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### Reshaping the Event Horizon- Marketing Utopia at Music Festivals

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## Reshaping the Event Horizon- Marketing Utopia at Music Festivals by Justin Joffe

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Imagine a world where every leisure activity is tracked, recorded, and then analyzed as market research according to your age and gender demographic. Imagine the next phase after smartphone payments, when a chip linking your finances isn't in your phone, but on your wrist. Imagine a vast field of fellow fun-seekers, eating, drinking and dancing in hedonistic, chemically enhanced utopia. Such a scene certainly requires some open-mindedness and improvisation, sure, a willingness to submit oneself to a vulnerable environment of whimsy. Now imagine being subtly exposed to advertisements in such a mindset. It's no Orwellian controlled dystopia, really. You've just arrived at a 21<sup>st</sup> century music festival.

I found the headquarters of live event production company Superfly Presents just below Madison Square Park. The building appeared to be mostly floor after floor of anonymous drab and gray offices, but no sooner than the elevator doors opened on the penthouse floor had I crossed into a space infinitely more dynamic and lively, more engaging, than the Flatiron below. A youthful vibe occupied the floor—Superfly's offices were vibrant and bright, its walls adorned with festive snapshots of Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festivals past, its conference rooms named for streets in New Orleans.

A team of millennial employees sat at first come, first serve seats in the main workspace. A large notepad sat on an easel from earlier in the week, when they brainstormed which cool new bands should fill out the lineup of next summer's Bonnaroo music festival. It was next to individual, labeled cubbies where the employees could keep their belongings, despite the ever-changing location of their workstation. In lieu of personal photos and regalia pinned to the side of a cubicle, a communal bulletin board aggregated their fond memories and celebration.

Many employees made personalized schedules on their smartphones for the week-long music industry trade festival hitting the city that week—a collection of concert showcases sponsored by labels and talent bookers called CMJ. They talked to band managers, labels, and booking companies to see who had an album coming out, or *something* to promote using Bonnaroo as a platform.

Clearly much meticulous planning went into creating an atmosphere of spontaneous discovery, and I wanted to know what that looked like. Both the head of artist booking for Bonnaroo and the CEO of CMJ would explain how data on crowds could be extracted from something called a shareable footprint, a vast data mine for festival promoters. Promoters face the music not through righteousness, but revenue streams. Integrated sponsorships are curated experiences—our digital and literal footprints leading up to, during and after festivals are being recorded.

Live Nation Entertainment Inc. owned Superfly since last April, when the giant live event megalith purchased a controlling interest in Bonnaroo and added the farm to its vast list of acquired festivals. The company also purchased C3 presents in Dec. 2014, giving them a controlling interest in Lollapalooza and Austin City Limits festivals.

As the North American concert industry pulls in \$6 billion annually, live event companies like Live Nation sink deep coin into these festivals because of all the people who come through. 1.4 million people attended Live Nation's festivals in 2014, while the company's close competition AEG live saw 1.3 million at Coachella, Firefly, Hangout, FYF and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.

A moment later the man I came to Superfly to meet materialized—Chris Sampson, executive vice president of programming for Bonnaroo, who oversees all talent booking and programming for the festival. He's the brand-savvy curator, largely deciding which artists to book, and ultimately telling the promoters whom to promote.

"Some people call it talent buying, but I do a lot more than just buy talent," he told me.

In no way did Sampson look the part of an executive. He sported a beard and a fleece, sneakers, and rocked a baseball cap with Bonnaroo's logo, a faux gnostic trio of circles, in New York Mets colors. Warm and inviting, he wanted to compare schedules of the artists we planned to see at CMJ right off the bat, on our CMJ smartphone apps. He led me through the open office, where he worked in the same streamlined seat cluster his team, and we headed past the Tchoupitoulas conference room (plastered with the uplifting tie-dye wall meme, 'don't quit your daydream!') to the office Superfly founding partner Jonathan Mayers.

The dark-green office looked empty save for a smattering of music memorabilia, an autographed poster of Buzz Aldrin, and a bookshelf. On top of the shelf sat a first pressing of Creole blues legend Dr. John's 1974 album *Destively Bonnaroo*, the festival's namesake. Bonnaroo roughly means "the best in the streets".

Though eager to talk about booking artists, Sampson acted most excited about the other programming he had a hand in. "As much of the music is an important part of the festival, the food and the wine and the beer has become equally as important," he said. "So you have a lot of people going who know there's going to be a lot of music there, but they're really excited about the tacos."

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Sampson wasn't exaggerating. Bonnaroo hosted 125 food vendors in 2015, from Bacon Land to Wonder Waffle, and produced the 120 tons of composted waste. Because cooking oil, scrap metal, and even human waste pressed into fertilizer pellets are commodities all, the 432.2 tons of waste diverted from landfills brought in thousands

and thousands of dollars.

With popular artists spread out on far-away stages and an overlap between set-times, festivalgoers are all but required to walk through such food and merchandise several times a day. What organic bahn-mi best suits your migration from the hip-hop stage to the electro tent?

Superfly can chart each festivalgoer's odyssey and where every they're chowing down in real time, because everyone is required to wear a Radio Frequency Identification, or RFID wristband, at all times. The RFID wristband gains festivalgoers entry into Bonnaroo, a veritable ticket that festivalgoers are required to register beforehand and must not to be removed under any circumstances. Small devices resembling metal-detectors greet attendees as they enter Bonnaroo, and once they place your wrist inside, the bands are activated. When those RFID wristbands electromagnetically transfer and store data via an embedded chip, Superfly doesn't just know how many bodies come through the gates, but where those bodies are at all times.

When Superfly knows which programming is happening at what stage, and can see how many people are there but *who* those people are, the real-time analytics it collects doubles as invaluable market research.

A company called Intellitix remains the industry leader in RFID wristbands for music festivals, and claims to be "reshaping the event horizon." Aside from Bonnaroo, Intellitix counts 11 other festivals across the globe as clients—Coachella, RockInRio, Tomorrowland, TomorrowWorld, Electric Daisy Carnival, Electric Zoo and Outside Lands for starters.

Last year Coachella required festivalgoers to create individual profiles on their website prior to attending, which fed into the chip on Intellitix's RFID bands. "Meaning that the organizers now have a 'snapshot' of each individual's preferences, location, age, gender," Intellitix wrote in a press release, "which has obvious benefits from a marketing and event planning point of view."

More important than just collecting data, though, Intellitix hopes to control all monetary transactions at these festivals. In 2013 the company launched Intellipay, a cashless system whereby festivalgoers load funds before attending the festival and pay for everything via RFID wristband. It first deployed the Intellipay tech at Mysteryland USA, an EDM festival held annually on the hallowed grounds of 1969's Woodstock in Bethel, New York.

"Intellitix technology increases revenues, drives efficiencies, and more closely connects bands, promoters and brands with their audience like never before," read a press release about Intellipay. In 2014, the company escalated the reach of this cashless tech at the TomorrowWorld EDM festival—160,000 users used Intellipay, making it the

company's largest all-cashless festival success yet.

Bonnaroo isn't 100 percent cashless quite yet, but Intellitix nonetheless makes a tremendous impact on the festival's social-media presence, using the RFID wristbands to increase the stomp of Bonnaroo's digital footprint. In the five years that Bonnaroo has partnered with the company, Intellitix's focus has been creating 'engagement points' around the farm including 22 live check-in stations and 5 photo booths, which generated 20,000 successful photo posts. Last year Intellitix's tech generated over 3 million likes and comments, and around 200 million page impressions, which quantify how often a user interacts with a page.

As Superfly crowd sources its promoting through social 'engagement opportunities,' Bonnaroo's digital footprint grows ever vast.

For each performance where a festivalgoer live clicked, the set-list could post as a Spotify playlist on their wall, allowing Facebook friends to see and listen to the songs from the actual performance. Ford Motors sponsored the RFID tech that allowed festivalgoers to record their experience. "Each post featured a collaborative Bonnaroo/Ford Escape-branded 'Check in' icon," the press release read.

Using its tech, Intellitix serves as a liaison between Bonnaroo and brands like Ford and Spotify, assuaging brand awareness without being overt about it.

So Sampson's job when programming the festival is not only to make sure his artists align with the values of the Superfly brand, or the tacos, but the sponsorships, too. As such, he sees a substantial difference between an advertiser and a sponsor. Bonnaroo doesn't have stages named for beer companies, and sponsorships are much more integrated than a free sticker or hat.

The plumbing manufacturer Kohler was a main sponsor at Bonnaroo last year, positioning shower trailers all over the 700 acre farm. The incentive was twofold—they provide festivalgoers with a reprieve from the mud-caked, mosquito heavy humidity, and promote their new showerhead at the same time.

Kohler's social media campaign around the Bonnaroo sponsorship, 'Shower Out Loud,' promotes the plumbing manufacturer's new Moxie showerhead using Bonnaroo's self-aware, hip youth jargon. "Come for the shower and stay for the party," Kohler wrote on the promotional website. "Jam out while you clean up with streaming music from your favorite Bonnaroo artists plus all the showering essentials." The sink company also ran a small time window called 'HAPPY SHOWERS,' "where you can shower like a rockstar at half the cost." Its requisite hashtag and Instagram account, when posted through festivalgoer's registered social accounts, fed more data into Intellitix on how effective the sponsorship campaign is at promoting the showerhead.

This is the goal of integrated festival sponsorships—bring in a sponsor who can provide something you would need anyway, the festival looks out for both the festivalgoer *and* the sponsor—everybody wins. “If there’s a way to offset some of the costs you’re already going to have, that’s the home run,” said Sampson.

Adam Klein, CEO of Abaculi Media, bought the college radio network CMJ in 2014 to turn the company around and implement such lessons on a struggling promotional radio industry. “You’ve gotta rethink where value is, and content is always at the source of value,” he told me. “But it’s built on activity, behavior, and data you gather.”

Anyone who attends a live event is carrying a cell phone, and if they’re under the age of 35, 95% percent of them have prime access to any media on a mobile device. So that means that *everything*—from discovery in advance of a festival, figuring out who’s going to be there, getting a group together, looking at old YouTube content and booking tickets —every *piece* of the promotional experience changed by having a cell phone.

With all this non-music programming at music festivals, immersive experiences are the end-game, and therein lies the value of said digital, sharable footprint.

This is the new face of festival promotion in the 21st century— make every second sharable and leave in your wake a string of “you had to be there” moments. On the plus side, the cellular charging stations are almost always free.

“It’s all social stuff, I’m sharing it so I’m here,” said Klein. “It’s a little bit of what’s going on in the background, of me being present, [and it’s] the totality of what the socially networked life is all about. Music is about as essential to that life as everything else.”

Klein didn’t want to give me the big picture of what Abaculi learned when it equipped Ricky Martin’s show with free WiFi during the opening ceremony at The Olympics, but he knew without hesitation that over 60 percent of the people in the stadiums spent more than 55 minutes sending out live stuff from the show. If a music festival offers guests a free technologically integrated convenience, you can all but guarantee some data is being collected.

“You work with audiences and data to create engaging experiences,” Klein says. “You’ve got to have deep insights to how audiences respond and react to these different situations. So... that’s the game, you know?”

Klein made sure I knew about the flagship CMJ event when we spoke, as it fit in line with his two greatest strategies for audience engagement—applying new technology to a live show and hosting sponsorships instead of advertisements.

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So hours before the band Neon Indian would debut a collaboration with software giant Microsoft to enhance the visual displays of their live show, I head to Webster Hall in Manhattan, for a press preview on this new tech and a behind-the-scenes peek at how it works. In front of me, reps from Microsoft explained how five 'Kinect sensors,' originally designed to capture movement and motion for Microsoft's video game systems, generated a plethora of constantly evolving, multicolored visual patterns in real time around Neon Indian front-man Alan Palomo's movements.

The software designer, Kamil Nawratil, spoke about how generous it was for Microsoft to open the project's development kit so bands can access pretty much any info the Kinect provides—tracking an artist's face and movement, and scanning the 3D environment where the Kinect stood.

Nawratil told a flock of press that, "personal resemblances stun the audience as if they were part of the performance themselves." The fluid animations looked gorgeous and sound responsive, which Nawratil claimed would play a key role in the overall excitement. His ambitions for the tech were aspiringly large, something about 'the new re-created reality' through 'bringing the physical into the virtual,' but everyone was still more interested in snapping unobstructed views of the band during sound-check.

Neon Indian went through a lot of false starts of "The Glitzy Hive", which would later be featured in a web video sponsored and promoting the tech on Groove, Microsoft's streaming music platform. Even though Palomo's was working with a six-member band onstage, all synth were synched up and pre-recorded. This way there would be no snags to the debut of this visualization. In a strange coincidence, the band also had a new album out later that week.

"[We] work with sponsors, not with advertising, because advertising is an awful experience," Mr. Klein said. "If it's smart sponsorship, it's actually an *experience*, a way of being. Audiences are smart, but also they're very available for new experiences."

Those new experiences are best articulated by Steve Milton, a founding partner of the firm Listen that partnered with Microsoft to create Neon Indian's visuals. "Most of the projects we do are focused on the intersection of music and marketing," he said. "When we think about how technology over history has shaped how musicians are able to express themselves and how audiences are able to receive music, technology definitely plays a role in that."

Neon Indian's set later that night *did* turn out to be quite the visual experience, nothing one might not see in an arena stage show, but impressive for the size and scope of Mr. Palomo's psychotropic Caribbean disco. The open-source software might reasonably be a fairly inexpensive, mobile tool for emerging touring artists to increase the aesthetic pull of their act. Whether or not that creates something truly *engaging*, though, will

ultimately be between an artist and their audience. Whether or not that heavy aesthetic emphasis remains a good thing ultimately depends on what the fans of that artist value, too.

There was no predicting that modern festival promotion would rely so heavily on technology to disguise sponsorships as experiences, track festivalgoers or coerce them into acting as vessels of promotion.

But if there ever was an oracle or a prophet waving his fingers and decrying the inevitable decay of grassroots festival promotion, it was Bill Graham—psychedelic royalty and the first modern Rock'n'Roll promoter to turn his shows into a lucrative business. When the head of a radical theater collective was arrested in 1965 San Francisco, Graham didn't just see the chance to stage a benefit for the man's release—he saw the chance to make a profit. Graham took to promoting psychedelic, blues and rock The Fillmore, a 1,150 capacity hall and storied epicenter of 'The San Francisco Sound.'

Graham later opened a New York outpost called The Fillmore East, which was managed by a man named John Morris, in 1968. Though the Monterey Pop Festival went down a year prior, and was considered a great success, Graham had everything set just the way he liked it. And he certainly wasn't about to let something like those music festivals fuck up his business.

"Bill got upset when acts discovered they could go to Madison Square Garden or a similar hall, play to 30,000 people *and make a ton of money* 20-30 doing 90/10 on the gross," said Morris. "He thought that was the destruction and the end of the business."

"A bunch of years ago a couple of geniuses put on something called Woodstock," Graham told NME in 1970. "It was a tragedy. Groups recognized that they could go into larger cattle markets, play less time and make more dollars. What they've done is to destroy the rock industry."

Graham didn't want anything to do with Woodstock, but gave Morris his blessing. Soon Morris found himself doing lead promotional duties *and* working as the head of production for Woodstock '69. One day Graham flew Morris out to California and introduced him to a young band that was just starting out. They were called Santana, and it was Morris's job to make sure they got to the upstate New York festival safely. Graham also bequeathed Morris with the responsibility of bringing over The Grateful Dead and The Jefferson Airplane.

"My father had been in the army in addition to the advertising business, and that was a pretty good precedent for what was going on," Morris told me. "At one point I told the crowd, 'from now on it's a free festival, and the people putting up the money are taking a bath.'" The key fences didn't get up, the gates didn't get up, and tickets were not



collected. It was a financial disaster.

“The first two words said publicly to the crowd, through the PA were in fact ‘holy shit’, because I had taken my crew out for a dinner, and we had no idea how many people we were gonna have.”

Morris had a makeshift city on his hands, too vast for him to frolic with the peace and love he was subsequently reminded of. And his announcements to calm the rowdy crowd down, help lost kids find their moms, and dissuade people from eating the brown acid became a sort of social work—the sort of empathetic, human endeavors that no promoter today would ever take on personally, instead outsourcing the duties to festival security firms.

“We had disc jockeys telling the crowd, ‘hey, groovy guys and girls’ and all that stuff, but right off the bat I knew that wasn’t gonna work,” said Morris.

The “Summer of Love” mentality so often attributed toward the relative calm at that event was only advertised as a vibe of peace, love, and brotherhood—the work of Morris and a circle of promoters wrangling some chaotic shit to keep the festival together.

“I wonder what the concern is today for the sociological situation,” said Morris. “Anyone who isn’t concerned with people liable to be dehydrated or take the wrong drugs and need some place to turn, they shouldn’t be called promoters.”

It took ten years for Woodstock Ventures, LLC to make back the money they lost, the vast majority of it recouped through film and merchandising rights. “Santana were a gigantic hit because of that film,” said Morris. “And they got 2500 bucks for the night.”

This financial disaster was not planned as such. Woodstock was the first nationally advertised festival, but the promoter’s didn’t know yet how large of a crowd would show when an event is marketed just about everywhere.

Neil Young refused to be filmed, as he had just joined CSNY and saw the high-vibe scene as a gimmicky, hipster utopian affectation —hence the story of how Uncle Neil was both at Woodstock and not at Woodstock.

“Woodstock was a bullshit gig, no one was into the music,” Neil told biographer Jimmy McDonough in his book *Shakey*. “They weren’t playin’ to the audience as much as to the cameras. All these assholes filming, everybody’s carried away with how cool they are...I wasn’t moved.” Indeed, it’s difficult to be all about the music when you’re trying to look good for the camera.

Nonetheless, merchandising and film rights are no longer an afterthought, but a driving

force of the music festival megalith. Live Nation came under fire in 2007 for offering artists 360 deals, in which the stipulations around touring, merchandising and recording revenues were all packaged together under one legally binding agreement. That same year, Live Nation bought Bill Graham's psychedelic cathedral The Fillmore and made it a brand retroactively. In no time at all, venues in cities like Detroit, Denver and Miami Beach were all christened The Fillmore, too.

Hours before Young is set to perform his first solo set ever at Woodstock, I tour the hallowed grounds adjacent to Max Yasgur's dairy farm, the damp earth that hosted Woodstock that rainy summer of 1969. I also tour the hallowed museum and gift shop. Talking to Morris forced me to look at Woodstock through another lens, not just as the fawning, moment of transformation we've been sold, but the original "you had to be there" moment.

Parting a gaggle of tourists learning about Country Joe and the Fish for the first time, I headed toward the iconic Woodstock poster, that white dove resting on a blue guitar neck against a red background. It appeared before me as the Nike Swoosh of American counterculture, a logo, a brand.

Further inside the museum some trippy, altered state fever-dream posters by David Byrd advertised Bill Graham's San Francisco 'dance shows', They were unapologetically psychedelic, drawing in the eye with geometrically even globs of paisley abstraction, and as such were artwork. But the artist's names were not easy to discern. The cardboard poster of the white dove resting on the blue guitar neck against a red background was far more inviting, far more simple, far more streamlined.

Festivals used to go down at raceways or established venues, but Woodstock taught promoters that people would travel far and wide for a "destination festival," especially if it provided an opportunity to get out a city or suburb. Camping and lodging soon became revenue streams unto themselves.

By the time Woodstock II happened in 1994, much of the same community who had embraced "three days of peace and music" didn't care for such fiscally lucrative lessons, though. The museum's curator told me that someone up in Woodstock, New York protested the festival's second iteration by designing a logo of a *vulture* on a guitar.

Neil played an epic, 3-hour set that night, not on the original festival grounds, but in a giant covered pavilion on the Bethel Woods property. "I would like to propose that we get some Woodstock veterans up here and get some jackhammers," he drawled between songs, "and we take this whole area here where the cement is, and we jackhammer it down to the ground. I would later tag both Neil's Instagram account and the Instagram account for The Monsanto Years, run by Willie Nelson's children of Promise of the Real, Neil's backing band for the tour.

When we spoke again, Chris Sampson reminded me of Superfly's dogmatically enforced set of 'core values', 'don't quit your daydream' among them, and said the company uses metrics, data and tech to foster that understanding. Bonnaroo and other major festivals like it are successful, he said because they create, market and sell the importance of a curated community.

"I think of us as a society, everything is moving into the physical," he said. "People *want* to be together in a community, be it a dinner with you and your close friends, or at a festival with 90,000 people."

But how did Sampson reconcile two seemingly conflicting ideologies—that festivalgoers want to be physically be a part of something AND that they are all connected digitally, mobile and plugged in.

"You use digital the right way to enhance those physical opportunities," he said. "From a content perspective, everyone wants to share where they're at." Like a photobooth, a plumbing manufacturer, a software giant or an automotive company, the modern promoter sees festivalgoers that are readily available for new experiences. Their audiences want to be there, to be present, but at the same time need to constantly interact with those not in attendance and let them know what they missed.

Sampson said that his team was already pretty far along in the process of artists for Bonnaroo 2016, as his team tries to book the majority of artists before the New Year. "The dialogue that we have with our managers that we know, the agents that we know, the record labels that we know, those happen every day," he said. "We're aware of when they're gonna be working, when they're gonna be active."

Bonnaroo's crown jewel of artist booking is its Superjam, a seemingly spontaneous pairing between musical heavy-hitters in which the festival brings together big-name artists for a one-off, powerhouse spectacle. Sampson remembered bringing My Morning Jacket frontman Jim James together with John Oates (he of Hall & Oates fame) for a particularly rousing Superjam, which came together smoothly but can often become a drawn-out, laborious process.

"The two of them worked with our team to put together not only a band, but a catalog of music that they wanted to play and perform," said Sampson. "We like to start by building it around an artist, and present and provide them with an opportunity to create something they've never done before. They had a vision and we provided the resources to help realize that vision."

Which came first, the resources or the jam? The sharing foot or the shareable footprint? Sampson legitimately believed that the RFID wristbands weren't nearly as Orwellian as they seemed, because while advertising and sponsorships are coercive, *experiences* benefit festivalgoers and promoters alike.

“It’s integrated in a way that provides real value to the festivalgoer,” said Sampson, “and it’s integrated in a way that provides real value back to the brand. The festivalgoer uses the product or platform of the brand for their benefit, to enhance the brand and the experience.”

Woodstock’s flood of traffic resulted in the shut-down of several roads, closing them off to folks bringing food, water, and medicine onto the farm. Similarly, the first year of Bonnaroo saw backed up traffic lines on the highway for 24-36 hours. “When you launch a new festival now social media is so much more active,” said Sampson, “so you learn. That’s how you get better.”

As such, Sampson saw value in every enhancing every facet of the Bonnaroo experience with technology, because when everything is integrated, every physical interaction is digitally documented and traceable. And when everything is traceable, the data is infinitely richer, the demographic metrics infinitely more specific. Sampson assured me that Superfly’s endgame with this data is providing the best possible experience for fans. “That information also helps us plan how people walk around Bonnaroo,” he said, “like where do we need more outhouses? Where do we need more water stations?”

While the whole world prays that no tragedy befalls a group of people gathered together in one place to have fun and enjoy themselves ever again, Superfly’s RFID tech potentially offers another means of making sure everyone is safe, accounted for and easy to locate. In a world where an Orwellian level of surveillance brings comfort, the RFID wristband is beautiful.

Sampson saw the Australian psych-pop band Tame Impala at Radio City the week prior to our meeting, and he remembered two kids holding iPhones over their heads throughout the entire show. “It’s sad, but at the same time, there’s value there,” he said. “Technology, used the right way, is going to enhance everything. You’ve gotta take care of your customers, no matter what business you’re in. Because that’s going to lead to much more life for your brand.”

#### Sources and Resources

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