

# A tale of two scenes: civic capital and retaining musical talent in Toronto and Halifax

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*Although Toronto has been the centre of the Canadian music industry for many decades, recent interviews reveal that industrial restructuring may be affecting the choices that musicians make about where to live and work. In an era of contemporary independent music production, some smaller city-regions, such as Halifax, Nova Scotia, are becoming more attractive to musicians. This article explores the ways in which musicians consider the economic and social dynamics of city-regions in making their location choices. Musicians recognize Toronto's advantages in size and economic opportunity, yet those in the music scene described it as an intensely competitive and difficult work environment. By contrast, respondents in Halifax talked about a supportive and collaborative community that welcomed newcomers, encouraged performance, and facilitated creativity. In the contemporary context, where independent musicians are adopting new strategies to pursue their vocation, communities high in civic capital may gain an advantage in attracting and retaining talent.*

Keywords: music, civic capital, Toronto, Halifax, social dynamics

## **Un conte de deux scènes : le capital civique et le maintien des talents musicaux à Toronto et à Halifax**

*Même si depuis plusieurs décennies Toronto trône au sommet de l'industrie canadienne de la musique, des entretiens récents font apparaître le poids de la restructuration de cette industrie sur les décisions des musiciens quant à l'endroit où vivre et travailler. En cette époque de production indépendante de musique contemporaine, certaines régions urbaines de taille réduite comme Halifax en Nouvelle-Écosse recèlent un potentiel pour attirer des musiciens. La principale question abordée dans cet article est de savoir dans quelle mesure les dynamiques économique et sociale des régions urbaines ont une incidence sur les choix de localisation des musiciens. Ces derniers sont bien conscients des possibilités économiques qu'une ville de la taille de Toronto peut leur offrir, mais les artisans de la scène musicale la dépeignent comme un milieu de travail extrêmement compétitif et ardu. En revanche, du côté d'Halifax, les répondants évoquent la solidarité et le soutien apportés par la collectivité dans l'accueil des nouveaux arrivants, l'appui à l'organisation de spectacles, et la promotion de la créativité. Dans un tel contexte contemporain, les musiciens indépendants déploient de nouvelles stratégies de valorisation de leur métier et les collectivités qui sont dotées d'un capital civique supérieur sont plus en mesure d'attirer et de retenir les personnes talentueuses.*

Mots clés : musique, capital civique, Toronto, Halifax, dynamique sociale

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In today's world, creativity is a necessity—a must have, not a nice to have. There is a direct link between a flourishing city and the vitality of its creative sector. (Gertler *et al.* 2006, 3)

Creativity and innovation have become important economic engines in North American cities. Traditional industries are adopting new technologies and modes of production; cultural industries—including design, new media, fashion, film, and music—are generating innovative ideas, products, and sources of employment and wealth (Scott 2000; Leslie and Rantisi 2006; Markusen and Schrock 2006a, 2006b; Wojan *et al.* 2007; Hauge and Hracz 2010). As a result, cities compete to attract and retain the highly educated, mobile, and talented individuals who catalyze these activities (Florida 2002a; Gertler *et al.* 2002; Delisle and Shearmur 2010; Florida *et al.* 2010).

In the contemporary marketplace, however, not all strands of talent are created equal. Indeed, a robust literature in geography and cultural studies highlights the contributions of musical talent to the economic and social prosperity of city-regions. The iterative relationship between the production of music (including lyrics, sonic styles, scenes, and subcultures) and the production of space is particularly well documented (Halfacree and Kitchin 1996; Leyshon *et al.* 1998; Bennett 2001; Connell and Gibson 2003). Geographers have also examined how musicians and music scenes contribute to place making and urban revitalization (Hudson 1995; Brown *et al.* 2000; Gibson and Davison 2004; Grazian 2004).

The literature points to the direct and indirect economic benefits generated by music. While Hyatt (2008) reported that the retail sales of recorded music in Canada totalled \$703.7 million in 2006, the gross revenue in Canada for live musical performances in 2005 was estimated at \$752.8 million. Power and Jansson (2004), Currid (2007), and Hauge and Hracz (2010) argue that musicians catalyze innovation and add value to products in related industries such as advertising, media, and fashion. With an economic footprint of \$84.6 billion in 2007, governments increasingly recognize the significance of the cultural creative economy (Conference Board of Canada 2008).

Musicians contribute to the social fabric and attractiveness of city-regions by creating vibrant music scenes. Although several cases, including Atkinson's (1997) work on jazz in New Orleans and Cohen's (1997) work on the Beatles in Liverpool, demonstrate the ability of music scenes to attract tourists, research by Florida (2002a) suggests that the presence of musical talent signals a high quality of place which in turn helps to attract and retain broader strands of talent. In Ontario, for example, 47 percent of individuals surveyed by Hyatt (2008) indicated that they had attended live musical performances in the previous year. As talent magnets, musicians and the scenes they create provide assets for cities locked in global competition.

Despite the important role that musicians play in city-regions, we know little about the specific factors that help to attract, incubate, and retain these individuals. Even defining who is and who is not a musician proves challenging. Census figures record those who self-identified as musicians in reporting their income; but being a musician may be a fluid identity only partly linked to primary sources of income. Professional musicians who earn a living solely from performing are rare in Canada. Many other people who consider themselves musicians combine performance with teaching, music promotion, or other employment strategies that give them time to make music. In the research reported here, we compare and contrast what musicians in the music scenes in Toronto and Halifax say as they explain their locational preferences. Although each city is recognized for its vibrant music scene with various musical genres, the underlying nature of their development differs. As the country's largest city, Toronto is the traditional centre of the Canadian music industry and boasts the largest number of musicians and music venues. As the regional hub of Atlantic Canada, Halifax has recently gained recognition for its dynamic music scene (Brooks *et al.* 2009).

Table 1 illustrates the rates of growth in the number of musicians in Canada, Toronto, and Halifax between 1991 and 2006. Throughout the period, we see that Toronto's share of total musicians in Canada grew from 16.4 percent to 19.7 percent, while Halifax's share remained relatively constant at about 1.9 percent. As Canada's centre for record labels and music infrastructure,

**Table 1**

Musicians in Canada, Toronto, and Halifax, 1991–2006

	1991	1996	2001	2006	Percent change 2001–2006	Percent change 1991–2006
Canada	27,975	31,880	32,955	34,080	3.4%	21.8%
Toronto	4,585	5,330	6,350	6,700	5.5%	46.1%
Halifax	535	510	585	630	7.7%	17.8%

SOURCE: Statistics Canada 2008a, 2008b.

**Table 2**

Musicians' average incomes from 1991 to 2006 (in 2010 dollars)

	1991	1996	2001	2006	Percent change 2001–2006	Percent change 1991–2006
Canada	12,131.9	10,496.9	13,511.0	11,833.2	–12.4%	–2.5%
Toronto	16,057.2	14,928.2	18,582.9	13,773.4	–25.9%	–14.2%
Halifax	12,187.5	9,396.6	13,672.2	12,625.3	–7.7%	+3.6%

NOTE: Dollar amounts were adjusted to 2010 values using rates provided by the Bank of Canada (2010).

SOURCE: Adjusted from data in Statistics Canada 2008a, 2008b.

Toronto's population of musicians grew 46.1 percent between 1991 and 2006, while Halifax's grew by 17.8 percent. Between 2001 and 2006, however, the population of musicians in Halifax began to increase at a slightly higher rate (7.7 percent) than in Toronto (5.5 percent). Do the shifting patterns suggest that musicians may be reconsidering their options about where to locate? What are their motivations for living in one place versus another?

One factor that may be growing in importance is the affordability of place. Canadian musicians have consistently earned low incomes, regardless of location, but the census indicates an overall decline after 2001. After reaching the highest relative levels in the 2001 census period, for example, Table 2 demonstrates the precipitous decline in earnings that musicians experienced between 2001 and 2006. For Toronto-based musicians in particular, an average decline of 25.9 percent between 2001 and 2006 may have exacerbated the difficulty of finding affordable live/work space and motivated some individuals to relocate.

Although conventional economic wisdom and census figures privilege large city-regions as migration magnets, neither theory nor statistics can fully explain the locational choices made by many of those engaged in the music sector in Canada. Census data provide no insight into the factors that produce musicians in a place,

bring musicians to particular cities, or keep them somewhere as they build careers. Although the absolute number of musicians in Toronto has increased over time, for example, the census does not tell us whether or not Toronto is attracting musicians from other locations or merely adding musicians from its own population. Similarly, although we might speculate that low and declining incomes may motivate musicians to migrate to more affordable locations, we cannot probe this possibility without asking these individuals. Therefore, to investigate these open questions we explored the perceptions and motivations of musicians in Toronto and Halifax by conducting 84 in-depth interviews in 2007 and 2008. We sought to understand why independent musicians<sup>1</sup> live in the places they do and how they explained their choices of location. Our sampling strategy was purposive, or what Valentine (2005) calls illustrative: we were interested in the depth and richness each encounter with a participant could provide. Using a semi-structured

<sup>1</sup> We distinguish here between the music industry—which encompasses entities such as record labels, professional associations, and recording studios—and musical talent represented by individual musicians, most of whom are independent entrepreneurs. As such, we highlight the potential redistribution of musical talent in Canada rather than minimize the economic importance or spatial dynamics of the Canadian music industry (which remains firmly concentrated in Toronto).

format, we asked participants about their employment experiences and geographic mobility. Specific topics included their spatial, education, and employment history; their employment experiences and goals; their perceptions of different locations and music scenes; and where they would like to live and work in the future.

To get a broad cross-section of experiences and opinions about the city-regions, we interviewed 64 musicians who varied in age, gender, training, genre, and career stage. We also interviewed 20 people who worked in Toronto and Halifax as music educators, producers, studio owners, managers, union representatives, government employees, and executives at major and independent record labels. These individuals provided invaluable information about their motivations for living in particular city-regions, the broader context of industrial restructuring within the music industry, and the characteristics of the music scenes in Toronto and Halifax. Figure 1 outlines our research participants.

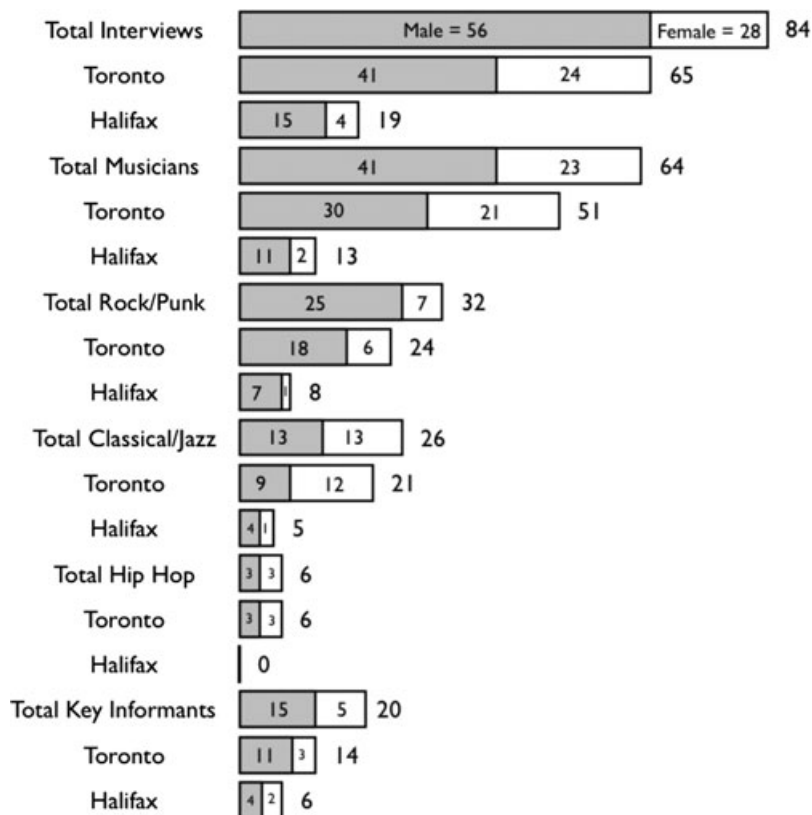
Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Throughout this article, we include verbatim quotations as the best way to demonstrate how participants expressed meanings and experiences in their own words. Following James (2006), we annotated transcripts and coded the data according to the dominant themes. As is common with qualitative interviews, our goal was not to establish statistical significance or representativeness but rather analytical plausibility and cogency of reasoning (James 2006).

Our interview results show that musicians in Toronto and Halifax generally described Toronto as competitive and unwelcoming and expressed limited commitment to the city. By contrast, musicians' comments about Halifax were positive and musicians indicated relatively little interest in leaving. Yet census figures offer a contrasting picture, with Toronto having many more musicians than Halifax. Given the differences between our qualitative data on musicians' expressed mobility decisions and quantitative evidence from the census about the recorded locations of musicians, we are forced, as Jick (1979, 607) notes, to 'reconcile the differences somehow'. We argue that the qualitative data reported here suggest that we may be witnessing an incipient shift in preferred mobility patterns among independent musicians as they adjust to a new era in the

music industry. Indeed, in the contemporary music industry, new technologies and the decline of record sales and recording contracts has generated a growing cohort of independent musicians who are less tied to the traditional centres of the industry. As earning a living as an independent musician is difficult no matter where one lives, some independent musicians may be reconsidering their locational choices and placing a higher emphasis on the social dynamics of place. In that context, Halifax—with its dynamic community of collaborative musicians—enjoys some advantages that Toronto lacks.

In the contemporary music industry, where digital technologies have altered traditional business models and organizational structures (Leyshon 2009), smaller communities, which have not traditionally been talent incubators, may become viable homes for musicians. Moreover, declining record sales and intensifying competition may privilege more affordable locations, which offer more venues and opportunities for musicians to earn money from live performances (Hracs 2009a), or remote locations perceived as authentic in an era of globalised music (Kruse 1993; McLeay 1994). Our investigation highlights the influence of civic capital on the locational choices of musicians. According to Wolfe, 'Civic capital consists of interpersonal networks and solidarity within a community based on a shared identity, expectations, or goals and *tied to a specific region or locality*' (2009a 184: emphasis in original). Traditional explanations of economic development emphasized the role of natural endowments, geographic position, and access to markets in affecting growth trajectories (Storper and Manville 2006). Florida (2002a, 2005) and Wolfe (2009b) have highlighted the role of social dynamics within city-regions in motivating talented and creative workers to locate where they do. Our findings suggest musicians' perceptions of the attractiveness of Halifax stem from its supportive and collaborative social dynamics, but also from the opportunities it provides for musicians to play before appreciative audiences.

Toronto is likely to remain the centre of the Canadian music industry: the record labels, professional associations, and major recording studios are unlikely to relocate within Canada. Our research, however, identifies some of the



**Figure 1**  
Some characteristics of the interview sample

challenges Toronto faces in attracting and retaining musical talent: that is, the musicians—many of them independent entrepreneurs—whose creativity generates products and performances. We also explore the reasons why smaller and more socially cohesive scenes such as Halifax may be becoming more competitive in the contemporary era. We begin by reviewing changes in the music industry that are currently affecting musicians' choices about where to live and how to work. Then we describe the results of our comparative research in Toronto and Halifax, profiling three elements: the scale and function, the economic dynamics, and the social dynamics of the city-regions. In the final section, we reflect on our findings and suggest that contemporary conditions may be affecting the relative attractiveness of city-regions to musicians.

## Changing Dynamics of the Music Industry

In the digital era of independent music production, the spatial preferences and patterns of musical talent are in flux. Traditionally, musical talent was tied to major record labels at established sites of music production (Scott 2000; Stein-Sachs 2006): Toronto in the Canadian context, and New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville in the American context. Until the late 1990s, the concentrated nature of corporate and physical infrastructure, including record labels and recording studios, positioned these centres as black holes for musical talent; ambitious musicians headed to the big scenes in large numbers. A one-way flow typically led successful musicians up the entrenched hierarchy of music

cities. Musicians discovered in the periphery relocated to the regional or national hub, where corporate executives made decisions and mobilized all-important hard infrastructure for the music production process. During this period, Toronto became the home-base for Canadian branches of the major record labels.

Prior to the late 1990s, the spatial patterns dictated by recording contracts superseded individual locational preferences. Although Halifax functioned as an incubator of regional talent throughout the decades, musicians relocated to Toronto or another major music city to develop a recording career once they signed with a label. During the 1990s, the advent of compressed musical files, or MP3s, facilitated a new regime of music file-sharing (Leyshon 2001, 2003). As sales and profits fell, music companies consolidated and downsized (Carniol 2005; Leyshon *et al.* 2005; Hracs 2009b). In the wake of industrial restructuring, the Canadian Independent Recording Artists' Association (2010) estimates that 95 percent of musicians in Canada now operate independently of either major or independent record labels. With digital technologies, contemporary independent music production has become essentially placeless, leaving musicians free to live and work almost anywhere. As flows of musical talent grow more fluid, a wider range of city-regions are becoming viable hubs of music production. Musicians and other creative workers are 'emoting with their feet' (Wojan *et al.* 2007, 711) in ways that favour some city-regions over others (Florida 2002b). Although Toronto remains the dominant cluster of musical activity in the Canadian music industry, digital music production has allowed other Canadian cities (including Montréal, Vancouver, Hamilton, and Halifax) to attract, incubate, and retain musical talent in a vibrant music scene.

Although the MP3 crisis<sup>2</sup> hurt the major labels, digital technologies furnished musicians with the tools to become independent. Musicians can now record in home studios with personal computers; this significantly reduced the cost of producing

CDs. One Toronto musician we interviewed for the research explained how easy it had become to record music.

As digital technology developed ... things became more affordable. \$3,000 will buy you a really good computer, software, a bunch of equipment, and way more tracks, so you can do multi-track recording and all that kind of stuff. So I think because it made recording more affordable, more people are able to do it on their own. People became less dependent on the label deal, or the big-money contracts. You didn't have to sell your soul for that \$20,000 to make the record or whatever. You can actually do whatever you want at home by yourself. (8 July 2008)

In effect, digital technologies democratized the production of music by making traditionally expensive and specialized activities accessible to more musicians (Leyshon 2009). Distribution through the internet and advertising through social media such as Facebook and MySpace gave musicians the means to promote their work to audiences near and far.

Technology not only freed musicians from dependence on major labels but also created a new geography of music production. Although many musicians still choose to live and work in major music centres like New York and Nashville, technology gives them the choice to produce, market, and distribute their music from anywhere. As a Toronto-based music producer told us,

I would agree that musicians are no longer tied as they once were to the major centres of music production and the major labels... Now you can make music from anywhere, even the far north. Last summer I was up in Moose Factory. We did a gig out there in an Aboriginal community and we met some people that have a little studio and [are] recording music in their basement. Because they have the internet, they don't have to go to a city or a major centre to record or to distribute their music to the world. (8 July 2008)

As the range of places musicians can conceivably live and work increases, what factors influence their locational choices? In the next sections, we compare and contrast what musicians and others in the music industry said about Toronto and Halifax as places to be a musician.

<sup>2</sup> The MP3 crisis refers to the introduction of file sharing networks such as Napster, which facilitated the widespread practice of illegally downloading copyrighted music files in MP3 format. This practice constituted a structural shock to the North American music industry and over time resulted in dramatic industrial and spatial reorganization (Hracs 2009b).

## Comparing the Cities and Scenes

With a population of 5,113,149 in the 2006 census and with several leading sectors including finance, telecommunications, media, and culture, Toronto is Canada's largest metropolitan area and economic capital (Statistics Canada 2007a). Much smaller, with a population of 372,858, Halifax is the capital of Nova Scotia and the regional hub of Atlantic Canada (Statistics Canada 2007b). Halifax's economy features strong creative and education sectors anchored by the city's six universities (Grant and Kronstal 2010). People in Toronto and Halifax achieve similar education and income levels: for instance, the median income of people over 15 was \$24,212 in Halifax (Statistics Canada 2007b) and \$24,314 in Toronto (Statistics Canada 2007a). In other aspects, however, the city-regions differ: for example, the average dwelling value in Halifax was \$212,942 (Statistics Canada 2007b) but \$403,112 in Toronto (Statistics Canada 2007a). Moreover, on the measure of population diversity, which Florida (2002a) argues helps to attract talent, the percentage of Halifax's population that was foreign born was 7.4 (Statistics Canada 2007b) while Toronto's was 45.7 (Statistics Canada 2007a). On the one hand, Toronto was larger, more diverse, and economically more robust than Halifax; on the other hand, house prices were significantly lower in Halifax.

Known for its history of Celtic music and fiddling traditions, today Halifax is home to various musical genres including indie rock, singer/songwriter, pop, and hip hop (Grant *et al.* 2009). The city hosts two major regional music festivals: The Halifax Pop Explosion and the Jazz Festival, as well as the East Coast Music Awards (Morton 2008). During the 1980s, the rise in the new-wave and punk musical genres was a departure from Halifax's Celtic roots. The music scene diversified in the 1990s with the rising prominence of the grunge genre: bands such as Sloan and Thrush Hermit became national stars during this time (Knox 2007). More recently, indie artists such as Jill Barber and Matt Mays and rappers Classified and Buck 65 gained national success in Canada, while rock artists, such as Joel Plaskett and pop artists, such as Wintersleep earned international acclaim in the 2000s (Knox 2007; Morton 2008). Rock music emerged as a

new and dominant style during the 1990s. Today, the rock, pop, and singer/songwriter genres dominate Halifax's music scene while rap has developed as a smaller but important contribution to the city's musical landscape.

Toronto has long been recognized as the largest and most diverse music centre in Canada. The city features several important institutions such as the Royal Conservatory (founded in 1886) (The Royal Conservatory 2011), the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto (1918) (Green and Spier 2011), the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (1922) (The Toronto Symphony Orchestra 2011) and the Canadian Opera Company (1946) (Morey and Morris 2011). Toronto has also had a long and illustrious history of recording studios including some of Canada's oldest and most renowned recording facilities. For instance, McClear Studios was built in the late 1940s by CHUM for its radio station; by 1972 Billboard magazine declared Toronto the recording capital of Canada (Dale 2010). McClear has produced albums for Gordon Lightfoot, Rush, and the Rolling Stones. Several other studios including Phase One, Metal Works, and Number 9 Studios have produced the bulk of the albums recorded in Canada. Toronto is the home of national music video channels, such as Much Music and MTV Canada, and all of the Canadian major labels (Berman 2009). Given its size and infrastructure, Toronto continues to support a diverse array of popular genres including jazz, classical, blues, rock, pop, country, hip hop, and electronic as well as niche genres, such as goth and punk (Berman 2009).

### The scale and function of the city-region

Underlying conditions influence the ability of city-regions to attract, incubate, and retain musical talent. In this section, we describe differences in the scale and functions of the Toronto and Halifax music scenes before considering how the economic and social dynamics of the city-regions affect the choices musicians make.

The largest city-region in the country, Toronto has the largest number of venues and greatest share of musicians. Musicians from all musical genres and from most parts of Canada are found in Toronto. As the national hub for the music industry with significant publishing, managing,

and recording functions, Toronto remains a destination for many Canadian musicians hoping to make it in the industry. The city-region serves as a stepping stone to even bigger scenes: musicians looking for better opportunities may move on to cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, or Nashville.

Toronto has a range of cultural activities that offer patrons many options. Live music competes with theatre, nightclubs, hockey, basketball, and other entertainment choices. Despite the city's size, however, the number of performance venues for some musical genres remains small; young musicians, in particular, find few all-ages outlets where they can perform. By attracting a large number of musicians, respondents complained, Toronto ends up with an over-supply of musical talent. With the market responding to conditions of surplus labour, the rewards decline for individual musicians, as one Toronto music manager interviewed explained:

Toronto is the anomaly in the rest of this country as far as how the business of art is conducted. The simple fact is that in Toronto, we have a plethora of talent, and all of that talent you can go and see for the same price as the beer you drink when you get there. This undervaluation drives me insane... I will never promote a show that is a five-dollar show, because I believe that the audience expects a \$5 show. (20 March 2008)

Given widespread gentrification in parts of the inner city once occupied by artists and musicians (Slater 2004; Hracs 2007), musicians live wherever they can find affordable housing; increasingly that forces them to suburban locations (Hracs 2009a). Moreover, the size of Toronto, the demands of independent production, and increasingly hectic schedules combine to limit the ability of musicians to network within communities. As a musician explained,

I sometimes wonder if I should network more here in Toronto to do more of this other work in Toronto but the other part of my reality is that I have a family that is important to me, too. I want to spend time with my children and my wife. I work long hours as it is... The work that I have is mostly evenings, so the idea of taking another evening off from my family and going somewhere

else to do networking starts to seem problematic. (28 April 2008)

Those playing in different musical genres rarely encounter each other. Thus, the scale of the Toronto city-region limits social integration within the music scene.

Until the 1990s, Halifax had a regional music scene that drew talent generally from Atlantic Canada. After the success of bands, such as Sloan, Halifax became a destination and incubation site for Canadian grunge rock<sup>3</sup> bands. In the wake of industrial restructuring, Halifax has emerged as a boutique national music scene attracting independent artists from across Canada and beyond (Grant *et al.* 2009). Halifax has a reputation as a live music city. A musician interviewed in Halifax put it this way: 'It's a social town; it's a drinking town; it's a university town. It's historically a navy port town that has always had live music in the pubs. That's always been a part of the fabric here' (11 June 2007). Musicians looking for a city-region where they can find places to play come to Halifax to refine their performances in front of appreciative audiences.<sup>4</sup>

Musicians noted that strong connections with the arts community enhance creativity in Halifax. Musicians easily bridge musical genres that in many cities remain quite segregated. The small scale of the city centre creates conditions within which those in the music community see each other with great frequency and are able to form cross-cutting social networks. One musician explained:

It is easy to move from field to field, in that it is smaller scale. It is—I say this kind of flippantly—easy to do... three-quarters of my networking and business comes from just walking down the street. I get a good chunk of my gigs this way. "Hey, how're you doing? Want to play with us tonight?" Or "Somebody is looking for someone to do this."

<sup>3</sup> Grunge rock features heavily distorted electric guitars and is often associated with bands emerging in from Seattle in the early 1990s including Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Sound Garden.

<sup>4</sup> Although respondents highlighted the variety and abundance of performance venues in Halifax, many also worried that the number of venues seemed to be declining, and said the city needed more good-quality venues (see Morton 2008; Haggatt 2009).



I get work walking down the street: that's really positive. (13 August 2007)

Halifax remains a regional hub for musical talent in Atlantic Canada but has also become a destination for Canadian talent more broadly, especially singer-songwriters.<sup>5</sup> Music producers commented that although bands used to go to Toronto to get noticed, now musicians come to Halifax to get recognized. Several respondents reported that musicians often see Halifax as home and continue to return to the city-region for renewal and inspiration even if they go away in search of success.

### The economic dynamics of the city-region

Although musicians in Canada often have high levels of education, they tend to earn low incomes. As previously shown in Table 2, musicians in Toronto and Halifax earned average incomes of \$13,773 and \$12,625, respectively, in 2006, placing them below the low income cut-off.<sup>6</sup> Finding affordable space to live and work is crucial for musicians in both scenes. In a context of low wages, musicians may choose to locate in city-regions where they can optimize their earning potential, their standard of living, or their chances for success (Hracs 2009a).

In response to the devaluation of recorded music, independent musicians now focus on live performances to make money. Musicians in Hyatt's (2008) study earned 3.4 percent of their income from selling CDs and 48.5 percent from performing live shows. We might expect a larger city like Toronto to offer more opportunities. Despite the large consumer market in Toronto, however, the finite number of venues and large number of musicians produces intense competition between musicians. As one musician put it, 'Getting paid for gigs is a treat because there are so many musicians now and bands in the city and the majority of them are half decent so there is a lot of competition, but nobody's paying. You go to the club and they say "Yah, you

are going on at this time but don't expect any money"' (7 June 2007).

The sheer number of bands competing for gigs in Toronto means that venue owners can control the value of live music. The options open to musicians in Toronto are paying to play (typical for new musicians just trying to get on stage), sharing a percentage of ticket sales (a risky proposition for musicians who struggle to maintain consistent fan bases in the saturated market), getting paid at the discretion of the owner (based on alcohol sales the band generates), or accepting a minimum guarantee (more established bands can ask for a minimum between \$150 and \$300). A Toronto musician told us,

It is common to not get paid or to have to pay to play which of course makes no sense at all. Now (after three years) we are getting paid more consistently but it is a maximum of \$50 or \$60 divided amongst the members in the band. That does not even really cover the cost of equipment and rehearsal time. Usually it will buy you dinner for that night, and maybe the gas to get to the show. (20 March 2007)

Facing these challenges, many musicians accrue large personal debts, struggle to pay their bills, and ultimately consider leaving Toronto or abandoning the industry.<sup>7</sup> Many rely on flexible, part-time work in unrelated jobs to cover living expenses. Abundant alternative employment opportunities have been the saving grace of the Toronto city-region for many trying to pursue careers in music while still paying their rent. As a Toronto musician explained, 'If you're going to make a living as an artist, you pretty much need to be in a big city. If you're going to be a freelancer, you need a thick labour market... The variety of work available is also important' (3 July 2008).

For its small size, the Halifax city-region has many live music venues, including Gus' Pub (Figure 2), where musicians get paid for performing (Haggett 2009). None of the respondents suggested that the market for musicians was oversupplied in Halifax. With six universities and

<sup>5</sup> Halifax musicians such as Joel Plaskett and David Myles won international song-writing competitions in the late 2000s, helping to raise the profile of the city.

<sup>6</sup> In 2005, the low income cut-off for a family of two was \$25,867 in Toronto and \$22,276 in Halifax; a single person earning less than \$20,778 faced poverty in Toronto (Face of Poverty Coalition 2007; Toronto 2010).

<sup>7</sup> The experience of risk and self-exploitation is often associated with work in cultural industries such as fashion and advertising (see McRobbie 1998 or Banks 2007 for a review).



**Figure 2**

Gus' Pub is a premiere venue for up and coming performers in Halifax's north end. The second floor consists of small rental apartment units  
 SOURCE: Photo by J. Grant 2011.

major military facilities in the city-region, youthful audiences are abundant and receptive; in the summer, tourists take seats in the pubs and coffee shops. A range of music festivals bring performers and audiences throughout the year. A music manager in Halifax remarked, 'Out of any province in Canada, this province—one of the backbones of its culture is its music. I really believe that and I hear that all the time—on street corners, down on the waterfront, everywhere—music is just so prevalent' (6 August 2008).

Finding supplemental work to help cover living expenses can prove challenging in Halifax where economic opportunities may be fewer. Also, by comparison with salaries paid for such things as music teaching in larger centres like Toronto and Vancouver, salaries in Halifax prove low. One musician told us, 'In my academic work, I am the lowest paid in the country. Having a post-graduate degree and making \$18 an hour, when my friends in Vancouver are making money like \$35 an hour doing the same thing with fewer qualifications, is really frustrating' (13 August 2007).

The Province of Nova Scotia has established funding programs and support services for the music sector in the last decade. These initiatives provide assistance for musicians to go on tour and to improve their business skills for self-management. Several respondents interviewed in Halifax pointed to the key role that provincial funding and support played in helping local musicians remain in the region while exporting their products.

Musicians often allocate their limited earnings from live performances to the costs associated with independent music production. These costs include equipment, transportation, rehearsal space, and recording fees. Indeed, the musicians in Hyatt's study (2008) reported spending one-third of their income on expenses such as instruments and transportation. During interviews, respondents complained of out-of-pocket money they had to spend on music-related expenses. As one Toronto musician noted, 'One year I did my taxes and I claimed these music related expenses on my taxes and I think I spent about \$8,000 that year on equip-

ment. When you sit there and work it out, when you are working part-time or minimum wage jobs then you think, "Where is all my money going?" (4 April 2007).

Musicians in the Toronto city-region often reported paying for rehearsal space, recording time, and putting on shows. Inflation in accommodation and production costs in Toronto has hit musicians hard. As one musician explained,

The biggest cost for us is rehearsal space; we rent space for \$1,300 a month. Everything for the band to try to establish yourself is ridiculously expensive. Albums and recording is crazy: the minimum is \$10,000 per album. We have put on shows in Toronto, and one of them cost us \$4,000 to put on. We knew we weren't going to get the money back, but we did it to get our name out there. (18 May 2007)

Of course, at the same time as musicians have to invest limited revenues in their work they have to find suitable residential accommodations. Musicians reported that they are influenced by the availability of affordable spaces to live, rehearse, and record. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2009), the average rental cost of a two-bedroom apartment was \$877 in Halifax and \$1,069 in Toronto: the average rent would consume 87.5 percent of the average musician's income in Toronto, and 78.3 percent of it in Halifax. The availability of affordable and artist-friendly living and working spaces is crucial to incubating and potentially retaining musical talent, but both cities face wide gaps between average incomes and accommodation costs.

Although Toronto traditionally offered a stock of affordable live/work space to musicians, rents are increasing rapidly, pricing musicians out of the downtown core. One musician said, 'When I first moved to Toronto from Guelph in the 1990s, I got a room for \$150 a month right on Queen Street. But that would never happen now' (15 May 2007). Another musician lamented the loss of an apartment to gentrification: 'I lived in a very roomy apartment for 24 years and it was so spacious, and had a great view, and really cheap rent. But we finally had to leave that and move into this tiny house because the owners decided that they wanted to renovate and raise the price' (9 June 2008). As musicians relocate to the

suburbs, they face added time for commuting to gigs in the city; some have refocused their interest on suburban venues (Hracs 2009a).

Musicians are well aware of the relative costs of housing and rehearsal space in other Canadian cities. Many respondents contrasted costs in various places, often pointing to Montréal as the least expensive of the cities with a substantial music scene; however, language barriers limit the interest of English-speaking musicians in moving to Montréal. Respondents indicated that while they want to locate within a music scene, they take costs seriously in considering their options.

Although respondents suggested Toronto is losing some of its musical talent to smaller peripheral towns and larger international music centres, they said that Halifax is attracting and often retaining musicians from across the country. The affordability of housing and studio space and the vitality of the artistic community in the north end of the city proved especially important to many respondents. A Halifax music producer explained his good fortune: 'I've got a studio here. I have about 1,400 square feet ... The actual rent is about \$1,000 a month. In another city, that would be pretty hard to do... It's a perfect mixture of the size of the community where it's still cheap enough that you can live here affordably' (3 August 2007).

Some respondents noted that housing costs were climbing in Halifax, and gentrification was appearing in districts popular with musicians. They evaluated their choices, however, in terms of what they knew about other cities. In Halifax, they said, reasonably successful musicians can afford to buy a home from which they tour. When asked about the potential of moving to Toronto, musicians in Halifax often expressed economic reservations. As a musician noted, 'I just don't know how people afford to buy a house in a place like Toronto: it seems insane. I mean I feel so fortunate to have scraped it together here... But I don't know, I think it would seem like your mortgage would be paralyzing in a place like Toronto' (11 June 2007).

In the world of art, the boundary between professional and amateur has always been difficult to identify. In the contemporary era of independent music production, these distinctions are complicated by the fluidity of musical career paths. According to respondents, musicians

residing in Halifax fell into two general groups: (1) those working to develop their talent, supplementing their income with other activities, and considering relocating at some point to enhance their options; (2) those working as full-time musicians, earning a reasonable living by touring, and eager to retain creative freedom by staying in Halifax. For the former, Halifax is a comfortable incubation site that comes to feel like home. For the latter category of musician, moving to Toronto in the hope of signing with a major label would entail sacrificing artistic control: selling out. In this context, musicians who choose a middle-class life in a less economically dynamic city-region make a cultural and political statement. Musicians' decisions to remain in smaller cities repudiate a music industry system that defines large cities and major record deals as symbols of quality and success.

In comparing the economic dynamics of the music scenes in Toronto and Halifax, we found that musicians could expect to earn low incomes from music in the two cities, but the lower cost of housing and rehearsal space in Halifax appealed to musicians trying to devote themselves to their art. Part-time jobs are easier to find and essential to paying the bills in Toronto, leaving some musicians with less time to practice and perform than they would like. Moreover, although Toronto has more performance venues in absolute terms, the competition for opportunities to play proves more intense than the situation in Halifax. Oversupply of musicians in Toronto undermines the precarious pay scale for performers. A sorting process works to distribute musicians to the locations they feel best support their musical engagement. Quantitative data from the census indicate that Toronto generally won in pulling musicians in the past, but the qualitative data suggest that musicians' previous consensus about the desirability of Toronto may be unravelling. While the lure of lucrative record contracts once pulled and kept talent in Toronto, the contemporary realities of the music industry may be reducing Toronto's economic advantage and attractiveness to independent musicians who see opportunity in other places. As musicians evaluate their options for where to live and work, smaller cities like Halifax may be gaining an edge.

### The social dynamics of city-regions

In assessing the social dynamics of Toronto and Halifax, musicians repeatedly commented on two significant factors: the extent to which the local community values music and the extent to which music scenes are permeable and socially supportive. Indeed, many respondents indicated that they wanted to live and work in a community that appreciates music. Beyond their obvious need for patronage, musicians want to feel like important contributors to the vibrancy and overall quality of the communities in which they choose to live. Moreover, the nature of the music scene affects social integration within and the quality of the work environment for independent musicians.

Almost everyone interviewed in Halifax attested to the local community's respect for music. Respondents indicated that Halifax has a tradition of live music that some ascribed to its history as a military and university town, and its recent experience as a tourism destination. One respondent characterized Halifax as a 'pubby' town; another called it a party town. Although bar crowds in some communities can be rude to musicians, respondents told us that audiences in Halifax appreciate the bands and singers who play for them. As a music manager said, 'The fact is that people respect music and culture in this city, in a way that doesn't happen in a lot of cities... It's a way of life here, I guess' (15 August 2008). Respect from audiences helps the city-region to attract and retain musical talent.

Musicians find themselves easily able to integrate into the local community in Halifax. One musician told us,

When I compare Halifax to, say, Vancouver, and maybe to a certain extent Toronto, Halifax is much more socially permeable. In Halifax, it is very easy to move from one circle to the other. It is very easy to meet people you need to meet. That really is Halifax's strength. "Oh, I know somebody who does X" or "I don't do X, but my friend so-and-so does. Talk to them." In that sense it is very good. (13 August 2007)

While those not born in Nova Scotia are still described as 'come-from-away', most are readily embraced into social networks through work or recreational activities.

A common theme in the Halifax interviews pointed to lifestyle factors in the city-region. Many musicians talked about the beautiful setting and laid-back pace of life. They appreciated the ability to walk to work and to focus on their own artistic production, as one musician explained:

The advantages of being in Halifax are that it's obviously cheaper. The rent is cheaper and the cost of living is cheaper than Toronto. The relaxed nature of a smaller city is just better. You don't spend all your time on the street in a car. You don't spend all of your time in the subway. You can be home; you can be thinking and writing. It's just a lot easier to get things done artistically. (18 August 2008)

In contrast with the support musicians found from residents in Halifax, several respondents in Toronto complained about the lack of respect the public holds for music and musicians. Some resented seeing music treated as a commodity rather than as a cultural experience. Because music in Toronto competes with a range of lifestyle amenities, some consumers undervalue the services provided by musicians. One musician described the problem:

I think people have too many alternatives in Toronto. People get blasé about it, because when I was growing up in Ottawa it didn't matter what kind of music was coming through, if a band was coming through everybody went out. People here, maybe they are too cool to clap, but unless you are really well known they just sit there with their arms crossed. (6 June 2007)

Musicians find it dispiriting to play to audiences who show little interest in their work. As one musician noted, 'In Toronto sometimes I feel like the general public does not appreciate the amount of hard work and dedication it takes to be a musician and the hardships. I mean they look at us like we are bums!' (4 April 2007). Even members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra reported experiencing a lack of respect from audiences.

Toronto has gone to great efforts to brand itself as a diverse and creative city, which values talent. That brand helps to attract musicians from other parts of Canada, North America, and Europe. Evidence offered by Toronto

musicians suggested that performers experienced disinterest and disrespect, but they appreciated the social diversity in Toronto and access to its wide array of cultural and entertainment activities.

Another important social dynamic is the extent to which musicians in the city-region cooperate with each other. Faced with dwindling employment opportunities, low incomes, the need to secure functional live/work space, and the demands of independent music production, some musicians choose to cooperate while others compete for opportunities. The risks associated with independent music production can either strengthen the solidarity and collective resolve of music communities or pit individual musicians against one another.

Our interviews in Halifax suggested that the city's music scenes are supportive and that the degree of personal competition among musicians remains low. As one musician put it, 'Generally speaking it's an incredibly supportive and nurturing community, unlike some cities where there may be more of a competitive thing happening' (18 June 2007). Respondents often contrasted the music scene in Halifax with conditions in Toronto or Vancouver. For instance, a music promoter said,

I mean Halifax is, like, so in the 60s... I mean that's a broad generalization, and it's probably a bit optimistic. But Jill Barber moved back here from Toronto because it was so dog-eat-dog, and she just didn't feel like the people there: everybody was her competition. And I think people like to be part of this community. They want to move here because they feel like they're a part of something. (23 July 2007)

Rather than viewing other musicians as direct competition, musicians in Halifax spoke of the value of reciprocal exchanges of knowledge, resources, and support. Collaboration and community building has given Halifax a national reputation for encouraging creativity and apprenticeship.

The accounts of musicians in Toronto paint a stark contrast. In Toronto's music scene, musicians experience employment risk in an increasingly individualized way. Reports of networking, sharing resources, and cooperating proved much less prevalent. Indeed, in addition to

exacerbating the poor working conditions for musicians in Toronto, musicians suggested that the competition produced by overcrowding in the scene is eroding the traditionally supportive nature of the industry and contributing to social segregation and exclusion. Intense competition diminishes the collegial atmosphere amongst musicians and leaves individuals less inclined to share information about employment opportunities and knowledge of risk mediation strategies (including government grants). A Toronto musician argued, 'There is a lot of cliquishness in Toronto's music scenes... I have found certain scenes very insular and difficult to break into... I found that insularity to be largely manufactured. There were people in the city that would say "I don't like you because you are this kind of person, or you play a certain kind of music"' (6 June 2007).

As digital technologies increase the spatial freedom of independent musicians, a key determinant of locational choice is the degree to which a city-region allows musicians to plug-in easily. In ideal circumstances, musicians want to arrive in a new location and quickly access performance venues, networks, collaborative initiatives, and sources of employment. In Toronto, musicians found it difficult to penetrate local networks. As one musician noted, getting a foot in the door can be a challenge. 'The city is very vibrant but it can also be very cliquey at the same time. I can see how newcomers find it hard to get into the business or to meet people to play with. It is all about the community: if you don't have the connections it is not an open door' (15 May 2007).

The exclusionary nature of Toronto's music scene may hinder the ability of incoming musicians to join the local community. As independent musicians face enormous pressures to get their entrepreneurial operations up and running quickly, the lack of social connectivity may push some musicians to other scenes. In the age of social media, word spreads about which places welcome and which communities have little interest in new talent. As independent musicians make new calculations about where they can best pursue their avocation in an era where traditional music industry conditions are floundering, they describe Toronto as a place to avoid because it does not welcome musicians.

In sum, then, the social dynamics between the wider communities in Toronto and Halifax differ, as do the social dynamics within the music scenes. We found resonance between the character of social relations within the local community and within the music scene: in Halifax, respondents described both in positive terms, sometimes alluding to Maritime hospitality; in Toronto, those interviewed perceived social distance from local residents and competition within the music scene. Those in the music scene in Halifax pointed to the nurturing and supportive community of musicians as a key factor drawing talent to Halifax, helping musicians develop their competencies, and keeping musicians in the city-region. Major markets like Toronto have more performance venues and music managers than Halifax, but they lack the social connectivity that engages musicians in Halifax. Musicians moving to Toronto do so with the hope that access to opportunities in the music industry will provide them with a chance at fame: in that context, others are their competition. By contrast, musicians move to Halifax to learn from each other and enhance their creative opportunities: in that context, other musicians are colleagues and friends.

### **Placing the Narrative in Context**

Our qualitative data suggest that Halifax musicians cite economic and social factors as influencing their choices of where to live and work. For instance, respondents explained that Halifax has a lower cost of living than Toronto and provides more opportunities to earn music-related income. In a context where the census shows that musicians' incomes are precarious wherever they live, we must be cautious in interpreting the nature of the advantages particular city-regions confer. Further research to identify the income and expenditures of musicians in these cities could help to clarify whether independent musicians do better economically in Halifax or Toronto. We need to better understand how migration patterns are influenced by career stage, life cycle attributes, non-economic factors including social networks (Lepawsky *et al.* 2010), and the evolving dynamics of independent music production in Canada

and beyond. We need updated mobility data to track a population that proves especially foot-loose: we know relatively little about which musicians are migrating, when, and for what specific opportunities.

Despite these caveats, the stories told by those involved in the music scenes in Halifax and Toronto offer valuable insights into recent changes in the music industry. Although it seems unlikely that Halifax will offer Toronto the kind of competition that Nashville created for Detroit and Chicago in the United States (Florida and Jackson 2010), respondents' perspectives help us to understand the way that participants in the scenes may structure their migration and employment strategies in response to social and economic dynamics.

### **Toronto as Stepping-stone, Halifax as Home**

In the digital era, as soft infrastructure replaces hard infrastructure, musicians are exceptionally mobile and music scenes compete in an increasingly global struggle to attract and retain musical talent. Our analysis compared the economic and social dynamics of the music scenes in Toronto and Halifax to argue that independent musicians may see smaller, affordable, and socially cohesive scenes as more attractive, leading different cities to become competitive choices for migrants.

Although Toronto offers musicians many venues, a thick labour market conducive to multiple job holding, and a large and diverse creative sector, our findings suggest that musicians see its music scenes as highly competitive and segregated by genre. The lack of connectivity across musical scenes and between cultural industries limits the attributes that musicians value: opportunities for collaboration and creative engagement across the arts. Various creative practices in fashion, theatre, and music may not easily share social or physical space in Toronto in the same way that they do in smaller communities. Musicians in Toronto suggested that cultural diversity in the city does not readily translate to creative diversity. Moreover, interviews revealed that many musicians struggle to find affordable places to live and work within the city.

By contrast, respondents suggested that Halifax provides steady and better paying per-

formance opportunities for musicians. Although Halifax has a smaller range of musical genres and creative activities, the permeability and proximity of these activities generates abundant opportunities for creative experimentation and collaboration among musicians. Furthermore, as the musicians in Toronto and Halifax earn relatively similar (very low) incomes, musicians perceived Halifax as more affordable and manageable. The lower cost of living allowed musicians in Halifax to dedicate more of their time and energy to their musical and creative careers. Moreover, those earning relatively modest incomes from music in Halifax could aspire to home ownership, a milestone denied those in Toronto.

Although Toronto has high amounts of human capital (in talent), social capital (in associations), and industrial and management capital (in the infrastructure of the music industry), it proves low in what Wolfe (2009a; Wolfe and Nelles 2008) calls civic capital: that is, regionally based social networks. Musicians in Toronto are isolated by distance, individualized by the demands of independent music production, and ultimately pitted against each another by cut-throat competition. They feel unwanted. In Halifax, the city's smaller size and less competitive marketplace produce a welcoming environment for incoming musical talent. The musical community features inclusive networks and support at multiple scales. Our interviews suggest that established musicians willingly support and mentor emerging talent while the broader Halifax community appreciates and patronizes musical performances. Moreover, government considers music an important pillar of the regional economy and provides funding and support when possible. Halifax has attracted more than its predicted share of independent musical talent by generating civic capital, and in particular, developing a local culture that focuses on welcoming and integrating talented newcomers. As a result, Halifax has generated a reputation that beckons up and coming talent while also retaining a loyal cadre of well-known artists.

Unlike Halifax, which offers a viable home from which independent musicians can base their music careers, Toronto draws limited commitment from many musicians. Evidence from the Toronto interviews positions the city-region as a stepping stone for musical talent. The city

has no trouble attracting musicians but unsupportive community conditions and overt competition within the sector may hinder Toronto's ability to successfully mentor and ultimately retain musical talent over the long term. Indeed, musicians interviewed who complained about the competition, high cost of living, and lack of respect reported a desire to leave Toronto. In some cases, the preferred destination is a smaller community like Halifax, in others a suburb or small town outside the city. As a Toronto musician noted,

The music scene in the slightly less populated areas north of the city is getting to be really good... In the northern areas, the kids have less to do. There are fewer entertainment options for them. In Toronto, there are one million things to do, so if there is a live band, those kids are gonna go. So you can sell tickets easier. The highest turnouts to any of our shows have all been in Newmarket and Keswick. (25 March 2007)

In explaining that many musicians interviewed are considering their locational options in a context where the music industry offers new choices, we recognize that for other musicians the lure of large cities remains linked to ideas of economic success and creativity. Our sampling strategy inevitably selected for those who stayed: the census results remind us that clustering may occur despite the stated intentions of many local actors. Certainly some musicians we interviewed said that they want to move to larger centres in search of greater opportunity. As one Toronto musician put it,

People in Los Angeles are way more aware of the world market. In Canada, people think of making it in a little section of Toronto, but it is so tiny: one neighbourhood within Toronto. But they don't really think big. If you go down to Los Angeles, first of all everybody there is looking for the next best thing. People here are a little bit complacent to that. I went down to Los Angeles and started playing, just solo piano and open mic: piano and singing. In two months, I had played for more people in Los Angeles than I had in Toronto. There is buzz; they are more into creative and cultural activities... It is this Mecca of people from all over the world who are pursuing their dreams, who know that they have to come to Los Ange-

les to do it. It is a really, really incredible energy there. (26 October 2007)

The music industry is in flux. As hard infrastructure and the presence of major labels become less important and independent musicians adjust their spatial calculus, musicians have new options in pursuing their passions. Although Toronto continues to attract musicians with stars in their eyes, our findings suggest that, unlike Halifax, Toronto may not offer the ideal social dynamics for musicians trying to make a modest living within the new economic realities of independent music production. Furthermore, unlike Los Angeles or New York, Toronto may lack the creative energy and attentive audiences that inspire musicians. Despite the recent work of Leyshon (2009) and Florida and Jackson (2010), which argues that the music industry is concentrating spatially even as it becomes more vertically disintegrated, our research identifies incipient challenges to Toronto's hegemony as the go-to music centre in Canada, at least for independent musicians who can develop careers from other city-regions. In the competition for musical talent, the attractiveness of city-regions depends on social dynamics as well as the cultural lore and creative opportunities embedded within specific music scenes. Ultimately, in an era of unprecedented spatial and creative freedom for independent musicians, smaller centres, which offer supportive social and economic dynamics, may gain advantage in attracting and retaining musical talent.

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