

A guide to the music industry in transformation

Leonardo Gabriel de Marchi

Abstract: The review highlights the most salient points addressed in Micael Herschmann's book *A indústria da música em transição*. The aim is to discuss the manner in which the author articulates several issues related to recent changes in the music business, discussing its theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of this object from the perspective of the Media Studies field.

Keywords: music, new communication technologies, news business strategies, cultural diversity, culture industries.

Since the release of *Lapa: cidade da música* (Mauad X, 2007), Micael Herschmann has been known for conducting researches about the music business as a vector of economic growth and social development in Brazil. In that study about the revitalization of a traditional bohemian neighbourhood in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Lapa, through live performances of *samba* and *choro*, the author had already situated his object of study – the live music business as a vector for economic growth and social rehabilitation of certain geographical areas – in a more complex context, that is, the transformation of the music industry in the late twentieth century. Then, he called the attention to the diminishing economic as well as cultural value of the record business and the growing importance of the live concerts to the music economy. Avoiding establishing a mere casual relation between both phenomena, Herschmann demonstrated that live concerts acquired a new force in these times when the record business is facing a dramatic change. In that book, however, the professor of the Communication School of the University of Rio de Janeiro had only approached the restructuring of the music business as a peripheral issue in his debate. Since then, he started to look more carefully to the new music business that is emerging nowadays, publishing his investigations in a fragmented way, as chapters of books, scientific articles, or lectures.

In *Indústria da música em transição* (São Paulo: Estação das Letras e Cores, 2010), Herschmann tries to put together his own reflections in a coherent and systematized way. That is not certainly an easy task. A glance over the themes

discussed along the three chapters that composes the book reveals a concern with different objects that are undergoing a complete transformation: consolidation of the live concerts as a force in the music business; the reconfiguration of the record industry in the digital era; the increasing importance of the game industry to the music business. The resulting question is: how to articulate those diverse phenomena?

The conducting line of the analysis is summarized by the idea of “transformation”. But instead of start a search for some “new business models”, Herschmann tries to understand how the current creative destruction of the music business can serve as vectors for social development and, therefore, strength the democratic order. As the author put it,

[there is] a constant concern [in the book] in producing a knowledge committed to the elaboration of a reflection that can contribute not only to a better understanding of the potential for a sustainable local economic development, which is associated with the actions of small and medium size local music producers, but also subsidize with empirical researches the re-elaboration of more democratic (endogenous) public policies for culture, in order to guarantee the interests of the territory and foment the cultural diversity in the region (HERSCHMANN, 2010, p. 14).

This quotation also points to the theoretical and methodological options adopted by the author. His intellectual affiliation is clearly presented and discussed in the first chapter of the book. Continuing the provocative proposition made in the book about Lapa, Herschmann reinforces the reconciliation of the fundamental concerns of the British cultural studies – known as the Birmingham School – with the macro-economic concerns of the political economy of communication and culture studies. The dialogue between both traditions is notoriously tense and complicated, what requires a sort of diplomatic attitude by the author in order to propose a research agenda based on the convergences, although not denying the differences of those two approaches. As a result, the reader will find a interesting debate about the strengths and deficiencies of both cultural studies and political economy of communication. What is more, there is an

open debate about how to conduct a research in a country where precise information about the object is not abundant at all.

The second chapter presents a comprehensive map of the music industry in its moment of transformation. Three are the themes discussed here: (a) the consolidation of live music concerts as a business structured in terms of an experience economy; (b) the emergence of a record market in the digital environment; (c) the increasing importance of the game industry to the music business. Thanks to a truly impressive effort of gathering and analysing statistics, the reader can find a concise and coherent panoramic view of the music industry in this very moment, showing the most critical differences between what could be considered an “old model” of the music business and a new one that is still emerging. In what concerns to the first topic mentioned, Herschmann recovers his anterior debate about the live concert business to stress that its recent and growing importance is a result not only of the decrease in the value of phonograms with the digital distribution but also – and most importantly – because what has been sold more and more in the live music concerts is the idea of “experience”, a label that gains a new force in the context of a cognitive capitalism. Drawing upon the experience economy theory (PINE; GILMORE, 1997), the author asserts that, differently from the record industry, which produces goods in series, the live concerts have been understood as the selling of an unique experience to consumers, what has allowed the introduction of more innovations in the live concerts market than in the record business.

The second and the third part of the same chapter are dedicated to brand new phenomena that strangely have not received attention accordingly yet. One of them is the emergence of new record ventures that are little by little crowding the digital environment. The argument presented is interesting because it inverts that conception that the record industry faces an irreversible movement of decadence. Although record sells are slumping in every market across the world, there is an uncomfortable silence about the fact that more and more the access to phonograms in the digital environment has been mediated by private ventures that becomes a critical intermediary for connecting producers and consumers. Although the facts and figures presented by these enterprises are not as impressive as the record companies experienced in its heyday, these various businesses are at work, building the main lines of what could be called an

effective digital record market. This assertion gains more force when one look at the intersection of the game and the music business. As Herschmann demonstrates, the success of products such as the *Guitar Hero* game reveals a very lucrative path for both sectors of the culture industries.

But it is the third chapter the more appealing one. The reason is that Herschmann deals with his favourite theme: the possibilities of live concerts to promote the local economic as well as cultural development. In this case, the author articulates two case studies. The first one is that of Lapa. Revising and enlarging his previous material – what constitutes an excellent opportunity to readers to confront an author's reflection on the same subject in different moments –, he reinforces the previous conclusions, stressing the importance of the cultural tradition of that specific geographical area to the success of an experience that had in the performances of traditional carioca music an vector for the revitalization of an entire neighbourhood. The second one is, however, an absolutely distinct case, that is, the independent music festivals that arise in Brazil. What is interesting here is the search for an experience that is not based on any geographical rooted culture.

These independent music festivals started to gain relevance in the mid 2000's. Differently from the major music festivals, that concentrate in Brazilian and international stars, these ones (a) work as window-shops for local new acts and (b) deliberately privileges the local music scenes where they produce a festival. Unfortunately, this brand new phenomenon in the Brazilian music scene has not yet received an attention by the academy, so in this sense Herschmann's essay helps to understand how these festivals are organized – who are the cultural agent behind the scenes, how they are financed, what are the problems in terms of organization of what is a niche business – and some of its contributions to innovation in the Brazilian music scene, revealing new acts that otherwise would not reach the national music market through the traditional channels of exposition. However, the complexity revealed along the article – the enormous challenges faced by entrepreneurs whom manage a alternative kind of business depending far more on the government help than on the support of the private sector – strongly suggests that this subject deserves a more detailed study – a warning that appears here as a suggestion to the author.

In sum, this book presents the latest author's reflections on the music business in a clear, articulated and systematized way. Far from presenting a conclusion, nevertheless, Herschmann has the merit of presenting data, themes, insights and proposals, opening up the debate in a way that will call the attention of different sorts of readers that can enjoy the lecture from the beginning to the end. There is no doubt that the book is already an indispensable reference to the study of the music industry in Brazil nowadays.

References:

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