

Festivals

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Introduction

Music festivals, especially those held outdoors on greenfield sites over a number of days, may become intimately associated with the locations which host them. For a few days each year, these sites take on a life of their own, with their own accommodation, entertainments, social experience, retail opportunities and policing. They form temporary villages or towns that are constructed and annually re-constructed in their own image by festival organizers and attendees, and increasingly mediated through traditional and online media by organizers, sponsors, broadcasters and festivalgoers. Drawing primarily on British examples, this chapter examines the spaces and places of such events, which typically offer the spectacle of live music performance on one or more stages alongside onsite accommodation and a wide variety of other activities and audience interactions. I begin by defining and categorizing music festivals and providing an overview of a variety of academic research strands. I then explore a number of theories that have been proposed to describe the relationship between festivals, space and place, before introducing my own conception of music festivals as ‘cyclic places’.

Defining and categorizing music festivals

The academic literature on music, arts and other cultural festivals remains rather fragmented and transdisciplinary in nature, despite growth in this area since the early 2000s. This leads to a wide variety of definitions of the term ‘festival’ and the lack of a broadly accepted typology relating to such events ([Getz, 2010](#): 2). Shuker has defined music festivals in straightforward terms as ‘concert[s], usually outdoor, often held over several days’ ([1998](#): 122), though most studies employ more expansive notions of ‘festival’ which draw on social and anthropological ideas of celebration, worship, conviviality, community and playfulness, or on policy-based understandings of festivals as drivers of tourism and economic development. For instance, [Falassi’s \(1987\)](#) definition of festival focuses on the excessive behaviours and temporary transgressions that may be associated with ‘festival times’ (see also [Bakhtin, 1984](#); [Anderton, 2008](#); [Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009](#)), while other authors stress the role of festivals in creating or maintaining a sense of local or regional community (see [Hall, 1992](#); [Duffy, 2000](#); [Derrett, 2003](#); [Jepson & Clarke, 2015](#)). Tourism and event management academics are also interested in how festivals foster civic pride, but are more likely to examine how tourist numbers may be increased, how local and regional economic growth and regeneration may be stimulated, or how a festival’s service offering may be enhanced or its environmental impacts reduced ([Getz 1991](#); [Bowdin et al. 2001](#); [Getz, 1991](#)). There is an increasing interest in crossovers between these different positions, though the nascent discipline of event studies ([Getz & Page, 2016](#)) has yet to gain traction in its own right. Nevertheless, we have seen the development of research that is situated at the intersection

between economic/regional development and community identity/belonging, especially in Australia where several such studies have been published ([Gibson & Connell, 2012](#); [Duffy & Mair, 2018](#)), as well as in the development of cultural economic approaches that examine the influence of culture on the organization and meaning of festivals ([Anderton, 2008, 2011, 2019](#)).

As noted above, there is no generally agreed typology of festivals; yet, the growing music festival literature allows us to distinguish a variety of (often intersecting) festival forms in terms of their purpose and organization. Some of these are discussed here, though it should be noted that this is by no means a comprehensive typology and is intended primarily to indicate the range of events that we see in the contemporary music festival market. First, we may recognize what might be termed 'organic' events, which emerge in local communities to celebrate local cultures ([Duffy, 2000](#)), or begin as one-off charity events or open-air garden-party style concerts that may later turn into longer-running annual events ([Anderton, 2016](#)). These organically created events can remain highly localized and almost unknown to those living outside the event's immediate location or to music fans who lie beyond the particular genre or subculture being catered to. However, they may also transform into larger events that attract visitors from further afield. For instance, Blissfields in the south of England; and the Green Man Festival in Wales each grew from events initially attended by only a few hundred people to become larger-scale events attracting thousands.

Second, we may identify destination-focused events where the purpose of the festival is to attract people to a specific location or to make use of that location's specific attributes as a marketing tool. Such events may vary both in scale and organizational framework, with large-scale 'hallmark' events often created by local or municipal authorities to enhance the place-image and economic regeneration of their towns or cities (Hall, 1992). Such events include one-off celebrations linked to important historic occasions and anniversaries as well as events aimed at raising awareness or funds for specific charitable causes (Rojek, 2013). Country house estates, sports stadia, farms, tourist attractions, holiday complexes and publicly-owned parklands also fall into the category of 'destination-focused', since the owners of such sites are seeking to 'animate' their otherwise static (and expensive to maintain) tourist attractions and amenities by staging music (and other) festivals themselves or renting their land and facilities to commercial promoters to do so. Commercial promoters are especially important because of the high levels of investment and risk that are present in the music festival market, which has led to an increase in national and international level companies, including Live Nation, AEG Presents and Kilimanjaro Live, consolidating control of the mid- to large-scale sector of the market (events with daily attendances in excess of 25,000); and adding non-camping (hence, lower expense and lower risk) events in urban parks (Anderton, 2019).

Third, there has been an increase in smaller-scale 'boutique' events that are designed in their approach, typically commercial in their organization, and often camping-based.

This form of event was pioneered by independently -owned festival promoters in the early- to mid-2000s, though major national and international promoters have since diversified their activities into this market as the competition and costs associated with larger-scale festivals haves increased over the same time period ([Anderton 2019](#); [Robinson, 2015a](#); ~~[Anderton, 2019](#)~~). Some events, such as Boomtown (in Hampshire, UK) and Beat-Herder (in Lancashire, UK), create immersive themed environments with stages built to resemble, for example, castles, churches and Inca monuments – eccentric spectacles that are moderated by these events’ emphasis on participatory activities including fancy dress and opportunities to perform and the ability for festivalgoers to customize their on-site experience. However, the ‘popular theatricality’ of the ‘boutique’ sector can encompass a wide variety of themes including superheroes, TV shows, outer space, decades and vintage ([Robinson, 2015b](#)). What is at stake for these events is to find a theme that resonates with audiences and to transform their locations appropriately – in some ways a negation of the specificity of their places, though often making use of the potential of the natural environment to help frame the activities and creative spaces on offer.

Researching music festivals

In his extensive review of the festivals and events literature, [Getz \(2010\)](#) identified three over-arching research themes: the social and cultural meanings and impacts of festivals, festivals as tourism, and festival management. The first of these themes incorporates questions about place identity, community and belonging though, as [Duffy \(2005\)](#) notes,

multiculturalism and diversity of opinion amongst festivalgoers and local populations and stakeholders ~~means~~ mean that the sense of belonging and community created by a festival may not be shared by all. This has further consequences for policy-makers trying to make use of festivals to create community cohesion and development or to re-invent the place-images of their host locations ([Gibson & Connell, 2012](#)). Another strand of research within this first theme is that of liminality and the carnivalesque – of the social meaning of events that are ephemeral in nature and may be associated with transgressive or excessive behaviours (discussed further below). In addition, we may add two further research areas that are found within the narrower field of music festival studies. The first is principally historical in nature and focuses either on analysing the role of music festivals within broader social history or on documenting the emergence, style and significance of particular examples or types of festival. For example, work on the Glastonbury Festival ([McKay, 2000](#)), the Woodstock Festival ([Spitz, 1979](#)), and the Free Festivals of 1970s Britain ([Martin, 2014](#); [Worthington, 2004, 2005](#); [Martin 2014](#)). The second turns attention to the role of mediation and mythology in the creation of images and meanings that have become associated with particular events, whether in the form of festival films or the use of internet archives and social media ([Street, 2004](#), [Goodall, 2015](#), [Morey et al. 2014](#)). The latter is particularly interesting in terms of how the festival experience may be extended beyond the day or weekend of the event itself, and how organizers and sponsors may make advantageous use of this ([Morey et al., 2014](#), [Anderton, 2019](#)).

The second main theme identified by [Getz \(2010\)](#) includes tourism studies-based research into place-marketing and into the motivations and opinions of festival attendees. It also incorporates the notion of ‘festivalization’, which has emerged as an important topic in its own right in recent years. Négrier argues that festivalization refers to the ‘process by which cultural activity, previously presented in a regular, on-going pattern or season [for instance, a season of concerts], is reconfigured to form a “new” event’ [a ‘festival’] ([2015](#): 181). This is similar to what [Ronström \(2016\)](#) has termed ‘semantic’ festivalization, where the term ‘festival’ is used as a short-hand way to indicate a particular type of experience that will serve, as Stoeltje puts it, ‘the commercial, ideological, or political purposes of self-interested authorities or entrepreneurs’ ([1992](#): 261). This concurs with [Roche’s \(2011\)](#) argument that festivalization is not about creating transcendent or transformatory experiences, but is part of the everyday public sphere and/or public policy. Hence, a village fête may be turned into a ‘festival’ to attract more interest and visitors, or a city may host a string of festival-like events during the summer months in order to transform its place-identity and benefit from the potential economic spill-over effects of increased tourism. Furthermore, numerous independent and corporate brands have festivalized their products and marketing in order to take advantage of the marketing opportunities and ‘good times’ that festivals promise by ‘activating’ their marketing through on-site and online activities and the creation of brand-specific experiential zones within festival arenas ([Anderton, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019](#)).

The final theme discussed by [Getz \(2010\)](#) is that of festival management, which includes strategic planning and evaluation and the role of design in the creation of festival settings. The latter is typically formulated in terms of event concepts, the marketing mix, and the creation of unique selling points – whether in the form of high-profile or exclusive performances, the development of a sense of ‘authentic’ community, or the provision of themed environments. Environmental and economic impact assessments are another strand of this theme, though there is a tendency within the event management literature to use quantitative methodologies and to downplay the social and cultural meanings attributed to festivals and events in favour of examining their more tangible impacts. Perhaps surprisingly, there has been little research into the decision-making of festival organizers, though festival volunteers have been the focus of a small number of studies ([Elstad, 2002](#); [Bachman et al., 2016](#)).

Festivals, space and place

The music festival sector has grown markedly since the turn of the millennium, and proliferated in terms of both content and form ([Webster and Mackay 2016](#); [Anderton, 2007, 2019](#)); yet, all festivals are rooted in the physical and human landscapes of their host locations. This sense of rootedness can increase as festivals are re-staged in the same locations each year, and they may develop a character or identity of their own that is both place-based and event-based. This place-based character is constructed through the activities and decisions of, amongst other things, each event’s particular mix of organizers, sponsors,

contractors, concessions, performers, audiences and local authorities. Yet, as will be discussed below, past theorizations of music festival spaces and places have tended to focus on their ephemerality and liminality— where festivals are characterized as occurring in out-of-the-way places, and as offering experiences that are either socially transgressive or utopian in nature.

The anthropological and cultural-historical literature typically views music festivals as a subset of festivals in general, and relates them to a long history of cultural festivities that are tied to religious observances, including the Roman Saturnalia, the Celtic Beltane, and the Christian Carnival. Of particular note is the work of the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who analysed the representation of the medieval carnival in the work of the French author François Rabelais. He described the time of the carnival as ‘a world turned inside out’ (1984: 11), as a short-lived period of time during which everyday authority and social norms were overturned and mocked – a time characterized by a flattening of class hierarchy, of conspicuous consumption and waste, and of grotesque masks, playful activity and religious irreverence (see also [Stallybrass & White, 1986](#): 189). He extended these characteristics to other festival-type events, describing them as ‘carnavalesque’ in nature, and this usage is prevalent in academic accounts of late-twentieth-century music festivals (see [McKay 2000](#); [Hetherington, 2001](#); [Worthington, 2004](#)). I refer to such work as embodying the ‘countercultural carnivalesque’, as it demonstrates a range of stereotypes and behaviours associated with the late 1960s hippie counterculture (nudity, free love, use of drugs, and other

socially transgressive behaviour), and their extension into post-hippie era alternative cultures such as that of the so-called New Age Travellers in the UK. The utopian narrative of the countercultural carnivalesque can also be seen in festival films such as *Woodstock – Three Days of Peace and Music* ([1970](#)). However, neither the carnivalesque nor the countercultural carnivalesque can be said to be explicitly spatial in nature, since the emphasis is on the temporal experience of festivals and the behaviours associated with them.

An alternative conception is that proposed by Victor Turner, whose theory of anti-structure bears many resemblances to Bakhtin's carnival, but demarcates not only the time of the festival, but also the space of the festival ([Turner, 1969](#)). For Turner, festivals are societal rites of passage that occur in particular geographical settings – liminal spaces and times that are separate from everyday life and where, during festival times, normative social structures are temporarily inverted or reversed. Turner's ideas have been developed by authors such as Rob [Shields \(1991\)](#) and Kevin [Hetherington \(1998a, 1998b\)](#), the latter using liminality as a framework for understanding the British 'free festival' movement of the 1970s and 1980s. These events were typically held in out-of-the-way rural locations such as the Rhayader Valley in Wales as well as at, or near, prehistoric sites such as Stonehenge and Avebury Ring in England – sites that held resonance and meaning for the post-hippie New Age Travellers who created the events, and which demonstrated their arcadian and utopian understanding of rurality ([Hetherington, 1998b](#)). The descriptions of these events owe much to the countercultural carnivalesque, but also characterize their locations as liminal – as existing on

the margins of mainstream modern society ([Shields, 1991](#)). However, the contemporary market for commercial music festivals is quite different from that of the free festivals of the past, and the locations chosen for commercial festivals are often far from liminal in nature, including the grounds of stately homes, parkland and amenities owned by local authorities, and city centre parks such as Hyde Park, Victoria Park and Finsbury Park in London. Similarly, festivalgoers themselves are far more mainstream and broad-based in their demographic and psychographic constitution than they were prior to the 1990s, and many festivals make use of commercial sponsorship and broadcast media tie-ins ([Anderton, 2008, 2011, 2019](#)).

A final theory to consider here is Michel Foucault's conception of the 'heterotopia of deviance', where individuals who are 'deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed' ([1986: 25](#)). He refers to places such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons; yet the theory has since been adapted by Graham St John ([2001](#)) to discuss music festivals such as Australia's ConFest. At this event numerous people and groups who follow a range of alternative lifestyles come together to celebrate their 'deviance' from mainstream culture and society, and to engage in 'hedonistic consumption practices' ([St John, 2001: 51](#)). Of particular note is the emphasis given to Foucault's understanding of heterotopia as 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several places' ([1986: 25](#)). This suggests that a single site (or festival) may mean very different things to different people – that it has the potential for multiple interpretations. Furthermore, it suggests that the image, meaning and behaviours

associated with festival sites are necessarily constructed and reconstructed from year to year through the interactions of multiple agents – from those on the production side (organizers, contractors, concessions, local authorities, media and so on) to those on the consumption side (festivalgoers). The deviance implied within both Foucault's and St John's work is less pronounced within the contemporary commercial music festival market as a whole; yet, it remains the case that festivalgoers may experience events in very different ways depending, in part, on demographics and psychographics, as well as on expectations related to music genre (see [Wilks & Quinn, 2016](#); [Anderton, 2019](#)) – there is no singular experience or understanding of any particular festival place.

Cyclic place

The above discussions lead to my own conception of festival sites and events as 'cyclic places'. This conception recognizes that festivals may be regarded as sites of transgression and the countercultural carnivalesque, but that there is no necessity for this to be the case – that festivals can take on many forms and meanings, and that individual festivals can themselves be understood in differing ways by the individuals and groups who are attending them. In this sense, I draw not only on Foucault's conception of heterotopia, but also on the work of Doreen Massey. She has suggested that *spaces* are 'constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations', rather than being fixed and bounded areas with singular identities (1994: 4). Furthermore, she has characterized *places* as 'spatio-temporal events' that are formed of multiple narratives (stories, memories, beliefs, mediations) that become

centred on particular geographical locations ([Massey, 2005](#): 130). In my view, her emphasis on the processual and relational nature of space undermines the lived experience and understanding of place that is found, for example, in music festivals, where relatively stable place-images do emerge over time. There is still room for variation in experience from year to year, dependent on the particular mix of attractions, performers, attendees and so on; yet, longer-lived events in particular may develop a recognizable sense of place and festivalgoers themselves feel a sense of belonging and familiarity in relation to that place ([Anderton, 2019](#); see also [Relph, 1976](#) and [Tuan, 1977](#) on the humanistic geography notion of 'sense of place').

Annual music festivals may, in my formulation, be defined as 'cyclic places' ([Anderton, 2019](#)). This refers both to the sense of place that is constructed around such events (they feel like 'real' places that can be returned to each year) and to their cyclical yet temporary material existence. Such events are characterized by four interrelated aspects. First, and unlike the liminal conception of space discussed above, festival places are often intimately connected to the pre-existing meanings of the locations that play host to them. They are not necessarily placed on the margins of society or in out-of-the-way places, and despite occasional concerns about noise pollution, land damage/waste and traffic congestion, local people and authorities often actively support events due to the economic, tourism and social benefits they may bring. They can animate otherwise static tourist attractions, enhance the place-image of the host location and provide employment opportunities and other economic and social benefits to host communities.

The second aspect relates to the sense of place, belonging and familiarity that is engendered by regularly occurring events. They may exist only temporarily in physical form, but the provision of on-site services, entertainments, accommodation and other facilities in a familiar layout and with familiar branding fosters a sense of continuity. Such events develop their own histories, behaviours, landmarks and rules that are shaped through the interaction of organizers and festivalgoers and are re-created or re-enacted on an annual basis. Furthermore, this sense of place and belonging will vary between different groups of attendees, such that those attendees develop their own sense of place which is linked to their lived experience and memories of the event. Thus, multiple narratives ([Massey, 2005](#)) or heterotopic understandings ([Foucault, 1986](#)) may be recognized.

This leads to the third aspect of cyclic places, which is that they are necessarily mediated in formal and informal ways. Such mediation includes: official marketing by festival organizers and sponsors; previews, reviews and other coverage in traditional and online media; and the activities of festivalgoers in discussing, anticipating and remembering festivals through a variety of social and online media. Together these form a virtual version of a festival that continues to construct expectations and place-images throughout the year. This is particularly important in the contemporary festival market where event saturation means that there are many hundreds of events catering to a variety of demographic and psychographic target markets. Mediation therefore helps such events to define themselves within the market, to gain new attendees and to reinforce a sense of place and brand image

that also highlights and strengthens expectations regarding social norms and behaviours within the festival site.

The final aspect of cyclic place is the combination of continuity and change. This is constructed through the intersection of a festival's relatively stable sense of place (its place-image and brand) with the ever-changing social interactions, mediations and performances which are to be found at the event each year. The mix of people, music, activities and tastes changes over time, and while the festival's overarching sense of place may remain familiar to regular attendees, each year's event will feel slightly different. This allows festival organizers to avoid stagnation and to react not only to changes in regulation and legislation, but [also to](#) developments in the tastes and demographics of their audiences – to add new attractions or stages or to extend the styles of music on offer. A sense of difference and novelty is therefore added to the sense of familiarity and belonging, which keeps the event experience fresh, while maintaining its overall identity. Taken together the four aspects outlined here help to characterize music festivals as cyclic places. It moves the discussion of these events beyond utopian and transgressive understandings of space and place, yet also acknowledges how festivals may be constructed as *places* that hold significant social and cultural meanings for attendees, even though they are commercially managed and marketed. It also acknowledges the role of festival organizers in fostering this sense of place, so begins to bridge the gap so often seen between the event/tourism management literature on one side, and the cultural geography/anthropological literature on the other.

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