). Although Perlin (2011) suggests the Fitzgerald Act is an example of what well-supervised and planned work-based training can accomplish, as apprenticeship programs became more formalized, they also grew rare. The Fitzgerald Act is credited with limiting apprenticeships to marginal status in the United States, not least because it made training apprentices “prohibitively costly” for master craftsmen (Coy, 1989, p. 9).
By the beginning of the 20th century, America’s formal institutions of work-based learning grew beyond the realm of crafts and trades. The apprenticeship model of training remained nearly constant throughout America’s history in the form of medical training, though with some variation. Medical schooling shifted from an apprenticeship arrangement, to education with little practical content in the early 1800s, to an educational curriculum incorporating an internship requirement later that century. Medical school eventually was deemed “insufficient preparation” for work and the internship became the norm of American medical training by the 1930s (Thorne, 1973). Work-based training gained traction in other fields as well. In 1906 Herman Schneider established the country’s first cooperative education program at University of Cincinnati’s engineering school, an arrangement Northeastern University emulated in 1909. Cooperative education provides an avenue for students to divide their time between substantive work and classroom learning, yet this and other forms of work-based learning remained marginal until the 1960s.

Work-based learning did not grow in importance in one swift, coordinated movement, but incrementally until the 1990s. The growth and formalization of internships, as with any major change in curriculum, represents a convergence of numerous social forces and the result of larger cultural debates (Rose, 2004). An important facilitator for the rise of internships and work-based learning in general has come in the form of government policies. Some ground was set in the 1960s and 1970s pursuant to President Johnson’s War on Poverty; tens of millions of dollars were provided to educational institutions to help disadvantaged minorities transition into the workforce via work-based learning programs (Knowles, 1975). These policies were coherent in practice with the Coleman Commission report of 1974 which blamed schooling for isolating students from the world of work and thus retarding youth’s transition into adulthood (Bailey et
As Coleman (1977) also discussed elsewhere, work-based learning provides an opportunity for youth to develop “social maturity” and it can benefit students of diverse backgrounds. However, the political push towards work-based learning in the late 1980s into the 1990s initially focused on a particular population and social problem, i.e., the difficulties of low-income high school graduates (and drop-outs) to find employment in their late teens.

“School-to-work” policies of the 1980s financed the establishment of secondary school work-based learning programs (including internships) and in the early 1990s, a rationale shift lead to postsecondary expansion of these policies in the form of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (Hughes, Bailey, & Mechur, 2001). Work-based learning was seen as an educational strategy useful for all students and more than simply training for occupations, but also as training through occupations (Bailey et al., 2004). Bailey et al. (2004) note with irony how work-based learning policies were considered an innovative new strategy to educate and train young adults in the 1990s, although these policy ideas are centuries old. The authors explain this shift as a conjunction of economic and pedagogical developments. In the 1980s the U.S. took note of the apprenticeship systems of their strongest economic competitors, Germany and Japan. Simultaneously, constructivist pedagogy and developmental cognitive psychology advocating “learning in context” became increasingly dominant (Bailey et al., 2004). To these should be added a demographic factor, i.e., the increasing number of college students. The number of 14 to 17 year-olds enrolled in public and private schools increased by over 29% from 1990 to 2007 (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008). What began as a policy to facilitate the transition from school to work grew into an unwieldy intern economy where companies welcomed the addition of low-paid or unpaid labor (Perlin, 2011). Internships now function as a sorting mechanism and credential system to both facilitate and rationalize the transition from
school to work, even in occupations that were previously excluded from work-based training schemes. The link between higher education and work environments proved significant in legally justifying the existence of unpaid internships.

**Legal Framework: FLSA, the 1947 Supreme Court Decision, and Six-factor Test**

As an attorney supporting intern labor rights, Maurice Pianko sees the law in black and white terms: “Workers at for-profit companies need to be paid minimum wage. By calling them an intern, it doesn’t automatically remove that.” According to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), the 1938 federal legislation regulating employment, interns should be paid. However, this point seems to be a matter of interpretation. An employee is defined in a spectacularly broad way; as Senator Hugo Black put it shortly before the FLSA became law, the definition of an employee is “the broadest definition that has ever been included in any one act” (Curiale, 2010, p. 1539, quoting 81 Congressional Record 7657, 1937). An “employee” is defined as “any individual employed by an employer” and “employ” means “to suffer or permit to work” (29 U.S.C. section 203).

Some exceptions exist to minimum wage laws, notably for “learners”, “apprentices,” and “handicapped” individuals who (if they meet the defined requirements and the employer applies for special permission) can be paid between 75% and 95% of the minimum wage. The WHD later added the “student-learner” exception for students who are part of a vocational training program, also making this group eligible for this slightly subminimum wage exception (Curiale, 2010). Despite these exceptions, the term “employee” remained in need of clarification, which occurred in 1947 when the Supreme Court ruled on *Walling v. Portland Terminal Co.* (330 U.S.)
148), a case opposing railway trainees and a railway company. To become eligible for employment as railway brakemen, trainees first took part in a program that lasted seven to eight days. Applicants chosen by the company to take part in this program worked with railway yard employees over this period, progressing from generally observing activities to doing some work under close supervision (Yamada, 2002). Trainees claimed they should be paid minimum wage during their training, but the Supreme Court ultimately disagreed.

The Supreme Court acknowledged that in some instances – though not this one – trainees could be paid 75 to 95% of the minimum wage under the FLSA, noting:

Without doubt, the Act covers trainees, beginners, apprentices, or learners if they are employed to work for an employer for compensation. This is shown by [section] 14 of the Act, which empowers the Administrator to grant special certificates for the employment of learners, apprentices, and handicapped persons at less than the general minimum wage. The language of this section and its legislative history reveal its purpose. Many persons suffer from such physical handicaps, and many others have so little experience in particular vocations that they are unable to get and hold jobs at standard wages. Consequently, to impose a minimum wage as to them might deprive them of all opportunity to secure work, thereby defeating one of the Act's purposes, which was to increase opportunities for gainful employment. (Walling v. Portland Terminal Co., 330 U.S. 148, 151, 1947)

It is striking how, in the eyes of the law, untrained workers – marked by their youthful inexperience – are akin to people with physical disabilities in their shared inability to find gainful employment. Although the two groups must presumably deal with different prejudices, the law acknowledged as early as 1938 and 1947 the comparative disadvantages of certain workers in the job market. Nonetheless, the Supreme Court found that in some cases a special permit to pay subminimum wages, or even to pay no wages at all, is not necessary according to the spirit of the FLSA:

The definition ‘suffer or permit to work’ was obviously not intended to stamp all persons as employees who, without any express or implied compensation agreement, might work for their own advantage on the premises of another. Otherwise, all students would be
employees of the school or college they attended, and as such entitled to receive minimum wages. So also, such a construction would sweep under the Act each person who, without promise or expectation of compensation, but solely for his personal purpose or pleasure, worked in activities carried on by other persons either for their pleasure or profit. (*Walling v. Portland Terminal Co.*, 330 U.S. 148, 152, 1947)

The notion that students doing work at a school cannot claim to be employees is powerful in this case, especially when considering that Portland Terminal Co. trainees were described as students housed by an employer under school-like conditions. The decision further clarifies the intention of the FLSA regarding who is or is not an employee:

> The Act's purpose as to wages was to insure that every person whose employment contemplated compensation should not be compelled to sell his services for less than the prescribed minimum wage. The definitions of 'employ' and 'employee' are broad enough to accomplish this. But, broad as they are, they cannot be interpreted so as to make a person whose work serves only his own interest an employee of another person who gives him aid and instruction. (*Walling v. Portland Terminal Co.*, 330 U.S. 148, 152, 1947)

In this way, the railway brakemen trainees were not deemed to be employees and therefore not subject to further compensation. The Supreme Court decision cited numerous reasons why these trainees could not be considered employees; for example, the work done through training is to the trainees’ benefit. The Wage and Hour Division (WHD) used much of the same language and reasoning from the Supreme Court ruling to articulate a six-factor test to decide whether a trainee is an employee at a for-profit business:

1. The training, even though it includes actual operation of the facilities of the employer, is similar to that which would be given in a vocational school.
2. The training is for the benefit of the trainees or students.
3. The trainees or students do not displace regular employees, but work under their close observation.
4. The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the trainees or students, and on occasion his/her operations may actually be impeded.
5. The trainees or students are not necessarily entitled to a job at the conclusion of the training period.
6. The employer and the trainees or students understand that the trainees or students are not entitled to wages for the time spent in training.
According to the WHD, all six factors must be met in order for a worker to not be considered an employee. In 1982, the 5th Circuit Court upheld the six-factor test in the all-or-nothing fashion, finding airline trainees not to be employees (Yamada, 2002); the same court cited this case and applied identical logic in a 1983 decision (Curiale, 2010). However, various courts in the United States have applied the six-factor test differently (see Table 2 for sample cases; data drawn from Curiale, 2010; Yamada, 2002; and court records).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Court</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Ruling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donovan v. American Airlines Inc.</td>
<td>5th Circuit Court</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Flight attendant &amp; reservation sales agent trainees</td>
<td>All-or-Nothing (WHD test)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atkins v. General Motors Corp.</td>
<td>5th Circuit Court</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>State-sponsored program to provide company with pool of trained workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony &amp; Susan Alamo Foundation v.</td>
<td>Supreme Court</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Individuals allegedly volunteered for commercial business of a nonprofit religious organization</td>
<td>Economic Reality Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Labor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individuals allegedly volunteered for commercial business of a nonprofit religious organization</td>
<td>Economic Reality Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McLaughlin v. Ensley</td>
<td>4th Circuit Court</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Trainees/potential workers at snack foods distribution business</td>
<td>Primary Beneficiary Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reich v. Parker Fire Prot. Dist.</td>
<td>10th Circuit Court</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Firefighters at firefighting academy</td>
<td>Totality of Circumstances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archie v. Grand Central Partnership Inc.</td>
<td>2nd Circuit Court</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Formerly homeless individuals sued non-profit; took part in Pathways to Employment Program</td>
<td>Applied all tests above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Supreme Court & Circuit Court Decisions related to Work & Hours Division's Six-Factor Test

In a 1985 Supreme Court decision, individuals who were allegedly volunteers for the commercial activities of a charity were found to be employees under the Economic Reality Test; according to the court, these individuals worked in contemplation of compensation, i.e., carrying out activities for which one would usually expect financial compensation (Curiale, 2010, p. 1543). Instead of applying the all-or-nothing six-factor test, the Supreme Court decided that employment status would not depend on isolated factors and it did not matter that volunteers vehemently denied coverage as employees. While a Supreme Court decision could be seen as the final word on the topic, this case is not widely cited in cases regarding trainees or interns,
perhaps since it involves the line between volunteer/employee instead of trainee/employee (Curiale, 2010). The WHD makes an exception for individuals who volunteer “without expectation of compensation” for non-profits or government entities, and therefore these individuals are not covered under the six-factor test to this day (Yamada, 2002; WHD, Fact Sheet #71, 2010). Nonetheless, more recent cases involving trainees also interpreted the six-factor test inconsistently.

The 4th Circuit Court rejected the six-factor test altogether, basing a 1989 decision on the Primary Beneficiary Test, deciding based on who benefits principally between trainee and employer. Similarly, in 1993 the 10th Circuit Court did not use an all-or-nothing interpretation of the six-factor test, but it did not decide based on the presence or absence of one factor, preferring instead the “Totality of Circumstances” test. The court acknowledged how “the expectation of employment upon successful completion of the course” (Yamada, 2002, p. 231) weighed in the trainees’ favor, but ultimately decided that firefighter trainees at a firefighting academy were not employees.

Finally, in a decision that noted the lack of consistent interpretation of the six-factor test, the 2nd Circuit Court applied all of the tests noted above and found that formerly homeless individuals who took part in the Pathways to Employment Program were entitled to minimum wage. The defendants claimed that plaintiffs received counseling and basic skills training so therefore were not entitled to more than the subminimum wage they received, but the court disagreed based on the Economic Reality Test (Curiale, 2010).

The line between “student” and “employee” is blurry, even when an intern is paid. In Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research et al. v United States, the Supreme Court ruled that medical residents do not fall into a special (tax exempt) “student” category in the Treasury
Department’s tax regulation since their standing resembles employment more so than an educational activity. This decision (#09–837, decided January 11, 2011) supports a previous ruling by the 8th Circuit Court. As a result of the various interpretations of the six-factor test by the courts, there is no clear, legally agreed-upon standard by which to decide if an unpaid intern is an employee. However, a line should separate the legal history of unpaid internships before and after 2010.

**Formalizing and Changing the Intern Economy**

As the intern economy grew over recent years and the legal standing of interns remained ambiguous, in April 2010 the WHD at the Department of Labor issued Fact Sheet #71, a clarification of its six-factor test as it applies to interns. The statement updates Part One of the six-factor test, specifying that an internship must be similar to training that would be given in an “educational environment” instead of “vocational school” as previously recorded. The WHD statement clarifies this first criterion by specifying that the more an internship program is organized around classroom or academic learning as opposed to an employer’s everyday operations, the more an internship will likely be viewed as educational in purpose (i.e., not as employment). The WHD (2010, Fact Sheet #71) even adds, “this often occurs where a college or university exercises oversight over the internship program and provides educational credit.” The WHD statement therefore reinforces the educational exception regarding unpaid work, though it is not a legally binding document (i.e., not a law).

If an internship is linked to higher learning, i.e., the intern is enrolled as a student, then the WHD is more likely to tolerate an unpaid internship even if there is presumable ambiguity in the interpretation of the six-factor test (Perlin, 2011; Yamada, 2002). Many employers require that
interns show proof of academic enrollment, though this may come in a variety of forms: requiring proof of academic credit for the internship, internship transcript notation, internship certificate, or a “zero-credit” option. I encountered some students who registered for various reasons at a community college to do an internship: a student’s college does not grant credit for internships, the college does not deem a particular internship appropriate for credit, or the intern wants to save some money. The academic requirements surrounding internships vary greatly; according to one survey, most interns (75%) must complete some form of written assignment for their school, but only 28% of those colleges directly associate internships with an internship seminar (Perlin, 2011).

Although the clarification of the six-factor test provided by the WHD does not seem to immediately threaten the ability of colleges and universities to maintain internship programs, 13 university presidents – including John Sexton from New York University – sent a co-signed letter to Secretary Hilda Solis from the U.S. Department of Labor later in April 2010 stating:

We are troubled by the Department of Labor’s apparent recent shift toward the regulation of internships. The Department’s public statements could significantly erode employers’ willingness to provide valuable and sought-after opportunities for American college students.

While we share your concerns about the potential for exploitation, our institutions take great pains to ensure students are placed in secure and productive environments that further their education. We constantly monitor and reassess placements based on student feedback. What the statement does not mention is that internships provide a significant source of income for colleges. As mediators between student interns and employers, colleges often charge interns tuition – this practice varies across and within schools. At New York University’s Music Business program, students must undertake nine internship credits before completing a bachelor’s degree (or six credits for a master’s degree), with each credit equal to 50 hours at an internship and costing the student more than $1,000 per credit (though this figure does not deduct
financial assistance provided by the school). According to a faculty member, this program has approximately 180 registered students; if half of those students registered for three internship credits that academic year (a fairly conservative estimate), NYU collected approximately $270,000 (i.e., 90 students x 3 credits x $1000) from one of its smallest programs. As an expense, two of the program’s faculty members share internship coordination as a part-time duty without offering an accompanying internship seminar.

The letter from the 13 university presidents references a statistic from the National Association of Colleges and Employers that reportedly “50 percent of 2008 graduates held internships during their undergraduate careers.” In the fall of 2008, 16,837,014 students were enrolled as undergraduate students at Title IV institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Using the graduation rate included in a 2009 U.S. Department of Education report – 55.9% – and assuming very conservatively that only graduating students completed internships, this would signify that 4,705,945 of those students will have held an internship during their undergraduate studies. In terms of economic magnitude, these figures do not include non-graduating students, community college students, graduate students, high school students, and non-matriculated interns. According to estimates, approximately half of undergraduate interns are unpaid (Greenhouse, 2010; Perlin, 2011). Hypothetically, if these interns were to be paid for (conservatively) 50 hours per internship at the $5.85 per hour federal minimum wage in effect until July 23, 2008, those interns would have received over $688 million in salary. With the current minimum wage of $7.25, that cohort of interns would have earned $850 million. Perhaps more striking, the estimated 4,705,945 interns who graduated in 2008 likely paid hundreds of millions of dollars (more likely billions) to their schools in tuition to receive academic credit for this learning experience.
Considering the financial interests of postsecondary institutions, it is not surprising that the letter from university presidents concluded by urging “great caution in changing an approach to learning that is viewed as a huge success by educators, employers, and students alike, and we respectfully request that the Department of Labor reconsider undertaking the regulation of internships.” The letter from university presidents defends internships and experiential education overall as a powerful way to learn, however the assessment of “huge success” is vague. David Moore is a professor at New York University, an experiential education scholar, and internship advisor. He told me during an interview that an intern, a host company, and college might all prove satisfied with an unpaid internship even though it might lack any pedagogical benefit: the intern enjoys being in a “cool” workplace, the company receives free labor, and the school collects tuition. Moore (2013) expands further about this arrangement in Engaged Learning in the Academy: Challenges and Possibilities where he argues that schools laud the merits of experiential education and yet they do not allocate resources for, nor prioritize, rigorous pedagogical engagement for work-based learning. It seems the low status of internships is prevalent within institutions of learning as well as the workplace. Professors are not incentivized to invest in work-based learning pedagogy, and internship coordination is relegated to administrative or part-time personnel. Nonetheless, colleges promote their internship programs as a selling point for potential students (see Image 1), while professors and administrators only begrudgingly participate in these low-status endeavors (Moore, 2013).

Nonetheless, faculty, college administrators, and employers show signs of increasing vigilance regarding internship regulation. Several schools have established limits on how many internship credits students can earn (Jedra, 2013), though other schools have not (Kloppenburg,
Due to the educational exception of the FLSA, stemming from the 1947 Supreme Court decision, companies increasingly require unpaid interns to show proof they are receiving college credit. In an article about schools establishing credit limits, Lauren Berger (aka the “Intern Queen”) speculates that employers should ignore the credit requirement since it is not necessary: “A lot of companies think they need to require credit to make their program safe and legal, and I don’t think that’s true. I usually tell the employer, if the student can get credit, great, but don’t make it mandatory” (Jedra, 2013). Conversely, attorney Maurice Pianko suggests companies cannot hide behind student credit to sidestep minimum wage regulations: “I’m seeing now many postings that, I wonder who’s giving the legal guidance, but many postings say you must receive college credit. They think college credit makes it legal. I don’t know why they’re doing that.” Because of increasing fears of litigation, companies are increasingly protecting themselves by
making internships at least appear educational and regimented: at the biggest companies, interns must also be enrolled as college students. Also, employers I encountered (especially major record companies) are instating stricter guidelines for their internship programs, including measures such as these: strict employee-to-intern ratios by department, limits on internship duration (one to two semesters), mandatory intern supervising seminars, and ensuring that interns each have access to a company computer. However, to my knowledge, no major record company is paying interns the minimum wage (or more). I recently heard multiple employees complain about efforts to formalize internships, especially those involving additional paperwork and the inconvenience of losing trained interns (super interns) due to new duration limits.

Brave new intern world

The changing landscape of the intern economy, especially the recent challenge of unpaid internships, has been propelled by two interrelated developments: intern lawsuits and labor rights activism. Regarding the former, an increasing number of former interns have been suing companies for back pay (and damages). According to the investigative journalism organization ProPublica, which began keeping track of intern lawsuits in June 2013, two such lawsuits were filed in 2011 (including the Black Swan case), seven in 2012, and 21 in 2013. The vast majority of the cases were filed against entertainment, media, fashion or other companies in the “glamour” industries. A lawsuit against the television show Charlie Rose resulted in a settlement for over 180 interns ($110,000 in total). Two cases against Warner Music Group and one against Sony Music are still in progress; a lawsuit filed against Universal Music was “voluntarily dismissed” by the plaintiff (though this may have been an undisclosed, out-of-court settlement).

Five months after two former interns filed a class-action suit against Condé Nast Publications,
the company chose to eliminate its internship program altogether. The company’s decision further propelled debates about unpaid internships, with some labor activists claiming victory while other parties bemoaned the “loss of opportunity” for a generation of future interns (Gurfein, 2013).

Law firms are taking an increasing interest in intern cases, hoping to land large class action victories. If someone were to search “unpaid internships” on Google in December 2013, among the top results would appear the Unpaid Interns Lawsuit website (www.unpaidinternslawsuit.com) hosted by Outten & Golden LLP, the law firm representing the Black Swan interns. The website heading reads, “Should you have been paid for your unpaid internship?” and includes information on interns’ labor rights and current litigation.

The rise of intern lawsuits has paralleled and propelled a public debate about unpaid internships. The release of Ross Perlin’s Intern Nation in 2011 helped put the intern economy on the media’s radar and helped launch a wave of labor rights activism that has kept internship coverage alive. A Tumblr account keeps track of which media companies pay interns (http://whopaysinterns.tumblr.com); an NYU student circulated a petition to end unpaid internship listings on campus (Zagier, 2013); the Intern Labor Rights group, an outgrowth of the Occupy Wall Street movement, handed out Intern Swag Bags (“Pay Your Interns” tote bags) during winter 2013 Fashion Week; protesters dressed like Santa and held banners that read “All we want for Xmas is pay” in front of an art gallery that hosts unpaid interns (Page, 2013). These and several other efforts help strengthen a sense of public outrage about unpaid internships.

When fashion company Alexander McQueen posted an ad for an 11-month unpaid internship, Twitter, Facebook, and eventually the media were alive with outrage (Sheriff, 2013). Similarly, Sheryl Sandberg (Facebook C.O.O. and author of a bestselling book on women in the workplace)
was publicly shamed because her foundation posted an ad seeking an unpaid intern – critics pointed out that she made over $90 million by selling Facebook stocks that same week (Goff, 2013).

**Conclusion**

The intern economy is the latest iteration of a millennia-old tradition of work-based learning. As apprenticeships were part of a social and economic system marked by guild and state control in lieu of widespread schooling, internships today are greatly facilitated by institutions of higher education as a complement to classroom learning (and, in some cases, a stepping stone to employment). Despite a decrease in work-based learning earlier in the 20th century, internships made a considerable ascent, notably because of government initiatives, economic and demographic factors, and a favorable intellectual assessment of experiential education.

Due to the variation in the educational content and oversight of internships, the precarious legal standing of interns, concerns about uneven opportunities, and the public/media outcry accompanying these issues, further investigation of internship practices is surely coming. In upcoming years further legal enforcements will catch up to and alter the internship economy, perhaps as considerably as the Fitzgerald Act or Statute of Artificers transformed apprenticeships. Yet, reports of the unpaid internship’s imminent death are highly premature. For unpaid internships to become illegal will require several court decisions, including one by the Supreme Court. Moreover, the increased critical attention towards internships has resulted in a *debate*, not consensus. For example, an article in *Slate* in December 2013 praises unpaid internships for providing what college does not – workplace knowledge and skills that facilitate
the plight of the young and potentially jobless (Yglesias, 2013). The author of the article argues for maintaining unpaid internships while reminiscing about his internship from years before:

As long as an internship does offer some practical educational value, letting the intern ‘pay’ with menial labor rather than five-figure tuition fees is a great deal. I got an enormous amount of practical career advice in the summer of 2000 doing an internship for *Rolling Stone*, where my day-to-day responsibilities consisted overwhelmingly of fetching an editor’s coffee and making Xeroxes. The bulk of the work was tedious and annoying, but a handful of substantive assignments and lunchtime conversations with experienced professionals was worth the price of entry. (Yglesias, 2013)

The article, entitled “Two cheers for unpaid internships,” spurred furious debate with over 400 online comments within 48 hours of its publication.

As this dissertation shows, the intern economy reproduces social inequality. More research is needed to better understand broader issues of inequality in the cultural industries and the ways internships alleviate or (most likely) exacerbate such disparities. With half or more of U.S. college students graduating with internship experience (Greenhouse, 2010), future work should also address the issues of access and inequality in other industries in an era when the transition from school-to-work, long seen as tenuous for students who do not attend college, is becoming increasingly problematic even for graduates from four-year institutions (Arum, Cho, Kim, & Roksa, 2012). Advocates must be careful that suggested policies – including outlawing unpaid internships or, more likely, enforcing the current laws on the books (see for example Perlin, 2011) – do not have unintended consequences that would make internships more competitive and therefore even less accessible to those with more limited social networks and financial resources.
References


