

Campfire Logic

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If the last essay argued that preciousness is market logic, this one asks: what does a non-market logic of art actually look like?

Before the recording industry, the idea of a "wrong" version of a song barely made sense.

A tune was not a product. It was a process. You heard it. You learned it. You changed it. You passed it on. The next person changed it again. Nobody owned the melody. Nobody had the definitive recording. The song was a living thing that mutated every time someone new picked it up.

We didn't lose this by accident. We professionalized it away.

Western music notation promised precision. Write down every note, every rest, every dynamic marking, and you could reproduce the composer's exact intention across centuries. That was the sales pitch. What it actually did was create the idea of a "correct" performance. A version that matched the score. Interpretation became deviation. Deviation became error.

The Victorians loved this. Same people who split art into "high" and "craft" split music into "classical" and "everything else." Classical meant composed, notated, performed as written. Everything else meant folk, popular, improvised. Lesser. The hierarchy was never about complexity. Jazz is more harmonically sophisticated than most classical repertoire. It was about control. Written music could be owned, published, sold. Improvised music belonged to the room it was played in.

Then came recording. Then copyright. Then the entire legal and economic infrastructure that treats a song as a fixed object rather than a living pattern. Now there's an original. Now everything else is a cover, a sample, a derivative work. Now the lawyers get involved.

Here's what we had before all that. I call it campfire logic.

Campfire logic works like this. Someone starts a song. Someone else joins in. They change the words. They add a harmony. They forget a verse and make up a new one. The song belongs to the circle, not the singer. It changes shape in other hands. That's not a flaw. That's the feature.

This is not a folk tradition. This is not a primitive precursor to "real" music. This is how music worked for most of human history, across most of the world.

The musician interpreting a tune is doing the same thing Da Vinci's workshop artisans were doing. Taking a vision. Making it real through their own hands. Adding their own skill and judgment to someone else's framework. The workshop model and the campfire model are the same model. Collaborative, iterative, non-precious. The product is the process.

Museum logic replaced campfire logic. Museum logic says: one original, everything else is reproduction. One author, everyone else is audience. One correct version, everything else is derivative.

Museum logic needs walls. Literal ones. The painting goes behind glass. The manuscript goes in a case. The recording goes into a format you pay to access. The walls keep the art scarce and the access controlled and the price stable.

Campfire logic has no walls. The song escapes the circle. The story changes in the retelling. The sketch gets photographed and reposted and remixed and tagged and lost and found. Nothing stays fixed. Nothing stays owned. Nothing stays precious.

Fan communities have always run on campfire logic. Fanfic runs on campfire logic. So do mods. So did zines. So did the entire pre-copyright folk tradition that kept human creative culture breathing for millennia before anyone thought to put a price tag on a melody. Every community that circulates art faster than it can be owned is a campfire community.

Creative communities have always known this, even when they couldn't name it.

The open-source codebase is a campfire. Someone writes a function. Someone else refactors it. Someone forks it and takes it somewhere the original author never imagined. The code changed hands and changed shape and that was fine, because campfire logic says the point is not to own the flame. The point is to keep it going.

The convention artist alley is a campfire. The Discord server where someone posts a sketch and someone else colors it is a campfire. The jazz club where a standard gets reinterpreted every night is a campfire. The value is in the exchange, not the object. In the process, not the artifact.

AI makes this tension visible. Running campfire logic and museum logic at the same time has always been a contradiction, but it was one most communities could leave unresolved. When the tools change fast enough, the contradiction surfaces. A community built on circulation has to decide what circulation means when the tools of circulation evolve.

The choice was always there. AI just made it harder to defer.

Campfire or museum. Participation or ownership. Pass it around or lock it up.

If campfire logic is how creative culture has survived and spread for most of human history, if it's how fan communities function right now, if it's the default mode of every creative tradition that wasn't industrialized into a product, then why are we building legal and platform infrastructure designed to kill it?

That's not a rhetorical question. The next essay has an answer.