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MEDIA REVIEW

TINY DESK CONCERT AS AN EMERGING SITE OF HIP HOP INTIMACY, AUTHENTICITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

From the late Mac Miller's introspective 2018 session to Megan Thee Stallion's sexually empowering show in 2019, National Public Radio's (NPR) Tiny Desk Concert (TDC) series has showcased several unique and memorable hip hop performances over the last few years. Many of these concerts have garnered millions of views and critical acclaim, making the series an important artistic medium and promotional tool for contemporary hip hop artists. TDCs challenge artists to put forth creative and intimate performances which offer unique audio-visual experiences to YouTube users. In addition to being a well-produced, accessible and engaging online concert series, individual TDC performances constitute important areas of contemporary hip hop music inquiry that raise interesting questions about musical authenticity, aesthetic negotiation, technological mediation, online engagement and genre. I suggest that these performances are becoming increasingly relevant sites of online hip hop mediation that should be further investigated and adopted as scholarly and pedagogical resources. More specifically, I demonstrate how TDC compellingly produces and distributes unique, intimate and engaging internet content that offers nuanced performances of contemporary hip hop artistry, self-representation and reception. Through analysis of concert videos and comment sections, I illuminate how the high-quality audio-visual production, unique performance practices and YouTube's platform features enable crucial elements of live performance – liveness, immersion and interaction – to be fully present in the online context. Overall, TDC provides ways for users to engage with more nuanced representations of hip hop culture as artists challenge the boundaries of what twenty-first-century hip hop performance can be. Accordingly, TDC has the potential to provide great theoretical and pedagogical value to hip hop researchers, educators, students and enthusiasts.

KEYWORDS

music
NPR
rap
performance
internet
YouTube
Megan Thee Stallion
T-Pain

1. Tiny Desk Concerts staged around Boilen's desk have recommenced as of 31 May 2022, interspersed with other 'home' concerts.

INTRODUCTION

From the late Mac Miller's introspective 2018 session to Megan Thee Stallion's sexually empowering show in 2019, National Public Radio's (NPR) Tiny Desk Concert (TDC) series has showcased several unique and memorable hip hop performances over the last few years. Many of these concerts have garnered millions of views and critical acclaim, making the series an important artistic medium and promotional tool for mainstream and independent hip hop artists. For lesser-known acts, TDC's YouTube channel functions as a key music discovery tool that provides increased audience visibility at rates comparable to late-night television show appearances (Blake 2017). Established performers, on the other hand, can introduce themselves to younger generations of listeners or offer drastically different musical arrangements of their well-known hits. TDCs challenge artists to put forth creative and intimate performances which offer unique audio-visual experiences to YouTube users.

While hip hop performances constitute a small portion of the broader TDC catalogue, they are among the most popular in the series with concerts by rappers Mac Miller, T-Pain and Anderson.Paak being the most watched in TDC history. However, the inclusion of hip hop on TDC is a relatively new phenomenon. The series initially centred around indie rock and pop performances, often to the exclusion of Black performing artists. Following several years of criticism from audiences and NPR staff members, there has been an intentional effort to programme more artists of colour, non-US performers and electronic musicians, thus creating more opportunities for hip hop participation (Cwynar 2017). Today, TDC is a consistent site of Black popular music performance hip hop artists utilize in pursuit of increased visibility, fan engagement and critical acclaim.

TDC also has the potential to be an invaluable online resource for hip hop scholars, students and fans. In addition to being a well-produced and accessible concert series, individual performances constitute important areas of contemporary hip hop music inquiry that raise interesting questions about musical authenticity, aesthetic negotiation, technological mediation, online engagement and genre. In the following paragraphs, I discuss how TDC compellingly produces and distributes unique, intimate and engaging internet content that offers nuanced performances of contemporary hip hop artistry, self-representation and reception. Ultimately, I suggest that these performances are becoming increasingly relevant sites of online hip hop mediation that should be further investigated and adopted as scholarly and pedagogical resources.

WHAT IS TDC?

TDC is a free pre-recorded online concert series hosted by the American media organization NPR on YouTube. Bob Boilen, the creator of NPR's *All Songs Considered*, founded the series in 2008 with the primary goal of showcasing underground and emerging musical artists in an intimate style. As of July 2022, there are nearly a thousand concerts available that have collectively amassed over 2 billion views on YouTube. Traditionally, musical acts were recorded in front of a live audience at Boilen's desk located in the middle of NPR's Washington, DC headquarters (Figure 1). However, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, TDC rapidly responded to quarantine restrictions by producing a Tiny Desk (Home) Concert series which enabled artists to record performances in their own spaces around the world.¹ After the shows are

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Figure 1: Screenshot of Rakim's 25 June 2018 Tiny Desk Concert performed at NPR's Washington, DC headquarters. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iU0_cYjm8HE. Accessed 6 July 2022.

recorded and edited, the fifteen-to-25-minute videos are uploaded to YouTube and NPR's music website. Hip hop acts usually perform three to six songs that combine numerous vocalists, instrumental performers and audio sampling practices. New concerts are released three or four times a week, amounting to an average of fifteen videos per month.

One of the most valuable aspects of the concert series is its consistently high production quality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous online concert series emerged with varying levels of audio-visual quality, occasionally providing internet users with less-than-ideal musical experiences (Swarbrick et al. 2021). For instance, internet bandwidth limitations have produced buffering issues in livestreaming contexts, and music-makers have released performances with poor sound and grainy imagery. As a pre-recorded concert series produced by NPR's small, but highly skilled, team of audio engineers and videographers, TDC circumnavigates many of the technical difficulties other online concerts have exhibited. The audio quality is particularly excellent. The production crew strategically places shotgun microphones that pick up direct and focused sounds without obstructing the view of the performers. Likewise, high-definition cameras are sophisticatedly positioned around the office space. Furthermore, each video is cleanly edited and features a great deal of consistency from the opening title sequence to the song labels to the closing credits. Akin to attending an in-person concert, the viewer is surrounded by well-mixed sounds and dynamic visuals, although these elements do not parallel the earth-shaking bass, extensive light displays and exciting crowd dynamics at traditional hip hop concerts.

2. Young Thug used this TDC performance, featuring pop-punk drummer Travis Barker, as a promotional opportunity to reveal the punk-rock aesthetic branding and release date of his sophomore album *Punk* (2021).

While intimacy can be difficult to transmit online, performers often achieve this on TDC. Both the musical acts and production team adjust their performance practices and technological setups to ensure each concert centres raw creative expression and the natural ambience of the space. The cameras intimately focus on the performers' faces, bodies and instruments, adding a humanizing element to the pre-recorded videos that help mitigate the sense of distance online distribution and consumption can create between artists and their audiences. Furthermore, the rappers often look directly into the camera and speak to the imagined audience in between songs. What viewers might find interesting is how these intimate camera angles and performance practices contrast with the mega-concert experience that has come to dominate in-person hip hop shows. There are often moments of silence and small mistakes captured during the performances – another point of contrast to the highly choreographed concerts, studio-produced albums and big-budget music videos promoted by the mainstream hip hop industry.

The performers themselves can be quite vulnerable and experimental during their sets. For many hip hop artists, the minimalistic TDC format presents new musical and aesthetic challenges to negotiate. For instance, rappers Tyler the Creator and Megan Thee Stallion openly admitted their apprehension about performing with a live, mostly acoustic band for the first time during their sessions. With the creation of the Tiny Desk (Home) series, other artists have experimented with staging by performing in diverse spaces and places that are not typically associated with hip hop genres including remote cabins, gardens and nail salons. One performance that stands out in this regard is Atlanta rapper Young Thug's TDC where he stood on a distressed rug in the middle of a garden surrounded by flourishes of pink flowers (Figure 2).² For hip hop scholars, the unique and intimate performances might raise insights that challenge the way we think about the typical visual, geographic and sonic signifiers of the genre.

Hip hop artists must also confront TDC's long-standing discourse of authenticity that privileges notions of liveness rooted in indie rock and pop performance aesthetics (Auslander 2008). In many cases, artists reconceptualize their songs in an R&B, soul or rock style while also incorporating electronic instruments. In addition to negotiating sonic aesthetics, hip hop artists must also navigate the NPR office setup, which is a performance space predominantly structured by aesthetic markings of whiteness. Notably, in the office space, the performer is surrounded by indie rock and pop figurines, drawings, gag gifts and other forms of clutter curated by Boilen. The Tiny Desk (Home) series, however, gives artists the ability to design their performance environment and fill it with culturally significant objects. For instance, rappers such as Fat Joe and Polo G used sneaker stores and basketball courts as their concert venues, showcasing traditional sites of hip hop culture. In this way, TDC has become an important site of self-representation where hip hop performers can challenge conventional notions of musical authenticity, place and performance.

NAVIGATING TINY DESK'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL

YouTube plays a central role in the distribution and consumption of the concerts, centred around the NPR Music channel. The nearly 7 million subscribers of the channel appear both loyal to and vocal about TDC performances. Scholars may be particularly interested in the active comment sections

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Figure 2: Screenshot of Young Thug's 27 July 2021 Tiny Desk (Home) Concert performed in gardens of The Houdini Estate in Los Angeles, California. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAR0JPnd_s8. Accessed 6 July 2022.

under each video as they highlight complex discourse regarding hip hop authenticity, legitimacy, value and sound. While music critics and fans have celebrated hip hop's growing popularity in the twenty-first century (Sanneh 2021), some have overlooked ongoing hostilities towards studio production and African diasporic musical aesthetics. Specifically, TDC viewers regularly contrast notions of musical authenticity and legitimacy with studio recording practices. Most notably, commenters praised rapper T-Pain, who popularized the exaggerated use of Auto-Tune, for his musicianship when he performed without the effect during his TDC and pleaded for him to record an entire album with live instrumentation. There is a potential for fruitful digital-ethnographic research into how this discourse shapes the online reception and sharing of Black popular music performances.

The series' presence on YouTube also makes it a highly accessible and inclusive online resource. YouTube, unlike some other video hosting platforms, is an ad-supported free website that does not require extensive training to navigate or customize. Although hip hop concerts are available on other platforms, the user interfaces of virtual concert websites may be more difficult to operate. Being able to access TDC on YouTube is particularly useful for those less familiar with internet-based tools and platforms. Furthermore, TDC offers an alternative online experience for people who might have difficulty accessing or participating in physical concert settings. Over the last decade, in-person hip hop shows have become prohibitively expensive for many concertgoers and feature structural and crowd conditions that are unsafe for people with disabilities. Rather, TDC audiences can watch high-quality and immersive live

performances on personal devices from nearly anywhere. However, since the series is exclusively online, it is inaccessible to those without internet access and in countries where YouTube is banned.

YouTube's platform affordances make TDC a practical pedagogical tool as its search function and algorithms make it easy to find concerts while interactive features on each video page enable sharing and online discussions. Additionally, users can interact with well-organized playlists of TDCs on NPR's Music channel or create their own playlists of their favourite performances. What I find particularly useful is that these mini-concerts can function as open educational resources (OER) for instructors looking to reduce course fees and engage students with culturally relevant content. Since the videos are around twenty minutes long, instructors should have plenty of time to play the concerts, conduct close analyses of textual elements with students and facilitate deep discussions of performances during class. It is easy to start, stop and jump to different parts of the videos – another handy feature for analysis and presentations. By doing so, instructors can provide students with opportunities to experience hip hop liveness in a digital context and lead fruitful discussions about musical performance, aesthetics and internet discourse.

CONCLUSION

Some might be disappointed by the growing influence of mainstream interests on TDC. In the last couple of years, commercials have become quite disruptive to the viewing experience as advertisements are often inserted in the middle of songs, counteracting the immersive and intimate nature of the performances. Other viewers might be put off by the increasing number of mainstream artists, heavy audio processing, extensive lighting rigs, and elaborate camera angles featured as the series initially privileged unknown and emerging artists performing in a straightforward, unplugged manner. Today, however, it seems that the NPR producers are only willing to book proven and well-known hip hop artists. For me, this set of practices raises numerous questions about intersectionality and inclusion as many of the featured hip hop performers are men. I hope that in the future, NPR showcases more women, independent artists and other underrepresented identities.

Overall, TDC is a well-produced, accessible and engaging online concert series that can provide great theoretical and pedagogical value to hip hop researchers, educators, students and enthusiasts. The excellent audio-visual production, unique performance practices and platform accessibility enable crucial elements of live performance – liveness, immersion and interaction – to be fully present in the online context. Taken together, TDC provides ways for users to engage with more nuanced representations of hip hop culture as artists challenge the boundaries of what twenty-first-century hip hop performance can be.

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