



4 Real: Authenticity, Performance, and Rock Music

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One

One of the iconic moments of 1990s rock occurred in a profoundly unlikely location: the backstage area of Norwich Arts Centre, in the aftermath of a Manic Street Preachers gig. An NME reporter, Steve Lamacq, had been critical of the Preachers: in particular, he had accused them of traducing the spirit of the music, of shamelessly mining its history for their music and attitude, and of committing the ultimate crime of inauthenticity.

Post-gig, after months of on-off sparring between ourselves in these very pages, the Manic Street Preachers and myself finally come face to face in Norwich. With an unwritten truce in the air, conversation kicks over everything we disagree on about punk, how the Preachers want to be perceived and ultimately what a sham some people think they've become.

After 30 minutes of friendly enough discussion and vitriol, on the Art Centre's exit stairs, we wind things up, for the most part agreeing to disagree. It was a good, if cliched, confrontation (maybe leaving both sides a little unsettled).

Ritchey's parting shot is: 'You have to put it into the context of where we came from. Back there people did not believe in bands anyway . . . the thing for us, it's really hard to convince you that we really are for real. . . .'

'I know you don't like us,' he says steadily, 'but we are for real. When I was a teenager, I never had a band who said anything about my life, that's why we're doing this. Where we came from, we had nothing.'

As he's talking, from somewhere he finds a razorblade. Turning unnervingly serious, he takes the blade and slowly and deliberately carves '4 Real' into his left arm.

. . . Looking back, God knows why- and how- we carried on talking

for another few minutes. But. As Ritchey's arm turns into a wash of blood, my mind wakes up to the situation and I get away to tell their manager to help him out. In the state of shock that follows, ashen people start hurrying around with bandages, arranging transport to the hospital and phoning casualty, gingerly side-stepping the pool of blood on the floor.

He had 17 stitches, apparently. What a dumb way to end an evening.
. . . (Lamacq 52)

James' act of self mutilation is extreme, but not extreme enough that it cannot be fitted into a recognisable framework of rockstar behaviour. It carries the same charge as Jim Morrison's self-exposure in front of a Miami audience, or of Iggy Pop's numerous self-inflicted, in-concert woundings (lashing himself with the microphone stand, dripping hot wax over his chest). As a plea for final understanding, it mirrors and reverses Johnny Rotten's despairing epitaph on the Sex Pistols ('ever get the feeling you've been cheated?') delivered at the end of their final gig in San Francisco's Winterland Ballroom. It allies James, at the beginning of the band's public life, with all the tortured rock poets, all the 'real' stars, who have to fight the industry, the cynicism of the press, and the indifference of the public in order to reach their ideal audience; a group loosely configured as those who will understand them--those who have nothing, not even a band to give them a voice.

James' gesture conforms to accepted rock iconography: but it also exceeds it, moves beyond it, into rather more troubling territory. Iggy Pop may have harmed himself spectacularly, but he did so in public, as part of the Stooges' assaultive stage show. James' act is semi-private. It takes place in front of the public's putative representative, the one who will relay the experience of the concert to a wider audience than could necessarily attend the gig itself: but he is also involved in an intimate conversation. One might say that Pop's acts are outer-directed, aimed to the audience in the venue, and to the wider audience of those who invest something of their sense of identity in rock music. James' act, it would seem, is directed first of all at himself. It takes a public concern--the authenticity or otherwise of the Manics as a group--and turns it into a private, desperate act of self-confirmation, as though the only way that James has to convince himself that he is not, ultimately, a charade, is to inscribe his authenticity, slowly and painfully, on his own skin.

As it stands, then, James' act is powerful testimony to the overwhelming influence that a discourse of authenticity, derived from white music's idea of black music and its intimate relationship with the lived experience of its audience (see Frith's Performing Rites), can have on musicians and critics; after all, the problem of 'realness', and the need to establish what is real and what is not, is a problem that both James and Lamacq seem to share. However, simply to turn the incident into another example of the pernicious effects of this discourse (so familiar from cultural studies, where the search for the authentic is seen as fundamentally ideologically driven) is to ignore the complexity of the sign James inscribes; and, in doing so, to simplify the complex relation between performer and audience in rock music.

For James does not simply create an unambiguous symbol of his desire to be believed. He inscribes '4 Real'; the word can be accepted, but the numeral seems both less and more than the word it represents. It weakens the declarative power of the act; the choice of 4 rather than for, a substitution familiar from Prince's song titles and lyrics (for example, "I would die 4 U" from Purple Rain) might be thought of as too self-aware, as a too-knowing sign of James' investment in both the history and the spirit of rock. However, given that James is so knowledgeable about popular music, the fact that he employs a numeral might itself be another sign of his overwhelming desire to be taken seriously, as someone so immersed in a particular culture that he thinks nothing of branding himself with it.

Both readings are possible; what is interesting, though, is the fact that James chose the act and the terminology in the first place. The act is private, but has public consequences; the sign is authentic, but archly so, calling attention to itself as an artificial statement as it declares its reality. In other words, James' act is both declaration and performance; it is manifestly constructed, but in a way that does not automatically invalidate it as a statement of real intent.

Two

James' act--knowing yet desperate, public yet private--not only fits, if rather uneasily, into the iconography of rock; it also fits the notion of "constructed authenticity" defined by Richard Dyer, in the essay "A Star is Born and the Construction of Authenticity."

There is a whole litany in the fan literature surrounding stars in which certain adjectives endlessly recur- sincere, immediate, spontaneous, real, direct, genuine, and so on. All of these words can be seen as relating to a general notion of 'authenticity'. It is those qualities that we demand of a star if we accept her or him in the spirit in which she or he is offered. Outside of a camp appreciation, it is the star's really seeming to be what she/he is supposed to be that secures his/her star status, 'star quality' or charisma. Authenticity is both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies. . . . It is this effect of authenticating authenticity that gives the star charisma. . . . (Dyer 133)

In other words, for Dyer it is not enough that the star is real; he or she must "act realness". Interestingly, the qualities that Dyer identifies as the signs of authenticity--genuineness, spontaneity, immediacy, etc.--are all qualities associated with performance. To be said to exist, they have to be demonstrated; they have to become clearly visible to an audience. The unstated paradox contained within this formulation is not that an audience accepts as real that which is patently unreal; rather it is that an audience accepts reality, or authenticity, as a performance, without necessarily accepting that its status as performance invalidates it as a true expression of the star's authentic self.

The audience, it could be said, believes in the star's performed self, while being aware that that self is itself a performance, and must be judged as a performance. The crucial question for both the performer and the audience seems to be one of belief: the spontaneous expression of both the audience's and the performer's faith in the act seems to confirm that the connection between the star and her or his audience can be termed authentic, no matter how transparently fake the trappings of the performance.

For Dyer, the guarantee of Judy Garland's performed authenticity is the way in which she transforms an inherently artificial scenario (the moment in which a musical number overwhelms a film's narrative development) into a private moment, shared on-screen only with her musicians: the audience become interlopers, observing an act which is not meant for them, and are able to read Garland's performance as a direct expression, both of her filmed and her real self, in what seems an entirely spontaneous response to the song she has to sing. It could be said that, for Dyer, the music in his selected example is simply the vehicle through which a performer reveals herself; the object in which the audience are implicitly invited to believe is the persona of the star herself. In rock, the position of the music is rather more central.

At midnight I wander on to the set and Bono engages me in an intense discussion of what he hopes to accomplish on the Zoo TV tour. He talks about embracing irony, the stupid glamour of rock & roll, the mirror balls and limousines- without abandoning the truth at the heart of the music itself. He compares it to Elvis Presley in a jump-suit singing "I Cant Help Falling in Love with You" to a weeping woman in Las Vegas. It might have been hopelessly kitsch, but if the woman believed in the song *and Elvis believed in the song*, it was not phoney. Maybe rock & roll was at its truest in the space between these apparent contradictions. (Flanagan 54)

What Bono describes as a contradiction is, it seems to me, simply a restatement of a standard rock trope: that the music contains within itself a pre-existing truth, and that it is the task of both performer and audience to rediscover and re-express that truth. The music, or rather the myth constructed around the music, is the fixed element in an otherwise infinitely transformable set of relations between the star and the audience. In rock music, therefore, the elements that Dyer associates with the persona of the star are recast. The audience does not simply gauge the star's performance against what it knows of the star's persona, and, by extension, of the way in which stars are supposed to act: in rock music, if Bono is correct, both the audience and the performer look to the music to provide the ultimate validation, the ultimate proof of authenticity. It is as though the music itself contains, beyond the meanings attached to a particular chord structure and rhythm, a single set of lyrics or a specific delivery, the ability to organise the audience's and the star's perception of it as inherently truthful.

This view, unsurprisingly, comes from a vocalist steeped in rock lore; a man who described the instrumentation of his group (guitar, bass, drums) as an attempt to return to the three primary colours of rock; a man who claimed, during the performance of an accredited rock classic that "All I have is a red

guitar/ three chords, and the truth" ("All Along the Watchtower," Rattle and Hum). It is a view that comes directly from the history of the form; rock, the common narrative asserts, derives from the blues, and therefore derives from a form that grew directly, unmediated, from the lives of those who sang and played it. It does not matter that, in Bono's example, both Elvis and the woman are situated on the heartland of American Kitsch: they believe in the song--their belief is strong enough to transcend their surroundings, and to unite them in an almost religious moment of revealed truth.

The hold that this trope has over the imaginations of both rock performers and those who report and write about rock music should not be underestimated. It exists as a shared, communal myth about the power of a music that carries with itself the mystical power to speak, and to speak truthfully, about the lives and experiences of those who listen and of those who play; a music that both relies on and transcends the individual performer, and that also provides a shared language that allows the performer and the fan to communicate. Rock, therefore, is more than a specific musical style, or a specific series of performance conventions: it is itself an icon, a prize to which both the performer and the audience aspire. All the indicators that Dyer notes in the construction of the authentic Hollywood star--the spontaneity, the directness, the sheer unguardedness of the performance--are indicators that can be used in a discussion of rock stars in performance. However, in rock the authentic bedrock against which the star is judged is the music; the persona of the performer is important, but only in so far as it reflects his or her investment in the music (in other words, is the performer real or are they faking it; an all-embracing discourse, analysed in more depth below). Ritchie James' act was, and remains, extreme, but it can be read (and James undoubtedly wished it to be read) as a sign of his investment in the central myth of rock as an authentic, and authenticating language.

Three

So far, I have used the terms star and audience in a rather loosely inclusive way: even the blanket use of the term rock is profoundly problematic--after all, what type of music does it indicate (Rock & Roll, or Punk, or Heavy Metal, or blues rock, or folk rock, or Britrock, dadrock, etc., etc.)? Popular music is, after all, more liable than most popular cultural forms to obey a logic of fragmentation, driven both by the market's need to generate an audience, and the tendency, on the part of some sections of the audience, to reposition themselves against the form of music currently perceived as dominant. The troubles experienced by Oasis after the release of their third album are a salutary example of this. Their record company (Creation Records) confidently assumed that demand for the album Be Here Now would meet and exceed that for the multi-million selling previous album What's the Story (Morning Glory)? In accordance with this view, the record company treated the release of the third album with the kind of secrecy normally accompanying the election of a new pontiff: the album was hyped, while its contents were jealously guarded. The feverishly expectant atmosphere surrounding the album's release was heightened by the media's interest in the activities of the Gallagher twins (activities that, once again, conformed to the accepted standards of rock transgression: Noel Gallagher, the surly, iconoclastic Northerner, and Liam, the

wild man of rock).

However, the album's performance, and the performance of the singles taken from it, have not met the expectations of the group or of the record label. Partly, this is because of the very success of the marketing strategy, which ensured that those interested in the group spent their cash on the album very quickly (the album sold over half a million copies in its first week of release). However, this coincided with the activation of a backlash against the group, conducted simultaneously by the music press (the NME, in particular, turned against the group, dismissing them as bloated and self-indulgent) and, more interestingly, by sections of the fan base itself (see the contemporary letters columns of the NME and Melody Maker). Oasis were no longer deemed to be the music of choice for a particular generation: that role had passed on to Radiohead, and more particularly to their lead singer Thom Yorke (a tortured rock poet, in the lineage of Kurt Cobain and Leonard Cohen), to the Manic Street Preachers, newly sanctified after Ritchie James' disappearance, and finally, to Richard Ashcroft and The Verve (of whom more below).

The identity of the authentic rock musician is, therefore, not fixed: to an extent it is at the mercy of a particular audience (the people, in James' formulation quoted above, who need a band to speak for them), and it is also subject to a process of commodification, as the 'real' musician is positioned in the marketplace. If, as I have suggested above, the performer and the audience find a moment of authentic communication in a commonly-held idea of rock music as an unspecific but accessible real language, then it is important to note that, in practice, language changes, and changes remarkably quickly.

Perhaps, therefore, the extent to which a group or a musician is able to establish themselves as authentic depends on the extent to which its target audience accept that they are able to balance the performance of authenticity with the practice of authenticity, as reflected in the band's/musician's and the fans' idea of the music as it exists at that particular time. Certainly, this seems to be the unspoken assumption behind much rock journalism, particularly that published by those papers and magazines whose brief is to patrol the practices of white male guitar rock--NME, Melody Maker, Select, Vox, Q (which combines the tropes of rock discourse with the style and layout of the lifestyle magazine), and Mojo (the closest that rock journalism gets to the practice of archaeology).

As an example of this, it might be instructive to analyse a review of a 1997 Verve concert by the NME editor Steve Sutherland. The band, after a rather difficult period in which they had split up and reformed, had released a new album, Urban Hymns, and a couple of 'landmark anthems', "Bittersweet Symphony" and "The Drugs Don't Work." The video for "Bittersweet Symphony" had placed Richard Ashcroft, the band's lead singer, in archetypal opposition to the everyday; he walked down a scrupulously ordinary street, singing directly to camera, while the rest of the world (it seemed) moved unconsciously to impede him. The concert's opening moments seemed to be a reflection of the attitude contained within the video: this band did not require the more obvious trappings of performance. In fact, they seemed to position themselves squarely against any idea of the theatrical.

. . . There is no fuss. No bother. No big intro. Just numbers on a screen counting down, then Richard lopes on, removes his parka, takes off his shoes, silently screams and shakes his fist at the crowd. There is no giant telephone box. No Rolls-Royce drum-riser. Just the Verve and their calamitous beauty, getting down to business. The band in the shadows, Richard up front. Not a performance as much as an experience. (Sutherland)

For Sutherland, The Verve are not engaged in a performance, as the term is normally understood. They exist in front of their audience unadorned, defiantly themselves. The simplicity of their stage set-up is contrasted against the set Oasis had used in a recent tour (which contained a Rolls-Royce drum-riser and a giant telephone box, images taken from the cover of Be Here Now): Oasis have, it seems forfeited their right to communicate with the audience because they have uncritically accepted the idea that rock performance is firstly a performance, rather than a moment of authentic communication between performer and audience. In other words, the subtext runs, they need their props, because they are faking it: they no longer connect directly, as themselves, with their fans.

At the same time, though, the moments that Sutherland praises are themselves unambiguously theatrical. Ashcroft's entrance is prepared for by a count-down: it is hard to imagine a more transparently artificial technique for securing an appropriately tense, expectant response from an already self-selectedly enthusiastic audience. Ashcroft's entrance is itself archetypally authentic: the performer, in his everyday clothing, enters and readies himself to engage directly with the audience, removing his coat and his shoes in a gesture that can be read as both public and private. It is a public gesture, readying Ashcroft for an appropriately energetic show: but it also seems unguarded, spontaneous, as though Ashcroft regards the location as if it were his home. In this light, the weighting of the paragraph's final sentence is particularly telling, because it both draws attention to and elides the contradictions inherent in Ashcroft's actions. Performance is the negative term, because it connotes a communication that is one-way, in which the performer controls the performance and the audience merely receive it: experience is the positive term, because it connotes an event that may have some elements of performance to it, but that uses those elements to create a direct communication between the performer and the audience. The public performance must be superseded by a private act of communion, that is however still based on a commonly-held idea of an appropriate way to perform.

And the focus of this performed communion is the music.

Richard doesn't say much tonight, doesn't want to break the spell. Between songs he stalks the stage, impatient with the applause which seems a curiously inappropriate response, like waking from a dream and cheering the hallucinations even as they evaporate. When The Verve get it right--and they do tonight--the crowd and band alike are not so much playing and witnessing these songs as living through them, they touch us all so deeply. What this Verve have got going for them that they didn't have before they went

away is mass communion. They had the commitment before, had the vision, had the intensity, had it all except the songs. So before, to see Richard so totally lost in the noise of his own creating, so far under the influence of The Verve's chemistry was a bit unnerving. Sometimes you felt like a tourist in bedlam, gawping at the freakshow.

That's why the timing of this tour's so crucial. Urban Hymns has had its time to bed inside our consciousness. We know it off by heart and are ready now to participate in a couple of hours of being The Verve. Now, with "The Drugs Don't Work" and "Bittersweet Symphony" and "Sonnet" and "The Rolling People" and all these landmark anthems from the Urban Hymns LP, we too have drained the elixir, we too are Richard, eyes closed, head thrown back, throat muscles taut with the pain of singing. These are our songs too and we each have personally interpreted their shadowy lyricism, have taken each line about cats in bags and butterfly chasing and have impregnated them with our own memories. (Sutherland)

The music, here, is more than a simple point of connection; it is the vehicle for a moment of transformation. The band and audience, it seems, become one. This moment, a moment of transformation, where the boundary between the performer and the audience no longer seems to exist, has been described by Jon Savage as the goal of any successful rock performance (Time Travel 250). Although it might not be possible to theorise such a transformation (to do so would be to move across the discursive boundary separating theorist from fan), it is at least possible to discuss its constituent elements, as described in Sutherland's review.

Firstly, there is a loss of control. Ashcroft is, it seems, unable to contain his response to the music. It pushes him beyond the conventional response of the performer to an audience; he seems impatient with their applause, precisely because it is a response appropriate to performance but not to communion. His singing style, too, seems to signal an unconscious response to the music: he (and the audience alongside him) sings with his eyes closed, his head thrown back, his "throat muscles tense with the sweet pain of singing." Secondly, there is an unpremeditated quality about the performance as described. The performance is one where, in Sutherland's words, "The Verve get it right"; all the elements of a successful performance have fallen into place, with the strong implication that this is a matter of this band, performing at this time, in front of this audience, who respond in this particular way. The description carries the powerful, yet unstated implication that the success of this performance is strictly unrepeatable, even though the response to the band might be equally as rapturous elsewhere. Thirdly, it is profoundly private: we (a pronoun employed for full emotive effect) share this experience with Richard; the first name, and the intimacy it connotes, is casually assumed as a sign of Ashcroft's and the audience's shared experience of the event.

These three categories--loss of control, unpremeditation, and privacy--are the three categories that Dyer assigns to the authentic performance of the star in classical Hollywood cinema: they are present here, but they are expressed in

terms of both the singer's and the audience's in-depth knowledge of the songs. The audience does not eavesdrop on the spontaneity of the star; the audience also loses control, acts in an unpremeditated way, and shares in the essential privacy of the star's performance, by recognising and performing the music with the same kind of commitment as Ashcroft himself displays.

By the review's end, we have reached the logical endpoint of the rhetorical development strongly suggested in the section quoted above. Sutherland suggests that, by the time that the final song is reached, there is no difference between Ashcroft and the audience: more than this, that both have shared the same experience of the world, and have come to share a common attitude to that experience.

Richard is using what happened to The Verve as a metaphor for our whole generation. Lost without any idea of what to believe in, he offers us the best he can; the shared experience that we are all fuck-ups and it's ok. By the time the band are cranking up into "Come On" at the very end, Richard has no need to hector us into sharing his reverie. We are right up there with him, howling at the moon, It's a high place to be. Ain't never coming down. (Sutherland)

Transformation has been replaced by transfiguration. Ashcroft is now the chosen representative of his generation, the latest in a line of such spokesmen; the slighting references to Oasis in the review are an indication that the burden of responsibility of speaking for his peers has passed directly from the Gallaghers to The Verve.

A standard rock trope--the generational representative--has been rearticulated, and in this rearticulation the terms of the trope have altered. Oasis, for example, spoke both for a confident, laddish, unrepentant British working-class masculinity, and for the classes excluded during the Thatcherite 1980s.

For all the success and acclaim--first album straight in at number one, Best New Band at the 1995 Brits--Oasis still carry themselves like outsiders, or, in the case of singer Liam Gallagher, a particularly feisty middleweight. Scratch the hedonistic surface and there's sharp social observation; not for nothing is leader Noel Gallagher the first lyricist to mention The Big Issue in a hit song. . . . (Savage 392)

Before Oasis, and a profound influence on both the young Gallaghers (Liam Gallagher's stage persona is loosely adopted from Ian Brown, the Roses' lead singer), The Stone Roses spoke for the contradictory yet transformative aspirations of the late 1980s love generation.

"Time! Time! Time! The time is now," Ian Brown shouts as The Stone Roses come out on to the massive stage at Spike Island. And, despite the extremely laid back appearance of the crowd, there is a palpable sense of urgency in the air. The Manchester groups have succeeded in capturing and stimulating an ambience which is delicately balanced between ambition and solidarity, between radicalism and conservatism, between hedonism and idealism,

between androgyny and laddishness, between gentleness and violence. . . . (Savage 267)

All this only to find that the contradictions embedded in their initial reception had been flattened out once Suede's image established itself in the early 1990s:

Suede presented a severe androgyny, all 1970s waisted angles and pouting, with lyrics that told stories of explicit gay sex--"The Drowners", "Animal Nitrates"--or at least went in for a good blurring, like on "Moving": "so we are a boy we are a girl." The Madchester groups had been laddish, blokeish, even homophobic: in contrast (and they had to be in contrast) Suede were haughty, girly, quite possibly homosexual. . . . (Savage 346)

All three examples come from the same source, and reflect one particular commentator/fan's response to the shifting allegiances of popular music; but each successive analysis does not necessarily invalidate the appropriateness of the previous one. It is not that the music industry, the groups, the writers, and the audience are prone to acts of communal amnesia, in which the lauded achievements of the previous year become the monolithic mistakes of the present: rather, it is that a group identified as authentic are rarely defined as possessing a single identity. In the extracts quoted above, The Stone Roses and Oasis are open to contradictory readings; of their personae, their music, and their relation to the lived experience of those who listen and of those who write. Even Suede, who undoubtedly blur gender codings in their music and in performance, have been held to reflect a variety of contradictory experiences--suburbia against the city, glamour against sleaze, etc., etc. The group's image is not entirely open (one would be hard put to imagine a gender-bending Oasis track, for example); but it is dialogic. As argued above, in performance, rock groups attempt to achieve direct communication, if not communion, with their audiences. But this is not to say that the experience is judged identically by everyone who participates in it. After all, the focus of the performance for both the performer and the audience is not the performer's image but the music he or she produces, and that music is not reducible to a single, canonical interpretation. It is this that enables a particular group to establish, at a particular time in their careers, a wide, generational appeal; the discursive inclusivity of music allows both musicians and audience to invest it with their own meanings, while still engaging in a shared experience of the performance.

Sutherland's review of The Verve at Glasgow Barrowlands is not an isolated moment of journalistic ecstasy; something of the same tenor can be found in accounts and reviews of other bands in the recent past--The Stone Roses at Spike Island in 1990; Oasis at Maine Road in 1995; Blur at Alexandria Palace in 1995; Pulp at Glastonbury in 1995; Radiohead at Glastonbury in 1997; The Verve themselves at Wigan in 1998. Each performance is more than a performance; it is the moment when the audience merge with the group, in the contradictory, inherently dialogic way described above. As Sutherland describes it, the successful performance is a performance that denies that it is a performance; the moment of communion itself therefore rests upon a contradiction, in which overtly theatrical moments (the countdown, the initial disrobing/preparation)

are described as though they are displays of Ashcroft's authentic, untheatrical self. Moreover, the exact nature of the communion is itself vague: Sutherland describes 'our whole generation' as consisting entirely of 'fuck-ups', without specifying the exact nature of the term; the implication seems to be that anyone driven to ask about the specific meaning of the statement (Who are 'our whole generation' and when, where, and in what way did they all fuck up) simply could not have been there. If Sutherland's account of the audience's response is trustworthy (and there is no good reason to assume that it is not), then, perhaps, we should look for the significance of the event, and the significance of rock performance in general, not in the vague and contradictory effects and second-order meanings of a performance, but in the process of the performance itself, and in the shared performative language constantly rearticulated in each encounter between performer and audience.

Four

The function of music in creating and sustaining a contradictory sense of identity has been acutely analysed by Simon Frith.

The experience of pop music as an experience of identity; in responding to a song, we are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with the performers and with the performer's other fans. Because of its qualities of abstractness, music is, by nature, an individualising form. We absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our own bodies; they have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible. At the same time, and equally significantly, music is obviously collective. We hear things as music because their sounds obey a more or less familiar cultural logic, and for most music listeners (who are not themselves music makers) this logic is out of our control. There is a mystery to our own musical tastes. Some records and performers work for us, others do not--we know this, without being able to explain it. Somebody else has set up the conventions, they are clearly social and apart from us. Music, whether teenybop for young female fans, or jazz or rap for African-Americans or nineteenth century for German Jews in Israel, stands for, symbolises and offers the immediate experience of collective identity. ("Music and Identity" 121)

Frith's account of music's construction of identity as contradictory--both individual and collective--is, I think, persuasive: but if we are to account for the experience of rock performance, then the opposition that Frith sets up has, I think, to be taken further, to embrace not only the contradictions inherent in the audience, but also the contradictory nature of the rock performer, and to an extent the ambiguous position of the reviewer. All share the sense that a good rock performance must contain a central contradiction--that it must be '4 real,' both constructed and authentic, both theatrical and spontaneous; but that the theatrical, constructed elements of the performance always exist in opposition to that which is authentic and spontaneous, while at the same time those theatrical elements are subsumed within the spontaneity of the event. Performance is permissible, it seems, if the performance is a performance that is real: if the act is an act that can be treated as though it is not an act. For the

group and for the audience the contradiction both does and does not exist. The experience addressed in rock performance is always general, communal, and the community formed in performance is, as Frith notes in his discussion of the experience of listening to music, both instant and outwith the individual audience member's control; but the community that is formed in performance is an inherently dialogic and active one. There is no metalanguage of fandom to which the individual audience member completely surrenders; there is no deeply articulated structure of participation that governs all responses to the event. The performer does not entirely control the event: the audience is not entirely constructed by their place in the event. Both, as argued above, find justification for their participation in the event in the idea of rock as a myth of authenticity. But the experience that the music authentically expresses is not the same from group to group, nor from audience to audience, nor even from reviewer to reviewer; all rely on the music to speak for and through them--but again, as Frith notes, music does not speak unambiguously to anyone.

It is within these contradictions that, finally, James' act of desperate self-mutilation can be placed. It cannot be read as entirely theatrical: it cannot be read as entirely spontaneous (the '4' is far too obviously a constructed sign). It is both a private act, a moment of bizarre intimacy between James and Lamacq; but it has a strongly public element to it--it is, after all the most visible sign possible that the Manics' public image was an authentic one, and it is hard to imagine any other statement carrying the same emotional impact of James' desperate, last-ditch assertion of authenticity. Finally, James' act is remarkable, not only for the sheer physical impact of the act itself, but also because it does call attention to, and in doing so it rearticulates and reforms, the central ambiguity in both the public performance and reception of rock music and the public persona of the rock star; both rest on the contradiction between the constructed and the unpremeditated, and both rely for their ultimate validation on the open, dialogic, unfinalisable status of music as a performed language.

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