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Source: *Popular Music*, May, 2001, Vol. 20, No. 2 (May, 2001), pp. 143-167

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/853649>

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# Vicars of ‘Wannabe’: authenticity and the Spice Girls

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## Introduction

Popular notions of value in art – even popular definitions of art itself – are much indebted to the idealist narratives of late romanticism and its maximalised form, elite modernism. Since artistic value is normally imputed to one side of a dialectically related pair of oppositional terms, two principal strategies exist by which to ascribe value to the music you love, find interesting, or want to study: either show how it merits the positive term of the valorising pair (if necessary redefining the specific markers of that term), or attack the narrative underlying the binary itself. A typical postmodernist strategy is to do both these things simultaneously, so as to collapse notions of value into a win-win polysemy.

One of the central terms in popular music criticism is authenticity, which establishes and then defends the boundaries of what is thought ‘good’ – artistically, politically, morally.<sup>1</sup> Like all such binaries, it generates (and is dialectically defined by) another – the ‘weak’ term of the opposition – which in this case is the inauthentic, the fake, the commercial. The notion of authenticity has been a source of moral and artistic value attributed to the commercial underdog at every point in the history of popular music, as important, as Simon Frith has noted, ‘for critics struggling to distinguish jazz from Tin Pan Alley pop in the 1920s and black jazz from white jazz in the 1930s, as for critics asserting rock’s superiority to teen pop in the late 1960s’ (Frith 1987, p. 136). Although in musical terms the markers for authenticity change in their detail depending on the types of music being set within the terms of the opposition, the fundamental implication remains the same – the authentic music is more real because it is less designed as a commercial venture. Making this claim frequently involves exaggerating the traits of the commercially dominant form. In her recent study of the Nashville Sound, Joli Jensen shows how the symbolic construction of authenticity for country music defined it in opposition to ‘pop’. The ‘authenticity markers’ within this frame were heartfelt, personal song lyrics that seemed to speak autobiographically for the singer. These were combined with self-revelatory articles in fan magazines and liner notes, promoting the accessibility of the performer and the personal nature of the performer–fan relationship. Most importantly, authentic country exhibited a ‘live’ feel and spontaneity in recorded performance. In fact this was often highly rehearsed – Jensen quotes the classic 1931 recording, ‘Jimmie Rodgers Visits the Carter Family’, which conjured up a cosy, homely spontaneity of a real visit and improvised conversation and music-making when it was in fact fully scripted and recorded in a studio – and country, like pop, was a recorded – and thus commercialised – form from the outset (see Jensen 1998, p. 9). Jensen explores how fans’ beliefs about the change in musical

style represented by the Nashville Sound of the 1950s and 1960s have changed with time. Originally, fans saw the lush orchestrated Nashville Sound either negatively as a loss of authenticity, 'selling out', or, slightly more positively, as a temporary, necessary but regrettably less authentic defence against the emergence of rock (see Jensen 1998, pp. 38ff.). Now fans consider the Nashville Sound as authentic as the earlier honky-tonk, since both currently stand in relation to the even more commercially successful 1990s country boom. Overriding both these reactions is an opposition between 'authentic' and 'commercial', based on a suspicion of a popularity that makes the recipient part of an undifferentiated mass rather than one of the select initiated few.

Scholarly attitudes to mass culture and, in particular, to its production, have traditionally drawn on the work of the Frankfurt School, notably, where music is concerned, on the writing of Theodor Adorno (see Adorno 1998(1941)). The internal dialectic of value within a popular music genre outlined above shares fundamental oppositional terms with the more general debate about music in the writing of Adorno, for whom commodification resulting from commercialisation was in opposition to the essentials of art. This is perhaps unsurprising since both Adorno himself and popular music, as it is understood today, are products of an era fuelled by romantic assumptions about the nature of art and the artist. Interesting, therefore, are both the derision which Adorno directs at popular music itself, and the surprising willingness of those who seek to validate its study within the academy to adopt this detractor as their theoretical model.

As Richard Middleton (1990) has discussed, Adorno's vision of musical art is essentially a late-romantic one, stressing the autonomy and immanence of the musical work in a fixed notated form separate from its social use-value or exchange-value. Adorno himself rejected popular music utterly, as regressive and oppressive, since it cheats the listener with its 'pseudo-individuation', depriving him/her of authentic emotion, and causing him/her to love his/her deprivation. In short, it lacks authenticity. Adorno's critique is nevertheless powerful, and aspects of it (without the withering denial of value in popular music) have influenced Neo-Marxist sociologists who critique late-capitalism by focusing on the production of mass culture, including the production of popular music. In discussing the boom in studies of popular music following the foundation of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music in 1981, Charles Hamm has shown Adorno's critique to be particularly influential with regard to the notion of authenticity. He argues that such studies were driven by 'the assumption that capitalist production negates "authentic" expression by certain groups, here defined not by ethnicity, [as in previous narratives of authenticity dealing with jazz] but by class' (Hamm 1995, p. 25). Whilst Hamm acknowledges Adorno's 'intellectual sophistication and ... role in legitimating the study of popular music in the wider academic world' (an irony, given Adorno's own conclusions), Hamm is sceptical about the ability of the modernist Marxist meta-narrative to make sense of the postmodern world.

However, the appropriateness of Adorno's critique could be argued on the grounds that certain types of popular music (jazz and early rock, for example) fairly clearly share Adorno's late-romantic definition of the artist. As Middleton writes, 'Interestingly enough, sociologists have noted the emergence of an Adornian distinction between "commercial manipulation" and avant-garde "authenticity" within the discourse of the jazz and rock communities themselves.' (Middleton 1990, p. 43) Middleton sees the fruitfulness of the application of Adorno's approach

to pop music as a measure of how deeply Adorno's critique of mass culture has permeated both popular consciousness and musical practice. However, it is possible, rather than seeing Adorno's critique as instrumental, simply to recognise in both Adorno and popular music, shared roots in romanticism, particularly in the late-romantic definition of authenticity as a defence against commercialisation in the wake of a decrease in artistic patronage and the rise of market relations. This, as Middleton points out, is reflected in the employment structure of popular music, whose performers are not paid pro-rata like workers, but given royalties, i.e. treated as artists.<sup>2</sup>

Jensen argues that country music fans resent commercialisation because it destroys the collective nature of music appreciation. The music enacts a symbolic and personal relationship between the performer (artist), the fan, and the other fans, whilst the perceived intervention of faceless commercial mediation deprives the fan of the idea that the experience is personalised and thus authentic. Adorno does not recognise the collective as a cultural subject. His critique comprises two dialectically opposed elements – the individual subject of the avant-garde and the monolithic mass subject of the culture industry. Avant-garde music is autonomous, that of the culture industry hopelessly partial. Many musicologists are no longer prepared blithely to accept the idea of any music's autonomy, and have attempted to recontextualise musical works and to avoid judging other music by standards of progress derived from an idealistic interpretation of Beethoven's. That this represents Adorno's idea of progress explains his resistance to conventions, especially those structured by unchanged repetition, which he sees as indicative of simplicity and childishness (in part explaining his opposition to both popular music and the 'neo-classic' Stravinsky). Once we have heard Beethoven, he implies, there is no turning back – the potential of music has been raised and our expectations must be too. This romantic ideal of progress and its concomitant attitude to convention also provided a way for cultural critics to validate the study of specific popular musics in Adornian terms, as oppositional, progressive, and counter-cultural and thus authentic art – always, however, in relation to another popular music style that was seen as conformist, conventional and therefore regressive.

Even within classical music, Adorno is keen to divide the authentic and progressive from the regressive, inauthentic 'other'. Adorno's Beethoven is defined to exaggerate his difference from what, once the opposition is constructed, becomes termed 'classical music', and this assists the ideal of progress that places composers such as Berlioz and Stravinsky outside the pantheon of progressives. In his recent essay, 'Chaikovsky and the Human', Richard Taruskin, seeking to unravel the assumptions which have led to Chaikovsky's 'misprizing', sees as root cause the construction of a devalued 'classical' in relation to the prized 'romantic', both of which terms 'are intelligible today only in their artificially constructed binary relationship' (Taruskin 1997, pp. 250–1). Taruskin's rich analysis goes on to place this binary within other dialectical contexts, notably *Zivilisation* and *Kultur*, so as to show Chaikovsky's unjustly maligned place within a Franco-Italian tradition which has provided the negative foil for the primacy of German Romantic idealism in the nineteenth-century musicological construction of music history.

Taruskin is seeking to rescue Chaikovsky's music for musicology by diffusing (through deconstruction) the moral opprobrium that it has traditionally attracted. Taruskin argues that because Chaikovsky exhibited a historical subscription to an 'aesthetic of enjoyment', his music received a relatively disfavourable assessment

within the discipline of musicology, whose premises drew on the German *Kultur* aesthetic as a supposedly universal criterion of value. This aesthetic, which Taruskin characterises as essentially romantic, ‘celebrated the idiosyncratically personal and the artist’s unique subjectivity, presupposing a producer-oriented [i.e. composer-oriented] musical ecosystem’, and was the product of Kantian ‘pure, disinterested artistry’ (Taruskin 1997, p. 251). Within this definition, music not valued was by contrast considered to be that which ‘served the base ambitions of performers and the frivolous appetites of spectators’, in short, ‘the vulgar, the sentimental and the feminine’ (Taruskin 1997, p. 251). Taruskin skilfully exposes the historical contingency of traditional musicological value judgements (some of which persisted into the late twentieth century) in which Beethoven has always been signified by the former (‘pure disinterested artistry’ – notably in Adorno’s critique; see above) and Chaikovsky the latter (crowd-pleasing vulgarity). I would like to argue that this binary is similar to that which permeates the discourse surrounding authenticity in pop music, whose values have traditionally overlapped significantly with those which Taruskin characterises as ‘romantic’. This is not to propose similarity or analogies between pop and classical musics themselves, or to suggest that they may be studied in the same way. Merely, I claim that ideas about value and worth, and the criteria upon which these may be assessed, have more to do with general cultural-historical values than with the specifics of the material being so assessed.

## Rock and pop

Taruskin’s further point is to peel away the false emphases that have accrued to Mozart in the process of his hijacking by the central German tradition which valued Mozart’s music (and differentiated him from his Italian contemporaries) by means of a very selective understanding of it as autonomously structured, idealised and contentless form. Using the work of Wye Jamison Allanbrook, Taruskin rejects this nineteenth-century picture of Mozart’s music to focus instead on the centrality of dance to its semiotic conventions (see Allanbrook 1983; Taruskin 1997, p. 292). I would argue that the same is the case in pop music, especially for a group such as the Spice Girls, who are unencumbered by the restrictive instruments that many rock bands require (and which themselves arguably serve as surrogates for women’s bodies in static sex acts (e.g. guitar solos)). Dance promotes the social negotiation of the individual body within the collective, the relatively select group, constructed around the music which serves to create collective identities. Such identification both requires a listener’s belief in the music’s authenticity and helps to construct one. Thus Taruskin offers a model as to how we might nevertheless value the feminine, the vulgar and the sentimental in music (here pop music, specifically the Spice Girls, in relation to rock-derived norms) by recognising the importance of semiotic dance conventions and an aesthetic of enjoyment grounded in the adherence to convention.

Pop music has served as the commercialised inauthentic other to both country (see above) and rock ‘n’ roll. With roots in both rural music and Black music, early rock was, so the story goes, dangerous and subversive, its roughness forming an easy antithesis to the smooth slickness of urban pop in the 1950s. Markers for authenticity in rock are the presence of a talented individual or small group formed organically from ‘naturally’ knowing one another, driven to write songs as the only outlet for their (personal) emotions and (political) views, who forge the music and

play it themselves, typically in the standard musical arrangement of two different guitars, lead and bass, with optional keyboard, obligatory drums and a vocalist (who might also be a guitarist, and is usually the songwriter unless (as is possible) she is only a woman). The fundamental White masculinity of these groups is epitomised in their organic unity and the way the group channels its identity through one singer who forms the expression of a group-originated song. Such a band should progress naturally as artists (rather than being an industry confection and being told what to do) and would be able to perform live (rather than requiring the artifice of technology or the commercialisation of recording). As Fred Pfeil has commented, 'this desire for a break with commercial culture and a disavowal of the commodity status of rock – to be opposed to "pop" from within, by dint of an "organic" relationship with the music, its traditions and its audience – is imbricated with the desire to construct, maintain and emulate an alternative white masculinity' (Pfeil 1995, p. 79).

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, in the wake of punk, pop groups attempted to deflate the overriding discourse of authenticity by affirming rather than resisting their label. Simon Frith has charted this defence to the previously disparaging use of 'pop':

One of the most important aspects of the post-punk dissolution of rock certainties was the replacement of authenticity by artifice as the central concern in critical discourse. This was marked (in the pages of *New Musical Express*, for example) by the revaluation of the labels 'rock' and 'pop' themselves. In the last [sic] sixties, 'rock' had been established as the praise-word, distinguishing serious or powerful music from 'commercial rubbish' and formula sounds. Now, 'pop' became the term of praise, a way of distinguishing sharp and clever sounds from 'rockist rubbish' and formula flab. (Frith 1988, p. 4)

Exemplifying this, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys expressed pride at 'proving we *can't* cut it live . . . We're a pop group not a rock 'n' roll group.' (quoted in Cook 1998a, p. 11) It is but a short step from here to claim, as some have, that by the end of the twentieth century the markers of this rock/pop divide no longer mattered. John Mundy, for example, has written:

'Youth', as a subject of conflicting historical discourses in specific cultural formations, no longer existed, and the notion of an ideology of 'rock', with its connotations of 'authenticity' and 'opposition', had become meaningless. Though the Monkees had been criticized for . . . their perceived lack of musical credibility, such issues no longer mattered with Take That and Spice Girls. Arguably, their very artificiality was part of their appeal. (Mundy 1999, p. 232)

However, the contribution to the authenticity debate made by Tennant and observed by Frith merely re-inscribes the terms of the discourse. Tennant simply trumps one marker of authenticity that the Pet Shop Boys don't possess (the ability to perform live), with another (the personally authentic honest address to the fans who they do not attempt to deceive). Frith's point is not that the markers of authenticity, or authenticity itself, have become 'meaningless', as Mundy alleges, but rather that, since it has fallen prey to convention and standardisation as a result of its commercial success, pop is able to reassert itself within the old terms of the dialectic as the new originality.

Moreover, that was the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, the old 'rock certainties' were reinvigorated in the UK by the advent of Britpop, which self-consciously hearkened back to the Beatles – a talented group of authentic musicians who represented everything antithetical to the industry confection of the Monkees. Many of the old rock markers for authenticity returned, all the stronger for their nostalgic and patri-

otic associations. This reinvigoration was arguably more widespread. In 1990, Milli Vanilli had their Grammy Award for best newcomer taken away when they admitted to not singing on their records. Mundy merely claims that ‘nobody actually *cared*’, but if this was so, surely the award givers would not have taken such a step? It certainly shows some degree of continued commitment to a rock-derived performance aesthetic which is ‘a last romantic attempt to preserve ways of music-making – performer as artist, performance as “community” – that had been made obsolete by technology and capital’ (Frith 1988, p. 1).

## The Spice Girls

The pop phenomenon of the mid-1990s, the Spice Girls achieved the highest debut single of any UK group in the US charts, surpassing even the Beatles. Both albums and eight of their nine singles releases achieved number one chart position in the UK,<sup>3</sup> including the first five consecutive singles (an unprecedented occurrence), yet the group exhibited few of the external traits which had come to symbolise authenticity in popular music. Because the Spice Girls had been formed from young hopefuls who had replied to an advertisement, they were immediately labelled as an inauthentic industry fabrication, attempting to cash in on the success of boy bands like Take That. All women, the group overtly aimed to please their public by singing songs conventional in type, albeit varied in genre, which they co-authored with accomplished behind-the-scenes song-writing duos.<sup>4</sup> The Spice Girls did not play instruments but rather sang and danced. Even though none were specialist singers or dancers (they were chosen for all-round ability and personality) they were well choreographed and well produced and edited. In short, they were an undeniably commercial product.

Clearly the success of the Spice Girls does not make sense in terms of the normal markers of authenticity. Their detractors criticised them for their lack of musical credibility (can’t sing) for their general lack of talent (can’t act, can dance a little), and the way they were formed. As mere front-women for an organisational machine whose ‘real talent’ was hidden away behind the scenes, they were also accused of insincerity (i.e. inauthenticity) with respect to their feminist ‘Girl Power’ message. How could they really be their own women, carped the press, when they had male songwriters and a male manager ‘pulling the strings’? If this was the case, surely Girl Power itself was just one more dishonest commercial strategy?<sup>5</sup>

The music press thought the fans had got it wrong. In an elitist quasi-Adornian way they were sure that the fans were in love with being cheated. The charges of being inauthentic, fake, insincere, not the real thing were levelled at the outset, yet did not immediately cause the Spice Girls to lose their ever-growing following. In fact, even when, by Christmas 1998, they were reduced to four members and had been written off by the press, their Christmas release, ‘Good-bye’, still went straight in at number one in the UK charts, giving them an exceptional (if not completely unprecedented) third consecutive Christmas UK number one. Despite not releasing a single in 1999, they were given a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Brits in 2000 and provided the main performance act. Why were the fans so convinced that the media analysis was misguided?

One possibility is that a perception of Girl Power as genuine contributed largely to the Spice Girls’ success in the face of their construction as inauthentic. The potential of Girl Power to function both as a strategy of resistance to patriarchy and

essentialism, and, ironically, as a financial entrapment (i.e. fitting punishment) of those (men) still subscribing to the values of patriarchy, is attractive to a young female audience. Those perceiving the strategies of feminist resistance to patriarchy purveyed by the act happily contribute to its financial success, and, at the same time, enjoy seeing how that section of the audience *unable* to perceive it as such, also unwittingly financially supports it. Whilst I do not agree that their male-dominated institutional set-up invalidates their feminism, I would argue that the Spice Girls' contribution to late-twentieth-century feminism does not differ markedly, in either its method or its content, from that of Madonna a decade earlier (for which, see Metzstein 1993; Tetzlaff 1993). Their similar polysemic exploitation of the male gaze and its inherent re-inscription of patriarchal values serves only to increase their potential fan base and give them more economic power – surely a feminist strategy within the prevailing patriarchal-economic conditions. To some degree their 'polysemous femininity' is part of an adherence to convention – a complicity with a public for whom such feminism has become, post-Madonna, standard. This is not to allege that they do not believe in what they are saying (they probably do, and it is immaterial – the fans perceive it to be true while the media and other detractors question it), but merely to suggest that their success lies also with their exploitation of the markers of authenticity. Manipulating the discourse of authenticity enables the Spice Girls to use a rebranded version of the post-Madonna feminism with which their audience is familiar, without this lack of originality (usually a marker for 'inauthenticity') forming an obstacle to their success.

In print and in their representation of the writing process, the Spice Girls work within the traditional authenticity markers established in the 1950s/1960s by the pop/rock divide. They assert their role as originators of their music, making reference to their own 'writing' of the songs. They stress that their songs have a basis in experience and exemplify Girl Power, which they claim as their own idea:

*Spice* is only the first in a long line of kicking albums we've got in us . . . By the time we got the chance to put an album out, we'd already written dozens of songs, so it was tough to choose which to include . . . So in the next few pages we're gonna take you through the album track by track, explaining what the songs mean to us, how we came to write them, and the feelings and experiences they're based on. (Spice Girls 1997, p. 33)

They thus seem to accept a traditional marker for authenticity – the hierarchy of producer-oriented culture. However, they are still a group put together after an audition, who do not play instruments or exhibit special musical talent. These aspects they transform into the authenticity of the ordinary, rejecting the elitist pedestaling of talented instrumentalists (and indeed musical talent in general) within our culture.<sup>6</sup> Although Mundy asserts that the Spice Girls' artificiality is part of their appeal, I would argue instead that it is the 'ordinariness' that they promote which diffuses the charge of commercialism or artificiality, which is appealing. This ordinariness, which stands in direct conflict with their actual fame, serves both to diffuse fame's negative connotations and promote its accessibility to the audience. The Spice Girls' first single, 'Wannabe', plays a crucial role in this particular self-presentation. They stress their difference from other pop stars, critiquing the world of the famous whilst partaking of it. In the visual medium and at the level of their musical self-representation they thus redefine the makers to claim a different kind of authenticity for themselves, that of the girl next door. This promotes audience identification, since both the Spice Girls and their audience comprise ordinary girls

lip-synching to someone else's songs. They convince us that they think what we, the audience, would also think of this mad world of stars if we were suddenly translated thence, which, because their presence there implies that hard work and luck would be enough, they additionally reassure us we could be. The traditionally authentic rock band speaks *for* their audience (who feel truly understood and that they truly understand). The Spice Girls speak *as* their audience and *with* their audience. As Nicola Dibben writes:

The Spice Girls have often been remarked upon by the media for their 'ordinariness' and their own promotion draws attention to this ordinariness by constantly referring to the process by which they have become famous: the video 'Spice' interlaces music videos of singles from the album with documentary 'behind-the-scenes' footage charting their rise to fame and showing the Girls revelling in their own success with a mixture of incredulity and enjoyment. Even the videos and songs emphasise this ordinariness: the video of 'Wannabe', their debut single, opens with them on a London street and ends with them catching a bus home – signs that they are ordinary young women out for the night; 'Mama' presents their mothers together with stills and home movie footage of each of them as children. (Dibben 1999, p. 350)<sup>7</sup>

In the context of play with authenticity, the image of 'ordinariness' is worth closer inspection. As well as revising the markers that denote authenticity, the Spice Girls present a complex surface of contradictions, working off a wide variety of authenticity markers – many mutually exclusive – which they do not try to smooth over. Their play with these contradictions, their obvious irony and interest in sharing the joke with the fans are part of their aesthetic of enjoyment, their interest in convention (even conventions about authenticity) and, when these are combined, the scope for ludic meaning in our semiotically rich and multivalent popular culture. I will now examine the Spice Girls' first single, 'Wannabe', as it appears in various formats – as a single, as a Pop Song Video, as part of a Pop Music Video,<sup>8</sup> and as a flashback lyric interpolation into the narrative of a Pop Music Film – analysing in each case the way in which the song engages with the issue of authenticity.

### 'Wannabe'

'Wannabe', the Spice Girls' first single, stayed at number one in the UK charts for seven weeks after its release in July 1996 and reached the same chart position in thirty-two other countries. The following analysis seeks to restrict itself to a consideration of the song in its primarily circulating form, as a single sound-only track. When the song is in combination with visual material, the range of meanings suggested by musical and textual cues from its existence as a song track interact with the images to construct more concrete (and, arguably, more limited) meanings. In turn, because the song's semiotic base is so elastic, the meanings lent by the Pop Song Video format (for example) are reabsorbed back into the song in its single aural track form. It is salutary, therefore, to examine the song first in isolation in an attempt to strip away emphases accrued in other formats and highlight the range of interpretation that the song itself allows.

'Wannabe' lies well within its genre conventions as a verse and chorus structure with an introduction and a middle eight (the Appendix reproduces the lyrics and phrase structure). The rapped introduction sections use one two-bar rhythmic-harmonic ostinato (given in Example 1a), the sung verse and chorus another (Example 1b). These two ostinatos are rhythmically similar and tonally opposite:

the first starts with chord I and ends with chord IV, the second starts with V and returns to I. Even the latter of these is without strong harmonic progression, since I is reached locally from IV, with movement by fourth in the bass predominating, making the piece tonally static – a fact aided by triadic consonance and the shortness (that is, the high density of the repetition) of the ostinato sections.

The rapped sections ('authenticated' by being led by Mel B – the only Black group member), supported by a rhythmic ostinato, sparse scoring, and block chords (B–D–E–A) each a minim in length, are a traditional 'till-ready' with semiquavers grouped in the second half of each second bar of 4/4 as 3+3+2 (the last two of which represent a chromatic slide through A#).<sup>9</sup> This rhythm is picked up in the melody line of the sung verse (at the words 'be just fine') which is more fully scored and more rhythmically foursquare.

The overall effect of the piece with its repetitions, extreme economy of tonal material (the middle eight uses the tonal material of the other rap sections), tonal stasis and rhythmic repetition, is of an improvisation, appealing playfully to the idea that the Spice Girls are an organic group of elite performers who have sufficient authentic musical talent to make it up as they go along. The short vocal melodic units of the verse often start on the second quaver of the bar, adding further to the improvised quality – as if the singer is waiting for the instrumental harmony before picking her note. The song's playful use of musical signs connoting traditional authenticity tally with what the Spice Girls themselves say about the song:

Mel B: We were just having a laugh when we wrote *Wannabe*. It's more of a vibe song than anything else. It had no sit-down planning. The sentiment, the meaning, the lyrics, the rhythm, just happened.

Mel C: It was recorded in under an hour.

Geri: We'd already written parts of it when Mel B and Emma came up with the bridge. (Spice Girls 1997, p. 34)

These comments seem clearly underpinned by the idea of the Spice Girls as the joint originators of the song, stressing their role as songwriters. The song 'just happened' – they are like an authentic genius composer visited by the muse and effortlessly delivered of a perfectly formed piece of music. Simultaneously, these comments are mutually contradictory: lack of sit-down planning on the one hand, yet at least a two-stage writing process, on the other. The same musical features which suggest improvisation, thereby colluding in a notion of musical competence and compositional–performative skill in line with the more traditional notion of pop authenticity, also signify the simplicity which underlines the Spice Girls' very ordinary musical abilities, and thus their 'ordinary-as-authentic' message. The conventional nature of 'Wannabe's' form – its clear structure – makes it easy to sing along to, and this vocal ease is aided by a melodic contour with few leaps, and a narrow range within a pitch area (the octave B to b) easily reached (whether at pitch or an octave down) by all voice types. All of the sung pitches are more than adequately supported by simple consonant harmonies, and the rapped sections increase this ease of reproduction by obviating the need for pitching notes at all. The audience at once experiences the song's simplicity, its directness of expression, and ease of reproduction as the performers' lack of talent (since it equals their own), and yet the musical cues signify skill at improvising – 'jamming' – the song such that the listener feels that they too could be one of the Spice Girls. Although these markers for musical simplicity and musical talent conflict with each other, they both function as markers of (two different types of) authenticity which may appeal differently to

different listeners. At the same time a listener able to spot their contradiction is given to understand that authenticity is unable to arbitrate in matters of morality or value (thereby diffusing the force of the arguments of the Spice Girls' detractors).

These different meanings represent a range of possibilities latent but available in the song itself. Where the song appears in various visual formats, images provide a further 'textual' foil against which it may be read. I will now examine three such formats, starting with the Pop Song Video (PSV).

### The 'Wannabe' video

As well as transmission in sound-only media, 'Wannabe' also circulates as part of a Pop Song Video (PSV) on music television, on pop music home video, on video jukebox, and on the world wide web.<sup>10</sup> The official video of 'Wannabe', for which the single provides the soundtrack, explores the authenticity of ordinariness in the light of a related topic, hinted at by the track's title: the opposition between fame and normality.

Pop Song Video tends to be approached in a way that virtually ignores its status as music, as musicologists frequently lament. The much-theorised PSVs of Madonna established her reputation (in the academic world at least) as 'an artist who composed with images and identities in almost the way that traditional musicians composed with tunes and harmonies' (Cook 1998b, p. 147). Nevertheless, Susan McClary finds 'breathtaking' the 'scorn with which [Madonna's] ostensible artistic focus has been trivialized, treated as a conventional backdrop to her visual appearance' (McClary 1991, p. 148). Cook reports a lack of serious attention given to the music of Madonna's PSVs, which one commentator considers as 'unambiguous . . . a mainstream contemporary pop sound with no real subtleties or surprises', as if the music is a meaningless connection between visual image and the lyrics (Young 1991, p. 67, quoted in Cook 1998b, p. 149). For Cook himself, the way in which music is often seen as secondarily reinforcing or challenging the primary visual material in PSV is comparable to the one-time similar lack of attention to, and dismissal of, film music *qua* music. The two are not completely analogous, however. Except in derived suites, film music tends not to circulate primarily as music, nor can one component of a film legitimately claim primacy as a locus for meaning.<sup>11</sup> However, PSV is, in origin at least, a promotional form for a pop music song; such songs circulate in various formats, many *without* the video – on the radio, on recordings and in live performance (whether by the original artists or not). Thus it is equally inadvisable to treat PSV as if it were a film with music regardless of how positively the critic considers the role of music in the production of meaning within the filmic totality.

In the description above of 'Wannabe' as a song, for example, it was suggested that the restricted harmonic rhythmic ostinatos of the song play with the idea of authenticity by connoting mutually contradictory markers (musical artfulness for the traditionally authentic and musical artlessness for the ordinary as authentic). The video similarly explores both these aspects of authenticity and negotiates between them and the meaning of the lyrics, which deal exclusively with friendship and love.

A perennial problem for the analyst is how to textualise a non-textual multimedia product. The way in which the narrative of the video as a whole (and not just as a film with music, but as song (i.e. music and words) filmed) is told, is of

necessity already an interpretation of its meaning. The relationship between music and narrative within the diegetic frame in pop music video is very different from, indeed almost opposite to, that of other visual media involving music. Opera and film, for example, only recognise the actual phenomenal presence of music at certain special moments. In PSV the performance of the song *is* the principal narrative. The group singing are not only aware that they are singing – deafness is not one of the basic perceptual codes in this music form – but they sing knowing that they are in a PSV – they are performers.<sup>12</sup> The Spice Girls' song videos in particular have a polysemous quality which actively discourages single meanings. As they say in their manifesto, *Girl Power*, 'Videos can add all sorts of other levels and meanings to a song, so we've also let you in on some of the thinking behind them and what it was like to make them.' (Spice Girls 1997, p. 33)

The video of 'Wannabe' has a simple narrative structure: the Spice Girls arrive at a posh hotel party, gate-crash it, dance around singing 'Wannabe', and then leave. In the central part, the Spice Girls sing the entire song. This is framed by a prologue in which the girls arrive on foot outside the party, and an epilogue in which they leave on a bus. In the prologue there is only dialogue and brief *a cappella* singing; in the epilogue there are similarly diegetic sounds of footsteps, dialogue, and the departing bus's engine.

Crucial as an apologia for their future success as pop artists, 'Wannabe' excuses the Spice Girls from absorption into a social stratum that would remove them from the world of their fans. They distance themselves expressly from fame before the event, by presenting it as 'other', and encouraging the viewer to identify with the Spice Girls' own subject position(s) – something facilitated by each member of the group having their own distinct personality. The video also emphasises the togetherness of the group (and yet their individuality within the group, since they neither dress the same nor do they perform the exact same dance moves, even in the more choreographed sections). The whole is artful in its artlessness – the girls gate-crash a party, acting on the spur of the moment in a pseudo-improvised way that belies the polished nature of the PSV, complete with its accompanying soundtrack whose instrumentalists are clearly not present at the party.<sup>13</sup> This picks up on the mutually contradictory musical topics of improvisation and simplicity by presenting the track narratively as both a piece of spontaneous fun and an artfully planned product. As Geri attests:

I remember the chaos and the cold. It wasn't very controlled – we didn't want it to be. We wanted the camera to capture the madness of Spice... It's the most spontaneous of our videos. (Spice Girls 1997, p. 35)

Yet, as will become clear from the analysis presented below, the video in fact contains many features clearly designed to further the establishment of the Spice Girls as authentic in their ordinariness and as ironic in their attitude to fame.

The viewer is integrated into the action from the beginning by a subjective camera. In the prologue, a formally dressed man looks nervously at the camera as his wife alights from their car, ushering out their two sons. The viewer is immediately positioned 'with' the Spice Girls in sympathy and in 'fact'. As the Spice Girls gate-crash the party the subjective camera follows, telling us that we too may have access to this world of exclusive parties in the company of the Spice Girls, not because they belong there (they clearly don't, they belong with us), but because they do not recognise the social barriers which keep them out (Emma scatters the

guest list, to the dismay of the doorman). The camera focuses on the Spice Girls throughout; the viewer follows them through the party, each individual viewer effectively becoming the sixth Spice Girl.

As well as being seen by the others at the party, the camera is addressed by the Spice Girls themselves. Although usually thought of as alienating, since it acknowledges the presence of the camera in the action and therefore its unreality, in this case direct address functions to acknowledge our presence since we are identified with it. The usual transparency of film relying on the suspensions of disbelief with respect to the presence of the camera is not required for PSV, since performance to camera is central to the narrative. The subjective camera increases, rather than dissolves, the sense of the reality of what is seen on the screen, since it erodes the presence of the camera at their end, and the screen at ours. The combination of subjective camera and the illusion of a single shot for the entire video create a pseudo-documentary reality for the video, which is at once both a true-to-life reportage and reflects the light-hearted, improvised fun of the Spice Girls as 'real' people. Mel C sings directly to the camera, 'What d'ya think about that?' at the opening of verse 2, the 'you' addressee – an ambiguous singular/plural second person, or generalised impersonal construction – only signifies the viewer if they deliberately resist the implication of the subjective camera. Otherwise the viewer, singing and dancing with the Spice Girls is included as co-producer of Mel C's question, as the medium through which it is communicated to the 'other' to which it is really addressed.

As well as being decided by the subjective camera, the viewer's choice between an identity as the person addressed or one as part of the address itself is also coerced by the presentation of the other people at the party. These are indeed 'other' in terms of gender and age, but also in terms of class and occupation (signified by dress) and by attitude (signified by expression, gesture and lack of movement, especially dance). The two ends of the social spectrum are represented in the prologue by the tramps outside the hotel and an aristocratic family in a white Rolls Royce. Once inside the hotel the other guests function similarly to the aristocratic couple in providing an affluent, older, formal, passive and sour-expressed background (a literal periphery in terms of camera shot) which throws into relief the Spice Girls' energetic activity, informality and fun. The Spice Girls are dressed in bright colours in a mixed casual and low-dressy style.<sup>14</sup> The invited guests include clergy, military men, the elderly, and those dressed oddly (either dated, or simply over-dressed). Several of the formal couples comprise an older (usually white-haired) woman and a younger man. This is a deliberate inversion of the social norm (notoriously rife in showbiz) of the rich older man with the pretty young bimbo, but this inversion exaggerates the difference of these 'odd' couples from the Spice Girls. In one of the few literal intersections between the video and lyrics, Emma pats one male guest on the head, singing – 'Are you for real?' – patronising (mothering) him in an ironic inversion of her role as 'Baby' Spice. Only one character, wearing a short Baby-pink dress, is attired even vaguely similarly to the Spice Girls. S/he is othered as transparently transvestite, with sizeable slightly muscular thighs and obviously fake wig and breasts – the hair cap for the former, and the cup padding for the latter, clearly visible.

The PSV visuals are structured to reflect the musical form in that both choruses (the memorable sing-along moments) are marked by artificial set-piece dances performed to camera. For the first chorus, the girls dance on a grand stair-

case with a still camera shot. For the second full chorus, the Spice Girls again desert their interaction with the guests and assemble in a small alcove to dance. The girls are suddenly performing to the viewer as if on stage, dancing in formation, which would place strain upon the improvised fun that the home movie subjective camera implies if this wasn't self-consciously a PSV. The implication is that they are performing to us in this spontaneous pop song video a little routine that they prepared earlier just to show that they are real performers and know the rules, and Mel B is still doing her own thing rather than mirroring the exact choreography of the others. This foregrounds the professionalism and talent implied by the ability to improvise and plays with the concept of performance, of staged artifice. The explicative 'zig-a-zig-ah' action of rhythmic knee trembling followed by abrupt scissoring of the thighs shut, is performed to the words by all five girls. The sexual innuendo of the dance confirms the authenticity of true fans (who understand what it really means) and also characterises the Spice Girls as active in distinction to the more passive guests.<sup>15</sup> These simple dance routines are another meeting point in the group negotiation of self and audience, since the audience can easily replicate the essential dance elements as they lip-synch to the song, feeling even more as though they are one of the Spice Girls.<sup>16</sup> By the time of the final pseudo-chorus, 'Slam', the Spice Girls' dancing is watched with disapproval by the other party-goers and a massed group of waiters threatening eviction. At this point the song ends and the Spice Girls leave. As viewer/camera we leave with them, making it clear that we do not observe or judge their dance like the other guests.

The epilogue sequence places much of the party in context. The Spice Girls arrived on foot, they catch a bus home, separating them further from the world of the party-goers' Rolls Royces. As the green double-decker bus draws away, Geri, hanging out of it, kisses us good-bye and Mel C beckons to us to come with them. There is a quick fade. Either Geri is kissing us good-bye because we belong at the party, or Mel C is inviting us to join them as their sixth member and joint generator of the song. Within the terms of identity that the video invites us to construct, this is really no choice at all, but the illusion of choice maintains the myth of the authentic fan.

The title of the song 'Wannabe' is a word that usually refers to people who seek fame in whatever way they can. Excepting the title, the lyrics do not mention fame, but serve rather to introduce the group and present aspects of Girl Power, their explicit exoteric focus. The lyrics are ostensibly about sexual love and its relation to friendship: 'If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends'. The elevation of friendship above sexual relationships forms a key plank in Girl Power since it enables women to configure their relationships with men as they wish: 'I won't be hasty, I'll give you a try/If you really bug me then I'll say good-bye'. The video, however, addresses the issue that the title of the track suggests. It surrounds the Spice Girls with the opulence of the famous, a world from which they take what they want but exit unchanged. Geri mockingly dances with a figure who appears to be an overweight Marilyn Monroe of an age that she would be were she still alive in the PSV-present of 1996, making manifest to the viewer the overblown distortion that fame wreaks on the body.

The explicit questioning of celebrity by celebrities is found elsewhere in pop songs, such as the nearly contemporaneous 'Star People' by George Michael. Uniquely, however, the Spice Girls achieve this critique not through lyrics (which could not do such a subtle and effective job alone because their explicitness reduces

the scope for listeners to project themselves), but in a video which maps only locally and tangentially onto the lyrics of the song. As individuals, of course, the Spice Girls all have a history of relentlessly seeking fame in whatever form they could – of being ‘wannabes’. For the members of the Spice Girls, pop stardom is arguably just a vehicle for fame, rather than fame being a result of pop stardom. This is another aspect of their inauthenticity in terms of the traditional construction of the authentic. They are not romantic artists who are driven to break the mould of traditional forms for their own inalienably unique artistic purposes. This is another way in which they are ordinary, for wanting fame in the abstract rather than being driven by a particular talent into a particular artistic direction. Several members had met each other at other auditions (famously, for *Tank Girl* and *Cats*) before meeting at the Spice Girls auditions. So, read differently, the world of the wannabe nevertheless gave them an authentic group identity, allying them with the traditional method of band formation through being part of the same social group, for all that they were ultimately chosen by an agency. In the ‘Wannabe’ PSV they imply a critique of fame, its exclusivity and the people who currently enjoy it, which they may then genuinely have felt (having behind them years of rejection, of not quite making it) but which quickly became a way of maintaining authenticity in the face of fame itself. As Mel B says in *Girl Power*, ‘Being normal and being thrown into such a bizarre world is the perfect combination. I just hope I can cling to that normality.’ (Spice Girls 1997, p. 36) They can enjoy the trappings of fame but do not belong to it but because they are normal like us. For us as armchair wannabes, they are our vicars since they act vicariously for us so that we can enjoy the heavenly realm of superstardom without jeopardising our own prized normality.

As a first single, ‘Wannabe’'s critique is credible, since the Spice Girls made it when they were only at the beginning of their eventual fame. However, as the Spice Girls became more properly famous, became in fact pop superstars, they ran the risk of losing their ordinariness and becoming more of that world and less of ours. Soon after the video launch of ‘Wannabe’, the Spice Girls *were* on the guest list of just those kind of parties. The use of ordinariness as a defence to commercialism, as a form of authenticity, was no longer enough. As if to reassure us that they were treating fame with an irony that we ourselves might well deploy, the ‘Wannabe’ PSV first became commercially available embedded in a sixty-minute Pop Music Video. It is to this PMV – *The Official Video Vol. 1: One Hour of Girl Power* – that I shall now turn, since, by making even greater play with the markers of authenticity, it begins to undermine the value of the binary itself.

### ‘Wannabe’ in *The Official Video Vol. 1: One Hour of Girl Power*

‘Wannabe’ is the first full-length pop song video incorporated into the pop music video *The Official Video Vol. 1: One Hour of Girl Power*.<sup>17</sup> The video opens with a sequence filmed by Geri on a home video camera, complete with the date 1/8/1995 (almost a year before the release of ‘Wannabe’) in the bottom right-hand corner. The camera follows Victoria around the ‘Four Seasons Hotel’, the Spice Girls have a pillow fight, lightly ‘trashing’ their hotel room – Geri (no longer filming) breaks a vase in a cutesie, feminised, ironic reference to what authentic (i.e. male) rock stars are meant to do – before (now with Geri behind the camera again) ‘running riot’ (a quiet riot in fluffy dressing gowns and slippers) around the hotel.<sup>18</sup> Prefiguring the party guests at the hotel in the PSV to ‘Wannabe’, the guests in the Four

Seasons hotel seem bemused and little interested in the Spice Girls. In a very stagy exchange with a young man, Geri (from behind the camera) says:

Geri: So, what do you think of the Spice Girls?

Hotel Guest (peering behind the camera, i.e. at both Geri and the viewer): Spice Girls? Spice Girls?

Emma (in shot with Mel B): Yeah, we're with Virgin, we've just been signed by Virgin.

Hotel Guest (nonchalantly): Oh, congratulations.

The effect of this is to create an 'authentic' image of the days before the Spice Girls were famous. Their authenticity is once more located in their lack of professional grooming – their similarity to 'ordinary people'. The video opens in the guise of a home video rather than a professionally produced documentary – a pseudo-video diary in a period when such a format was rife on British TV. However, it also colludes in pre-dating their togetherness as a group, paradoxically also bolstering their authenticity in more traditional terms.

The scene then cuts to the Spice Girls on two leather sofas, watching these 'home videos of what we've been up to' (Mel C) in the post-fame present of studio-finished filming, emphasised by a film-quality image, shot through a filter to make the colours appear brighter and less naturalistic than on the 'home videos'. Mel B's imprecation to 'stick the kettle on, make yourself comfy' underlines the idea that by watching their 'ordinary home videos' with them we are once more one of the Spice Girls.

The video of 'Wannabe' is preceded by genuine behind-the-scenes footage of preparation for the Spice Girls' second video, 'Say You'll Be There'. 'Wannabe' thus occurs out of chronological sequence, after footage which in fact post-dates it and which was shot after the Spice Girls' chart success. In what purports to be a chronological retelling of their story, this prolongs the pre-history normality (and group authenticity) of the Spice Girls whilst lending some credibility to the 1995 (pre-fame) footage by obscuring the actual shortness of this section. The video of 'Wannabe', although clearly a professional product, is able through its images and their resonance with those in the first part of *The Official Video*, to re-inscribe the 'pre-professional group pre-history' message of the first part of the video.

### 'Wannabe' as lyric nostalgia in *Spice World the Movie*

The issue of authenticity is problematised even further by the lyric insertion of 'Wannabe' into *Spice World the Movie*, which further reflects the somewhat different relationship that the Spice Girls of 1997 had to their fame and their fans. *Spice World the Movie* is a palimpsest of main narrative, digressive, fictional 'flashforwards', and lyrics (here singles from the Spice Girls' first two albums which are performed both diagetically within the narrative, and function extra-diagetically as soundtrack items).<sup>19</sup> The work as a whole is structurally dominated by the meaningful remaking of other genres – films, TV, and pop music – and flaunts its intertextuality so as to promote self-congratulation at their intertextual competence in a broad audience. The Spice Girls appear as 'actors' within the narrative that they have created so that there is a blurring of the line between the fictional reality (verisimilitude) of art (especially that 'based on a true story') and the 'truth' of documentary film. Movies such as the Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* established a pseudo-autobiographical genre in which real-life pop stars play themselves and may thus exercise a (playful) self-critical perspective. As Fred Pfeil has commented, film and rock (and here pop) culture are distinguished by 'the consistency and coherence rock fans expect from their stars in

terms of just this relationship between rock genre and “offstage” personality profile’ (Pfeil 1995, p. 79). In *Spice World the Movie*, this is accentuated by nearly all the other characters being essentially caricatures, signalled by over-reaction and over-acting, as well as by certain stars playing themselves in walk-on parts. Although the Spice Girls can play with this mode too, they are clearly playing. Once more, they are ‘ordinary girls’ in a ‘mad world’ who can cross-dress into it behaviourally, but keep reverting to (normal) type which gets them into trouble with the media who police the world of fame. The film addresses the Spice Girls’ response to a media backlash, a potential break-up, and touches upon the problem of becoming *former* celebrities in the aftermath of great fame. Tensions within the group are manifestly present in both dialogue and body language within the film. Although *Spice World the Movie* is not ‘true’, it is ‘true-to-life’ and plays prophetically with reality such that in the months following its release, life appeared to imitate art.

*Spice World the Movie* charts its own writing and making – it is its own fictive textual autobiography. Near the beginning of the film and then at intervals throughout, Clifford (Richard E. Grant), the Spice Girls’ (fictional) manager, meets with a writer and his agent to discuss potential film plots for a movie using the group. These start outlandish and, although they stay in the realms of fantasy, gradually approach a more recognisable amalgam of filmic clichés. Occasionally they are ‘illustrated’ by a fantasy ‘flashback’ which shows the Spice Girls acting in the film as the writer narrates and imagines it. These illustrations are initially brief until the final sequence of the film, when two narratives – that of the film and that of the scriptwriter in the film – climactically converge to imply that the film we see is the film the script-writer finally wrote.

A truncated performance of ‘Wannabe’ occurs as a collectively imagined flashback.<sup>20</sup> The demands of fame (symbolised by rehearsals for a live performance), impinging unduly and unfairly on normal human priorities (symbolised by the birth of their friend’s baby), cause the Spice Girls to walk out on Clifford one by one during the rehearsal for their live gig. This is followed by a comic scene in which the evil newspaper proprietor Kevin McMaxford (Barry Humphries) smiles with glee to the accompaniment of the Hallelujah chorus from Handel’s *Messiah* at the idea the Spice Girls might split up. The nostalgic interlude in which ‘Wannabe’ occurs is prefaced by a fade to a scene across the river from Westminster with Big Ben,<sup>21</sup> whilst the soundtrack cuts to a dialogue which, as the picture ‘catches up’, is revealed to be the soundtrack (at second remove, of another film screened within the film) of *Casablanca*, which, lying on her bed, Geri is watching. The dialogue (‘I’m sorry, sorry that you ever left here – Sam – for old times’ sake’, ‘Yeah, sure – for old times’ sake’) embodies the idea of regret at a past that has been lost, an opportunity that has been missed, which is voiced ironically within *Spice World the Movie* by iconic film stars within a cult movie.<sup>22</sup> In the context of *Spice World the Movie*, this is the opportunity to live an ordinary life, of which their fame has deprived them. The necessity for traditional authenticity (the live gig) has required such a punishing schedule (either challenging the myth that talent makes performance effortless or indicative of their lack of talent, their ordinariness) as to threaten their authentic group unity.

The flashback sequence begins with a shot of the outside of a corner cafe with the on-screen caption, ‘A very long time ago’ – a time frame exaggeratedly pre-figured by the film Geri is watching. The cut to the interior reveals the Spice Girls looking younger and less groomed than in the post-fame present.<sup>23</sup> This is a fabricated pre-fame past which, although here obviously ‘faked’, is nonetheless meant

to be taken as representing a kind of 'truth' about the authentic group nature of the Spice Girls, the pre-fame dating of whose friendships defends them from being an inauthentic industry product. The initial conversation of the scene leading into the performance of 'Wannabe' is heavy with dramatic irony. The soundtrack of the flashback runs continuously but is intercut visually by images of the Spice Girls in the present of *Spice World the Movie*. For the girls separately reminiscing in the present, the flashback becomes a collective reconstruction – group nostalgia – emphasising their unity at the moment in the film when it is most threatened, but linking this explicitly with the authenticity of their group identity and origins (which is fictionalised). As a collective memory, the flashback's soundtrack can be heard by all of the Spice Girls. The images from the film's present follow lines said by the relevant girl in the flashback. Emma says, 'well, it was worth a try', as Brian, the café's proprietor, refuses them credit until such time as they should be *really* rich and famous. The film-present shot cuts to Emma in her pink bathroom, brushing her teeth in her bath robe and silently laughing at the dramatic irony. The conversation turns to pop music styles, which allows Brian to show himself as representing old authentic certainties. The image cuts from the café of the flashback as Victoria asks Brian rhetorically, 'where've you been for the past ten years?', to show the film-present Victoria lying in her bath. This is followed immediately (without visual return to the flashback, but in time with the running of the soundtrack) by an image of Mel B lying in her Gothic-style iron-steaded bed as she hears her flashback incarnation saying 'anything goes these days, you can do what you want', to which Brian responds: 'I'm a jazz man and I'm telling you, jazz is due for a comeback'. After the Spice Girls perform 'Wannabe' to him, and despite his playing of air piano on the counter during it, Brian's only comment is that it 'just needs a wee bit more jazz in there'.

Although the café is clearly an early 1990s setting (there is the presence of a microwave, a portable CD player, and the Spice Girls themselves), it exemplifies 1990s retro in its decor and in the large number of black-and-white photographs around the walls depicting great jazz performers. Brian's café and his attitude to musical style provide further reference to the idea of authenticity. Firstly, the central musical skill involved in great jazz performance is improvisation. This displays artistic quality and (since it is spontaneous) is from the heart, or soul. The track 'Wannabe', as discussed above, already makes musical reference to improvisation and spontaneity by its repetitive harmonic structure and till-ready rhythms. Brian seems to suggest that this doesn't, however, make it jazz. Secondly, Charles Hamm's first narrative of authenticity in popular music (pre-dating the class-based authenticity of Adorno) is the idea that 'Ethnic, racial, or national groups can develop distinctive types of music giving authentic expression to their culture.' (Hamm 1995, p. 11) This became synonymous with the singer/composer's moral right to express the sentiments of a given song according to his own subject-position, which became an issue in the wake of the 'covering' of Black tracks by White artists so as to deprive Black musicians of royalties when their music was marketed to White audiences (see Monson 1995; Cook 1998A, pp. 8–9). The Spice Girls disassociate authenticity and subject position by engaging in play which results in a postmodern destruction of categories. The moral aspect of the authenticity of race and its relevance to oppression is quietistically diffused as being somehow quaint, part of a bygone age. They do not accept this form of authenticity, nor do they feel that liking a specific type of music forms your identity to the extent

that it isolates you from others (they still 'owe Brian for a few coffees'). For them, style is not about authentic ownership and subject-positioning but a matter of taste, appropriation and play – 'anything goes' – and is not worth fighting over, or linking too closely to what you are. Brian, whilst not entirely a sympathetic character, is also neither a figure of fun nor of hate because the very power of the dialectic that would judge him has been quietly undermined.

The Spice Girls' performance of their demo version of 'Wannabe' has its own rather different kind of authenticity. The track is here recorded as a flatter, non-reverb sound, especially the vocals. This is meant to sound as if it *is* live, as though it is performed on a small CD player in the hard and echoey acoustic of a cafe, lending verisimilitude and differentiating this lyric moment from nearly all the others in the film, which, even where they are diageetically performed, are properly recorded and mastered to CD quality. The Spice Girls grab ketchup bottles and sugar cellars as microphones, and their dancing is freestyle, although it includes aspects of the eventual video of 'Wannabe' – pointing, Mel C's hand gesture at the opening of Verse 1, as well as her backflip and the stamping for 'slam your body down' – as if these grew organically and naturally from the group's pre-history. This suggests, more than the music of the song already does, that the song is improvised, that Brian is wrong (after all, he doubts their ability to become famous), and that this is the new jazz. This is also exactly how the vast majority of the Spice Girls' audience will sing these songs, in an unpolished way, lip-synching or singing to an unprofessional-sounding performance on tape (or CD), whilst freestyle dancing, yet approximating the most distinctive moves of the 'Wannabe' video.

In the flashback, the Spice Girls wear clothes extrapolated backwards (and downwards in terms of style) from the present of *Spice World the Movie*. These are alternately contrasted with the five scenes of the Spice Girls alone in the film present, collectively generating the flashback. The last of these closes the flashback sequence as we see the film-present Mel C sitting at her window in Liverpool strip, holding a football. This, along with the opening scene of Geri weeping over *Casablanca*, and the three intercut pictures of a very pink-garbed Emma brushing her teeth and giggling, Victoria luxuriating in her bath, and a gothic, animal-skinned Mel B lounging, are individual images replete with the iconography associated with the persona – and nickname – of each Spice Girl. This contrasts with the nascent, but not yet pronounced, characters of the pre-fame Spice Girls in the flashback. Trapped and ossified by the personae they are forced to adopt within the context of the Spice Girls – a group fiction that has now taken over their 'real' life – the message here seems to be that, as five individuals who were not so trapped, their group togetherness was more spontaneous, more authentic. The limitations of stereotypes (conflicting with their 'anything goes' play with subject positioning) is addressed throughout the film, notably in the scene of the photo-shoot session where they all dress up first as one another, and then as a string of twentieth-century icons, many, nostalgically, from the 1960s. The simple message of ordinariness contained in the video of 'Wannabe' is no longer credible – they are not ordinary – the world of fame has taken over. We are able to enjoy their fame vicariously but are asked to sympathise in a way that makes us feel comforted not to share in fame's limiting aspects. *Spice World the Movie* furthermore implies that the 'real' girls *are* indeed still ordinary, that they are resisting the way in which fame has transformed their lives and turned them into fake caricatures by remaining true to the group and to their friends. That the strain of their first live show is what causes the split (which elicits the flashback) signifies that by making them play

by its rules (they *should* be able to cut it live), the world of fame is too abnormal for the Spice Girls.

In the final sequence of the film, the Spice Girls seem to manage to reconcile their ordinariness with success in the world of fame: they attend the birth of their friend's baby *and* make it to their live gig. I would argue, however, that the happy scenes of resolution are jeopardised by the rest of the film which represents them as too ordinary (too much like us, sharing our priorities) for a life of fame. This last sequence is where the textuality (fictionality) of the film is revealed as the character of the screenplay writer narrates his latest scenario only for it to converge with the action of the film itself. Reality is abandoned and 'The Rules' (explicitly cited by the script-writer) of this kind of film, take over. Ultimately, the Spice Girls succeed as people to the extent that they fail as traditionally authentic pop stars. Ordinariness can no longer defend them from the attendant distance and commercialisation of being so famous, since it is crushed by the momentum of the large culture industry machine.

## Conclusion

Simon Frith has written that 'we should be examining . . . not how true a piece of music is to something else, but how it sets up the idea of 'truth' in the first place – successful pop music is music which defines its own aesthetic standard' (Frith 1987, p. 137). The Spice Girls' power is to define this standard in a way that has so many in-built contradictions that, by selectively negotiating amongst the various types of authenticity that they have on offer, virtually anyone can be a fan. At a superficial level, especially in what they say and write, they represent themselves as participating in the standard rock discourse of authenticity by defending their status as artists (in the traditional romantic definition of the term). That they talk about 'writing' their songs (either because they are expected to, or because they truly believe their input to the lyrics to be important) serves to underline their status as ordinary people by articulating the commonly held beliefs about pop music. This is now part of their non-rock authenticity, their ordinariness. This ordinariness legitimates the aspirations of a broad section of their audience who become Spice Girls by dancing and lip-synching to Spice tracks in their own bedrooms. In the 'Mama' video, amongst stills of each individual Spice Girl as a child, is mocked-up cine-film footage supposedly capturing the whole group playing and dancing on home video. Paradoxically, the fact that the Spice Children wear clothes contemporary with the actual present (1997) and not with the narrative present (c. 1985), adds to its patina of verity since it replicates the real-life situation of young girls up and down Britain by this stage in the Spice Girls' career (March 1997 – released in time for Mother's Day in the UK). Like the 'Wannabe' flashback in *Spice World the Movie*, it at once projects a natural (authentic) coming together for the Spice Girls through growing up together, and facilitates the fantasy predicated on inauthenticity, which allows a group of ordinary girls to enjoy fame. Perhaps this is a particularly female and feminist strategy. In her research into all-women pop acts, Mavis Bayton documents how 'some feminist performers have gone to great lengths in order to avoid being seen as special or different from their "sisters" in the audience', and reports one female musician as saying that she refrains from wearing stage clothes because 'I think it's important that the audience recognises that you're just ordinary people, like they are' (Bayton 1993, pp. 180, 182).<sup>24</sup>

However, in the context of a highly commercial, fully merchandised film, this lack of grooming is itself clearly a form of grooming. The Spice Girls' contribution

to *fin-de-siècle* pop music is to upset the clarity of authenticity markers by presenting a polysemy which allows different collectives to construct the kind of authenticity that they require, based on the assumptions that they bring to their listening and thus to find their own meanings in the group. Like their approach to constructions of femininity, this breadth maximised their commercial success. This polysemous presentation of authenticity enables listeners who see and enjoy the contradictions in these markers to understand that the opposition between commercialism and authenticity is itself a commercially constructed one. As an essentially postmodern pop act, the Spice Girls deconstruct the binary itself, having it both ways and playing with the modernist narrative as they use it to their own ends. Although some fans no doubt eagerly participate in their own deception, many probably knowingly appreciate the play, and willingly subscribe to a pre-romantic aesthetic of safe fantasy and terpsichorean enjoyment.

Appendix: Text to ‘Wannabe’

| Text                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | No. of bars |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| [Intro]      RAPPED                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 2           |
| (A) Yo I'll tell you what I want what I really really want,      (Mel B)<br>So tell me what you want what you really really want,      (Geri)                                                                                        |             |
| [Intro]      RAPPED                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 4           |
| (A) Yo I'll tell you what I want what I really really want,      (Mel B)<br>So tell me what you want what you really really want,<br>(B) I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna,<br>I wanna, really, really, really wanna zig-a-zig-ah!  |             |
| [Verse 1]      SUNG                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 8           |
| If you want my future, forget my past,      (Mel C)<br>If you wanna get with me, better make it fast,      (Emma)<br>Now don't go wasting my precious time,      (Mel B)<br>Get your act together we could be just fine.      (Geri) |             |
| [Intro]      RAPPED                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 4           |
| (A) Yo I'll tell you what I want what I really really want,<br>So tell me what you want what you really really want,<br>(B) I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna,<br>I wanna, really, really, really wanna zig-a-zig-ah!               |             |
| [Refrain]      SUNG                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 8           |
| (C) If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends,<br>Make it last forever, friendship never ends,<br>If you wanna be my lover, you have got to give,<br>Taking is too easy but that's the way it is.                      |             |
| [Verse 2]      SUNG                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | 8           |
| What d'ya think about that? now you know how I feel,      (Mel C)<br>Say you can handle my love are you for real      (Emma)                                                                                                         |             |

## Text

## No. of bars

|                                                              |         |   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------|---|
| I won't be hasty, I'll give you a try,                       | (Mel B) |   |
| If you really bug me then I'll say good-bye.                 | (Geri)  |   |
| [Intro]      RAPPED                                          |         | 4 |
| (A) Yo I'll tell you what I want what I really really want,  |         |   |
| So tell me what you want what you really really want,        |         |   |
| (B) I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna,                      |         |   |
| I wanna, really, really, really wanna zig-a-zig-ah!          |         |   |
| [Refrain]      SUNG                                          |         | 8 |
| (C) If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends, |         |   |
| Make it last forever, friendship never ends,                 |         |   |
| If you wanna be my lover, you have got to give,              |         |   |
| Taking is too easy but that's the way it is.                 |         |   |
| [Middle 8]      RAPPED                                       |         | 8 |
| Here's the story from A to Z[ee],                            | (Mel B) |   |
| You wanna get with me,                                       | (Mel B) |   |
| You gotta listen carefully.                                  | (Mel B) |   |
| We got Em in the place,                                      | (Mel B) |   |
| Who likes it in your face,                                   | (Mel B) |   |
| We got G like MC,                                            | (Mel B) |   |
| Who likes it on an [E]                                       | (Mel B) |   |
| Easy V                                                       | (Geri)  |   |
| Doesn't come for free,                                       | (Geri)  |   |
| She's a real lady,                                           | (Geri)  |   |
| And as for me,                                               | (Mel B) |   |
| [laugh] you'll see.                                          | (Mel B) |   |
| [Intro X]      RAPPED                                        |         | 2 |
| Slam your body down and wind it all around                   |         |   |
| Slam your body down and wind it all around                   |         |   |
| [Refrain]      SUNG                                          |         | 8 |
| (C) If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends, |         |   |
| Make it last forever, friendship never ends,                 |         |   |
| If you wanna be my lover, you have got to give,              |         |   |
| Taking is too easy but that's the way it is.                 |         |   |
| [Refrain (part) and Intro X]      SUNG EXCEPT WHERE STATED   |         | 8 |
| If you wanna be my lover                                     |         |   |
| you gotta you gotta you gotta you gotta you gotta            |         |   |
| (RAPPED)                                                     |         |   |
| slam slam slam slam                                          |         |   |
| Slam your body down and wind it all around                   |         |   |
| Slam your body down and wind it all around                   |         |   |
| Slam your body down and wind it all around                   |         |   |
| Slam your body down and zig-a zig-ah!      (RAPPED)          |         |   |
| If you wanna be my lover.                                    |         |   |

## Acknowledgements

This paper is partly the result of teaching on the residential summer school at Villiers Park, Middleton Stoney. I would like to thank all at Villiers Park, specifically the Music Reading Parties 97, 98 and 99 and my co-tutor Cormac Newark. In addition, I am most grateful to Suzannah Clark, Nicola Dibben, Julian Muphet and Leanne Roberts for their comments on earlier drafts.

## Copyright acknowledgements

Lyrics from 'Wannabe' (Stannard/Rowbottom/Spice Girls) ©1994 by kind permission of Universal Music Publishing Ltd.

## Endnotes

1. For classical music, authenticity is usually applied specifically to aspects of performance, especially of performance practice. This usage has been criticised as a manifestation of modernism, masquerading as historical enquiry, and fronting a purely commercial CD promotion enterprise (see Taruskin 1988). Peter Kivy has commented that the ascription of authenticity to performance 'has become or is close to becoming a synonym for "good," while seeming to confer upon a performance some magical property that it did not have before' (see Kivy 1995, p. 1). In popular music, Charles Hamm has identified two narratives of authenticity which are similar to the fourth of Kivy's four meanings for 'authentic', i.e. 'The Other Authenticity' or 'personal authenticity', the unique product of a unique, special individual. Hamm (1995, pp. 1–40) identifies that the individual is authenticated by belonging either to a particular racial group, or to a particular social class, and is thereby committed, through subject positioning, to the ideological or affective content of his/her song. As Bennett *et al.* attest, authenticity is a 'slippery term', since 'on the one hand, it provides a measure of the relationship between a musical text or practice and its production... On the other hand, it also functions as a quotidian theory of the sociology of consumption.' (see Bennett 1993, p. 172) As will be seen in this essay, the constant slippage between production and consumption is something sought by both producers and consumers. Part of the effect of perceived authenticity is to forge an identity between these two groups by offering a seemingly transparent transfer of meaning from the producer to the receiver.
2. This is what led to the original racial/ethical dimension of authenticity, since Black artists had their songs covered by White Singers as an attempt on the part of record companies to avoid paying royalties to the original Black artists despite the popularity of their songs (see Cook 1998A, pp. 8–9).
3. That is, all of them except the Motown track 'Stop', which only reached number two.
4. Mainly Richard Stannard and Matt [Matthew] Rowe [Rowbottom] ('Wannabe', '2 Become 1', 'Mama', 'Spice Up Your Life', 'Viva Forever') and Paul Wilson and Andy Watkins ('Who Do You Think You Are?', 'Stop', 'Too Much'). All five Spice Girls are also jointly credited with the authorship of these songs. The issue of an individual's degree of input in a jointly credited enterprise is always somewhat murky, and those critics feeding off a traditional notation of authenticity have questioned the Spice Girls' role in creating their songs. Joint accreditation gives the Spice Girls royalties on covers of the songs, since the legal system itself privileges authorship (ownership) over performance (rental). Although all of the Spice Girls' claims could easily relate to writing song lyrics rather than music, the possibility that these claims of 'writing' are to some extent constructed should not be excluded merely in an attempt to show feminist support. At base, I am not interested in whether they write their own songs or not. What is interesting is that they say that they do and yet that certain critics seriously question this.
5. See, for example, Lee (1997) which is accompanied by a picture of the Spice Girls as small marionettes whose strings are tied to the fingers of large male hands (I am

- grateful to Cormac Newark for this reference).
6. Tony Blair's Britain (which, although it followed the Spice Girls' rise to fame by ten months, arguably represents the mood of the country in the last couple of years of John Major's Government) had a suspicion of elites (encouraged by the exposure of much Tory sleaze and the odd ministerial imprisonment) and a belief in Blair's promise to create an integrated and organic country.
  7. The 'home videos' of the Spice Girls as children are genuine in that they show 8-year-old fans, dressed as the group, pretending to be them. This authentically resonates with the practice of such fans as well as suggesting a pre-fame unity for the group which counters the known facts of the group's formation.
  8. I am using the industry's own legal definitions for these formats. 'A "song video" is a video of one song performed by an artist the making of which is initially intended to stimulate sales of a single play record containing the same sound recording as is embodied on the video' (although this is not merely promotional but also a commercial venture). 'A "music video" is a specially commissioned video featuring one artist with a running time usually between thirty and ninety minutes. This type of video is not made to promote a specific record but is made as a commercial venture in its own right' (Fisher and Kuhn 1984, p. 1).
  9. The rap starts one crotchet before the till-ready accompaniment and is strongly stressed on its first and third crotchets, which fall on the second and fourth crotchets of the till-ready. This adds to the improvised quality of the whole. As Nicola Dibben (personal communication) has commented, 'the use of rap is also a reference to hip-hop and its current cultural reception as "authentic street reality"'.
  10. I am using the PSV to 'Wannabe' as contained in PMV, *The Official Video Vol. 1: One Hour of Girl Power* – Virgin UK: VID 2834 (1997) 60 mins.
  11. Any claim that the visual narrative of film is primary because the music is added later can be countered by analysing the music's fundamental role in actively constructing the meaning of the finished product, which is not merely a narrative, but a complex of different media of at least equal status (music may even have more emotional force than any other element).
  12. For a discussion of the discussion of phenomenal music in opera and the concept of voice, see Abbate (1991).
  13. Cf. Björk's 'There's More to Life than This', where the song's accompaniment itself is the music of a party from which the singer is trying to escape.
  14. Victoria's sobriquet – 'Posh' spice – is potentially upsetting for the duality implied between the poshness of the other party guests (and hence their 'otherness') and the relative normality of the Spice Girls, with whom the viewer is invited to identify. This is minimised by keeping Victoria in the group setting and not focusing on her individually. She is backgrounded visually and is the only member of the group not to sing a solo line in the verse (or the song as a whole).
  15. In print and in conversation, the Spice Girls have never admitted an explicitly sexual meaning of 'zig-a-zig-ah'. This helps keep the group 'PG certificate' on the literal surface, whilst allowing for the bonding with their fans that occurs by having such 'in-jokes'.
  16. In traditionally authentic rock (and in its 1990s aesthetic derivative, Britpop) dance is impossible because members of the band play instruments.
  17. Virgin UK: VID 2834 (1997) 60 mins. The video contains the PSVs of the first four singles, a Comic Relief version of the fourth's second A side, 'Who Do You Think You Are?', and behind-the-scenes footage introduced and linked by the Spice Girls.
  18. There is a cut which (conveniently?) obscures the precise location of the hotel, whilst adding to the authenticity of the 'home video' effect by being amateurish. As this could have been fixed post-filming, as is evident from the overlay of rolling text charting the Spice Girls' rise to fame, it is part of a deliberate attempt to increase the believability of the ordinariness of the Spice Girls. That the central part of this section must in fact be being filmed by someone who is not a Spice Girl – potentially disruptive for the effect of group spontaneity being created here – is carefully elided by Geri's audible presence behind the camera in the opening and closing cuts.
  19. PolyGram Filmed Entertainment PAL 0559343. 1 hour 29 mins, directed by Bob Spiers.
  20. It is performed until the end of the first full Refrain (C) and then cuts straight to Refrain (part) and Intro X and a play-out during which Mel C does a backflip to lead into the last line: 'If you wanna be my lover'.
  21. One of a number of architectonic images of London which, on the back of Britpop's own

- nostalgia for the 1960s, stress the British identity of the Spice Girls as a prominent iconic feature of the film.
22. See Eco (1987). *Spice World the Movie* plays with the very idea of cultural iconicity.
  23. Mel B is wearing blue jeans and matching denim jacket over a white crop top, but continuity with the 'Wannabe' PSV is provided by her prominently erect nipples. Mel C wears a bandanna, a shirt and leggings, but has girlish long plaits rather than the scraped-back pony tail of the PSV. Geri has a short-legged boiler suit with a frilled crop top under it and girlish pig tails – very different to the glamour of the sequinned body in the video. Victoria wears a similarly styled dress, but rather than the grown-up chic of black, it is patterned with flowers. Emma sucks a lollipop and is in school uniform (implying that she is young enough still to be at school), but the unusual school colour, pink, makes reference to her babyhood and casts gentle doubt on the authenticity of the uniform itself.
  24. Bayton is interested in grass roots music-making and not in recordings, and thus her perspective is slightly different. She also approaches the issue with the idea that women's role as non-composing vocalists does not count. I think this is a problem since she is colluding in a gendered division of labour and only recognising that which men normally do as valuable. The way in which the Spice Girls married feminism with chart success was by imputing value to the types of input into pop that women already had in the mainstream – as vocalists and dancers. For an impressive analysis of feminist strategies that deals specifically with the Spice Girls, see Dibben (1999).

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