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Popular Music — Style and Identity

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Recasting Popular Music Studies' Conceptions of the Authentic and the Local in Light of Bell's Theorem

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In a variety of discourses, most notably those surrounding the media of mass communication, authenticity has played a central role as an agent of power. The determination and over-determination of authenticity increased the power of those wielding symbolic forms in public forums.

In the study of popular music authenticity is a largely under theorized notion but one with the greatest significance. There is something about it that makes it a cornerstone of both scholarly and fan discourse, of production and consumption decisions. My aim is to bring to the fore the following the questions:

1. How is authenticity communicated in popular music?
2. What is the site of the interpretation of authenticity?

These two questions are of great importance not only to popular music studies but to the study of contemporary culture. They implicitly ask about alienation, about the attempt to understand the ideal and the image, the natural and artificial. Popular music is an ideal site to engage these issues. As Grossberg points out:

> rock continuously constructed and reconstructed new mattering maps which empowered fans in new ways by specifying the different forms, sites and intensities of what could matter. It determined how other aspects of everyday life could matter.... Rock's special place was enabled by its articulation to an ideology of "authenticity." Rock appropriated an older middle-class obsession with "authenticity" as a way of responding to the absence of its own authentic past (and future) (1992:205-206).

It should be noted that rock appropriated a particularly modernist form of authenticity as well (Jones 1992a, 1992b, 1993a, 1993b). Popular music makes authenticity explicit, not necessarily on its surface but in its very being, in the ways it forges links between it and the social formation it is at once being shaped by and shaping.

How is Authenticity Communicated?

The greatest obstacle to overcome in the quest for understanding authenticity in popular music is to find a way to avoid making music dependent on the social formation from which it arises. To do so is, as Shepherd sees it,

> to claim a social significance for music (that might) imply that music, and the human processes involved in its creation and appreciation, are somehow secondary symptoms or manifestations of "the social" (1992a:129).

Wicke (1990) too has argued that music possesses a different kind of sociality, largely because of its nature as an aural phenomenon. In Shepherd's words, "little cultural theoretical work in music is concerned with music's sounds" (1993a:174). Why should this be important? First, because Shepherd seeks to do away with the structural homology by claiming that sound is not a signifying structure in the traditional sense. Second, because it leads us to re-examine a question long set to the side in popular music studies, namely: What is music?

The structural homology is a foundation upon which the concept of authenticity in popular music stands. Yet it is a weak foundation, prone to crumbling at any instant, as Frith makes clear throughout his work. The ability to label a particular piece of music "good" shifts from moment to moment. Frith understates the problem:

> It is difficult...to say how musical texts mean or represent something, and it is difficult to isolate structures of musical creation or control (1981:56).

Shepherd attempts to overcome this difficulty by emphasizing that:

> music is a social medium in sound. What (this) means...is that the sounds of music provide constantly moving and complex matrices of sounds in which individuals may invest their own meanings...(however) while the matrices of sounds which seemingly constitute an individual "piece" of music can accommodate a range of meanings, and thereby allow for negotiability of meaning, they cannot accommodate all possible meanings (1992b:17).

I have claimed elsewhere that popular music relies on sound, that its production encompasses not only the manipulation of music but manipulation of sound, and that popular music is, for us, sound (Jones 1992a). As

regards contemporary popular music, the recording process itself demands that music and sound be so combined. Indeed, musicians no more record music than they record fingering; they engage in sound recording. Sound, particularly when joined with the visual, becomes a means to build and manipulate space, the environment, virtual and non-virtual (Jones 1993b). A more interesting argument, then, questions how we make sense of sound and music, and resurrects critical analysis of the ontology of sound and music.

Two analytic paths are available. One is to examine the construction of space through sound (Jones 1993a, 1993b). But another reasonable path to take is to return to the question: What do musicians think they are doing with sound and music? Do they think they are making music, making sound, making meaning, manipulating one, the other, or all? And with what consequences for meaning-making? One way to answer these questions is to claim that sound is the realization of the aural, and music is culturally or socially constituted and interpreted. Shepherd writes:

> The question of "what is music?" is a complex one that cannot be addressed usefully in terms of the love affair with definitions that pervades the worlds of academic and common sense knowledge. "Music" is a discursively constituted category. The meanings invested in it are not consistent, but contested....There is one statement that can be made about music which is unlikely to be contentious. It would say that music is a cultural or artistic phenomenon which implicates sound in its manner of expression in ways significantly different from the manner in which sound is implicated in language (1993b:49).

But how then to define sound, or more precisely, its interpretation? There are several ways to define it. One definition can be deduced from human physiology, and that is the approach taken by Carpenter and McLuhan as they examine the role of aural perception in culture:

> The "sudden loud sound" that Watson thought produced an instinctive (unlearned) fear response in the infant still compels our quick (conditioned) fear response when perceived as, say, an automobile horn (1960: 69).

The parenthetical use of the word "conditioned" is troublesome, as it leaves ungrounded the site of interpretation. At times they seem to confuse the physiological with the technological, letting slip through the back door the argument that humans are "hardwired" insofar as the apperception of sound is concerned.

A technological definition of sound is most often encountered in reference to instruments for sound generation, be those acoustic or electronic in nature. Along those lines, sound also refers to the tonality of particular instruments. Regardless of the notes those instruments produce, they all have a timbre, or range of timbres, and are valued largely for those (as in the case of "vintage" instruments). Sound, in this instance, also refers to a variety of mathematical, acoustic and mechanistic models for the creation of vibrations in air.

There is a social dimension along which sound is defined. For instance, the term "sound" is deployed in popular music to signify several things, all of which have to do with music or musical performance, but none of which are music. So, for instance, musical groups or performers can have a "sound," but it is distinguishable from what notes they play. Entire music scenes can have "sounds," but the music within such scenes is clearly distinct and differentiated. For the study of popular music this is likely the most significant dimension of sound, for, as Lawrence Grossberg argues, "The authenticity of rock was measured by its sound" (1992:207). Visually, he says, popular music is suspect and often inauthentic, but it is grounded in the aural. Consequently, for the popular music audience it would seem that a tendency toward ocularcentrism is set off by the primacy of sound.

Music, on the other hand, refers to the realization of tones according to particular "rules," as those are culturally constituted. So, for instance, according to Raffman:

> As (the listener) hears the incoming musical signal, he mentally represents it (i.e., he recovers the score, more or less) and then analyzes it according to the grammatical rules; that is to say, he computes a *structural description* of the piece.... Having the right sort of structural description in one's head is what hearing the piece *as tonal* consists in (1991:362).

Music is thus part of the human mind insofar as it is not only heard but interpreted, and that interpretation is culturally constituted (culture as the site at which "structural descriptions" are formulated) but sound is, of course, an active participant within the meaning-making process described. As Popper and Eccles put it,

> (music) is something acoustic and the written-down encoding is obviously merely conventionally and arbitrarily related to the acoustic ideas which this written-down encoding tries to incorporate and to bring into a more stable and lasting form (1977: 449).

For them, music is that "which has the possibility of being interpreted in a performance" (450). They do not, however, make a claim as to the site of interpretation. Is the interpretive subject the audience or the musician, or both?

BELL'S THEOREM AND POPULAR MUSIC

Rather than engage in a "which came first?" exercise, some analysis of music's interpretive relation to the social is necessary. Shepherd argues for music's "relative autonomy" from social processes and claims such an argument

> opens up conceptual space for an understanding of the exercise of individual creativity through musical processes....This is because any extrinsic (social) significance may result only from such moments being recognized *subsequently* as of relevance to other areas of social processes (1992a: 37).

The principle of relative autonomy also opens up conceptual space for application of Bell's (1964) Theorem to the process of meaning-making in popular music both as regards conceptions of the "local" and its relation to the "other" in musicology and as regards the "authentic" and its existence as experience and mediated discourse.

In brief, Bell's theorem interrogates local realism, a concept physicists consider "the philosophical doctrine that considers that physical objects have objective properties, independently of whether or not they are observed" (Ferrero et al 1990:684). Another way to phrase that doctrine was coined by Einstein, who asked "Is the moon there when nobody looks?" to which physicist David Mermin replied, "(from Bell"s theorem) we now know that the moon is demonstrably not there when nobody looks" (1990). Bell's theorem implies "that one or more of our most fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality – including the belief that there is an external world whose existence is independent of the human mind – is mistaken" (Schick 1989:131).

It is not difficult to consider that Bell's theorem supports the notion of relative autonomy, but it can go further. For instance, we can use Bell's theorem to argue for music's causal independence. Namely, music can be in some instances created independently of social causation but for the purposes of the construction of authenticity it is always causally interpreted.

Bell's theorem is rooted in the physical world, but can be applied to the symbolic world in the service of interrogating our notions of authenticity. Bell's theorem arises from an epistemological conundrum with which many scientists grapple, namely that it is difficult to know something by observation without disturbing it in some way, and without perception and interpretation intervening. Perhaps a similar theorem can hold for the symbolic world, that knowing something (i.e., creating meaning) disturbs not the object that is known (as in the physical analogue) but the symbolic process by which that knowledge is communicated. Put another way, the interpretive process as epistemologically constituted is one that "disturbs" meaning in the sense that each act of meaning-making is a new construction, and without that construction, as in Mermin's response to Einstein, the meaning will not exist.

The implication of this formulation for the ways we think about authenticity is that in every instance it is acknowledged that authenticity is constructed, and that in itself is an argument against the most common way to think of authenticity. If authenticity implies something about the "pure" state of an object or symbol then surely such a state is connected to some "objective" rendering.

But I do not want to simply attack notions of authenticity for an implicit adherence to objectivity. Indeed, I do not wish to attack them at all, but rather to clear away the lingering obfuscation that clouds them. Autonomy, it seems, is a linchpin for understanding the symbolic construction and cultural production of authenticity. It is apparent that authenticity is somehow autonomous (as regards its place in interpretive schema) and at the same time it is individual autonomy that marks authenticity. As Redhead and Street put it, authenticity is often based on:

> the musician's right to speak (as) a function of his or her integrity; that is, there is no doubt that they speak for themselves and are not the puppets of other interests (1989:179).

It is not hard to illustrate the point by generalizing and observing that rock's notion of authenticity is captured in terms of songwriting, in the break from Tin Pan Alley and other popular musical forms that emphasize the interpretation of songs, toward the style adopted by the Beatles and other 1960s groups who wrote their own songs. In this way there is an obvious connection between authenticity and authorship (Jones, forthcoming).

But the stronger connection is to the way authorship is tied to place, or, as Redhead and Street put it, to "roots:"

> The idea of "roots" refers to a number of aspects of the musical process. There is the audience in which the musician's career is rooted;...Another notion of roots refers to music. Here the idea is that the sounds and the style of the music should continue to resemble the source from which it sprang....The issue...can be detected in the argument of those who raise doubts about the use of musical high-technology by African artists. A final version of roots applies to the artist's sociological origins (1989:180).

Redhead and Street unfortunately leave off their analysis by only noting that:

> music and image are interpreted and symbolized...the notion of authenticity rests on some prior notion, in this case, on the interpretation of "reality" (1989:181).

This of course returns us squarely to the siderations at the outset, namely, connection between thenticity and the interpretation of reality. There are two ways to formulate that connection. One way is to rely on reality as it is constituted geographically and historically. Thus we find (as Redhead and Street note) in folk music that community and locality are the elements used by audience and artist alike to understand the authenticity of a performer or performance. The other way is to rely on the notion of interpretation, to understand that authenticity is a symbolically constructed cultural category. The process of authenticating performer and performance alike is a political process, and as part of popular music's production and consumption, that process forms the narrative, the stories, we tell not only about music, but about ourselves. Consequently, popular music scholars need to renegotiate terrain already covered, to question the nature of music and its interpretation.

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