"If we can make it we can print it and if we can print it we can give it away": experimental independent music publishing in the United States or Beyond Imprimatur

*imprimatur* 1. Official approval or licence to print or publish, especially under conditions of censorship. 2. Official sanction; authorization. [New Latin, let it be printed, from Latin, *imprimere*, to print.] (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*)

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Selected quotes by and about American experimental independent music publishers

Altho' this composition hath cost me much time and pains; yet I little thought of exposing it to public view: But being repeatedly importuned by my friends, I was at last prevailed upon to commit it to the press... Perhaps there may appear in the eyes of the accurate much incorrectness that I was not able to discern; therefore I would beg the critic to be tender, and rectify those errors which through inexperience may happen to have escaped the notice of a youth, in the course of so large a volume.

—William Billings
from Billings's "preface" to the New England Psalm Singer

Oh! how did my foolish heart throb and beat with tumultuous joy! With what impatience did I wait on the Book-Binder, while stitching the sheets and putting on the covers, with what exacty, did I snatch the yet unfinished Book out of his hands, and pressing it to my bosom, with rapturous delight, how lavish was I, in encomiums on this infant production of my own Numb-Skull? Welcome; thrice welcome; thou legitimate offspring of my brain, go forth my little Book, go forth and immortalize the name of your Author; may your sale be rapid and may you speedily run through ten thousand editions, may you be a welcome guest in all companies and what will add tenfold to thy dignity, may you find your way into the Libraries of the Learned.

—William Billings
from the introduction to The Singing Master's Assistant, referring to the publication of the New England Psalm Singer eight years earlier

It would be difficult to find another single publication in the history of American music—in the history of western music, for that matter—whose priority in its tradition is more conspicuous than that of Billings' collection [New England Psalm Singer]. . . . [It] was the first published compilation of entirely American music; moreover, it was the first tunebook produced by a single American composer.

—Richard Crawford and David McKay
from William Billings of Boston, Princeton University Press, 1975

The Wa-Wan Press never paid us anything except as we could draw upon it a little. I called it my 'wife,' as I had mostly to support it which I did by my lectures.

[Concerning the impossibility of getting his own works, often based on Native American materials, published:]

. . . such a state of affairs made it intolerable for a composer in this country. . . . I was just plain mad, and I vowed I would change the United States in this respect. I was just not willing to live in a country that would not accept my calling.

—Arthur Farwell
Some have written a book for money: I have not. Some for fame; I have not. Some for love; I have not. Some for kindlings; I have not. I have not written a book for any of these reasons or for all of them together. In fact, gentle borrower, I have not written a book at all—I have merely cleaned house. All that is left is out on the clothes line,—but it's good for a man's vanity to have the neighbors see him—on the clothes line.

The printing of this collection was undertaken primarily in order to have a few clear copies that could be sent to friends who, from time to time, have been interested enough to ask for copies of some of the songs; but the job has grown into something different—it contains plenty of songs which have not been and will not be asked for. It stands now, if it stands for anything, as a kind of 'buffer state,' —an opportunity for evading a question, somewhat embarrassing to answer,—"Why do you write so much,—which no one ever sees?" There are several good reasons, none of which are worth recording.

— Charles Ives
from 114 Songs, AMP/Peer/Presser Edition, 1975

[Cowell's New Music Editions is] a circulating music magazine via a library of unsaleable scores.

— Charles Ives

All I have to say, finally, is that I think it is time for a new revolution in American music. And I wait for those, younger than me, who will carry it out. Who can predict the nature of this revolution which has yet to come?

— Peter Garland
from In Search of Silvestre Revueltas, Soundings Press 1991

Lingua [Press] is part of a growing movement to restore and to further the values we speak of. Certainly there are those, such as yourself, who know they need to participate more fully, and actively.

There's so much urgency and so much to do. Lingua's absence of customary editorial and rigid deadline policies, . . . policies which I consider to be serious acts of censorship against the creative act. . . , sometimes drive people nuts.

[On publishing as eco-system:]

The creative act consists not only in the stipulation and formation of concrete structures, but in responsible maintenance of them. Furthermore, such structures demand of us the necessity to create and maintain environmental systems within which they can function properly.

— Kenneth Gaburo
from Collaboration Two: David Dunn and Kenneth Gaburo, Publishing as Eco-System, Lingua Press 1983
"If you want to see, learn how to act"
— Heinz Von Foerster

Abstract
This talk presents some of the philosophies, politics, histories and motivations for experimental independent music publishing in the United States, especially in the present. Specifically, we will discuss the motivations, mechanisms and technologies used in our own publishing collective, Frog Peak Music, and discuss some of the ways that organization has evolved the concepts of publishing and distribution of experimental music.

Opening Statement
some goals of this talk

Frog Peak Music
the advocacy of pluralism: anyone can and should do it
the main rule: no rules
the avoidance of distinctions between different media and between different publishing technologies
principle of the collective
the economics of a small, artist-based collective

Towards a definition of American experimental independent publishing
why do it?
the importance of pluralism in approaches to publication and distribution
the organization is itself a creative and experimental act
parallel activities in other arts
the prevalence of independent publishing

Historical examples of American experimental independent music publishing
William Billings’ New England Psalm Singer
Arthur Farwell’s Wa-Wan Press
Henry Cowell’s New Music Editions
Charles Ives’ 114 Songs
Peter Garland’s Soundings Press
Kenneth Gaburo’s Lingua Press
Frog Peak Music (A Composers’ Collective)

Philosophies and aesthetics of experimental independent publishing
"imprimatur"
important and honorable to do it yourself!
hands-off editorial policy
artist as publisher/publisher as artist
establishing a “home” for important work

Technologies of experimental independent publishing
what makes it possible?
the relationship of experimental publishing to new technologies: control over “look and feel”
appropriate technologies and the revolution in technological availability
the high technologies of yesterday become the consumer technologies of today

Politics of experimental independent publishing
  avoidance of hierarchical models
  independence from institutions
  beyond “imprimatur”
  pro-active artist work
  avoiding capitalism
  intellectual property and experimental publishing ideas

Problems of independent publishing
  economics
  distribution
  pace of work
  advertising
  artists working with and for artists
  the growth problem: how to stay small and survive
  the “burnout factor”

Experimental independent publishing and you: the music librarian’s dilemma
  how to evaluate experimental, unconventional work and formats
  avoiding stylistic biases in the acquisition of holdings
  who’s in charge?: pro-active librarianship