

Women in Popular Music and the Construction of "Authenticity"

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This article investigates the representation of female popular music performers in regard to the construction of authenticity in popular music. Firstly, it deals with the concept of authenticity and its relationship to the construction of the creative subject. This discussion includes an investigation of the ideas of nineteenth century romanticism in relation to the artist and the separation of rock and pop into a gendered division of labour. Secondly, it focuses, via textual analysis, on three areas related to musical authenticity: the position of the musical author/composer; the female singer's role in popular music and the discussions by fans regarding certain female music performers. The main conclusion reached is that the conservative traditional values represented by the music media concerning women's participation in popular music are negotiated by fans and fan communities. Thus, the meanings and criteria attached to the label "authentic musical performer" are struggled over within media representation and, most importantly, within fan dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

Within feminist studies of popular culture, representations of women by the mass media have been, and still remain, an important area of study. Recently, feminists have looked at the way in which popular culture has become a site of negotiation and straggle in gender relations and in the construction of gendered identities (Brooks 1997). This article fits broadly into such feminist research in that it takes as its focus the representation of female popular music performers in the 1990s.

The history of women in rock is similar to that of other musical styles and many other areas of popular culture, in that women's roles have been largely limited to being audience members (Bayton 1997,37). This pattern is certainly reflected in the performer gender makeup of Rolling Stone's recent list of definitive "best albums ever made." From the 1950s to the 1990s, female solo artists made up ten per cent of the total albums listed as "the best ever." If we add gender mixed bands to this percentage, then twenty per cent of all the acts listed were either female performers or bands with female members (Rolling Stone 1997). This content analysis shows the quantifiable inequalities of women's place in rock music both in terms of access and in the construction of musical artistic values. It also confirms the continuing need for feminist research into areas of popular culture which marginalise female participation and the value of female performances.

My own feminist approach has been to understand that, like other art forms, rock music has gone through a canonization process. In this process performers and musical

material have tended to be positioned, respectively, as creative artists and as art. It is this legitimisation of musical acts and styles, and the way in which gender roles are positioned within it, that is the main focus of this article. Furthermore, the legitimisation of certain musical forms and roles can only be understood through the term authenticity and the criteria that embody it.

Authenticity is the main concept discussed and it is defined and illustrated via the discourses embedded in the music press and fan texts. This article provides some examples of the way in which authority is given, or not given, to female performers in the popular music scene of the 1990s. More specifically, it focuses on the construction of female musical performance in the Western popular music world via media representations in the music press and in the discussions of fans on the Internet. Several female music performers' will be highlighted using textual data collected from the music press and Internet postings.² The article considers what constitutes authentic musical performances and focuses specifically on the representations of successful popular female performers³. The role of the female singing voice in popular music and its status in relation to mainstream authentic musical criteria are considered. Lastly, the article discusses the ways in which rock discourses create criteria of authenticity (including those of authorship, individuality, originality, live performance and instrumental skill) which are negotiated by fans, and, at certain times, resisted by them.

Of course, rock is not simply a few free floating sets of symbols. Along with all other musical types it has been institutionalised. The core of this institutionalisation process has been the symbiotic connection between popular musical genres and big business (Martin 1981,179-180). Although the economic processes of popular music are not the focus of this article, these processes have an impact on female participation and the economic and artistic success of female performers. It is understood that the systems of capitalism and patriarchy have a complex relationship that combines in different ways to create the spaces for women's participation and representation as musical popular artists.

This article deals with some examples of the way in which female performers are positioned by romantic discourses concerning the construction of the creative musical artist. Yet it should be understood that men as well as women are judged by such discourses. However, because of the dominance of females in musical roles such as the singer, and in genres labelled pop, women have been much more likely to be vulnerable to such criticisms.⁴ These criticisms, and the problems in overcoming them, are discussed.

"AUTHENTICITY" IN POPULAR MUSIC: CREATIVE "AUTHENTICITY"

In its most general sense authenticity is a concept which conveys assumptions about objects, people and places. If something is authentic it is assumed that it is believable and reliable, that it is genuine and thus acceptable. Not only in music, but in the Western arts generally there has been the desire to:

believe that art is capable of making visible certain ultimate meanings which are present in

ordinary events but which remain hidden in them until they are, in fact, reborn in their full spirit within the work of art (Grafia 1989,18).

Thus authenticity, as an analytical concept, designates the construction of truth. Furthermore, within the capitalist economy it has involved the appearance of the individual author who can be marketed as an individualised identity. These criteria, of truth and individualised authorship are still influential in constructing a musical authentic status to popular performers. That is, the musician/performer is positioned as the creative artist, with the music representing a "truthful" reflection of the artist's talents and personal expression. Thus, the discourse of authenticity universalises, but in combination with a notion of creativity it does so through constructing individual uniqueness. This discourse both diffuses and naturalises the marginalisation of women and other groups in participating as artists/musicians within the popular music field. It positions such social differences as inconsequential to the taking up of recognised creative roles and attaining success.

However, it should be noted that the exact meaning of authenticity, in relation to popular music performance, is transitory, unstable, and relies on context for its meaning. Thus, Middleton describes the arena of popular music as a site of struggle over meaning:

What the term "popular music" tries to do is put a finger on that space, that terrain, of contradiction - between "imposed" and "authentic", "elite" and "common", predominant and subordinate, then and now, theirs and ours, etc., - and to organise it in particular ways (Middleton 1985,5).

Many criteria, including authorship, are not fixed or static indicators of authenticity. These criteria are sites of struggle, especially in the active discussions of music fans. Yet these struggles are connected to the power relations which stratify society and are not random aesthetic values or struggles over mere style. The following discussion on the patriarchal construction of the artist, and the gendered construction of a pop/rock divide, will help define and clarify the concept of "creative authenticity" as it relates to female performers in popular music.

THE ROMANTIC ARTIST AND THE DESIGNATION OF GENIUS

Historically, men have dominated the area distinguished as high art as the art music canon has been as exclusionary as the canons of literature and the visual arts (Citron 1993). Many of the criteria and dichotomies that have existed in traditional art music can also be seen in popular music, and in the way that the listeners, critics and academics make sense of it. In particular, the era of romanticism (1825-1900 in art music) can be seen as an important influence on how the musician/artist is still seen today (Greckel 1979, 177). For example, Greckel suggests that the musical eras of romanticism and rock have similar characteristics which underly their apparent musical differences. These characteristics include the expression of intense emotion, the expression of rebellion against traditional social and moral constraints, technological advances in musical instruments, and the use of drugs (Greckel 1979,177-178). More importantly, he points to the way in which musicians, in both periods, have become the individual centre of

attention in the form of the "star" as:

[t]here are compelling similarities between the Mick Jagger of the Rock Era and the Franz Liszt of the Romantic Era. Both represent in their own way the virtuoso performer-composer;...the sex-symbol-lady-killer thronged with hysterical, idolizing women grasping for a personal souvenir...; the dashing figure with a sensational if not scandalous life-style; the archetype who personifies the characteristics of his particular era (Greckel 1979,199-200).

Greckel does not comment on the quite obvious gender assumptions made in this construction of the composer/performer as star. Yet the quotation reveals the "common sense" discourses which have placed the male rock performer as the norm of rock success and mastery.

Other writers have noticed the romantic themes in the discourses of rock. Pattison argues that "Rock's is the aesthetic of Romanticism vulgarized" (Pattison 1987,188). To put it simply, rock has taken on aspects of romanticism, but this does not mean they are one and the same. This is because rock is both a commercial and popular communication form and its romanticism is always being negotiated via those institutions and practices that make popular music a commercial concern. Indeed "the artistic virtues of rock and romanticism are originality, primal order, energy, honesty, and integrity" (Pattison 1987, 188). Furthermore, romanticism is not necessarily a conscious set of values to which rock musicians and critics adhere. As Pattison points out it can be conscious and unconscious. Yet the effect of the discourse is the same, a contempt for the "simply popular":

Many rockers consciously adopt the outrageous poets of the last century as their aesthetic models because they embody both in then- lives and in their work the unyielding imaginative standards of a shared Romanticism. And those rockers who are unaware of the nineteenth century as a force in their lives nevertheless instinctively mimic the aesthetic system of Romanticism, venerating an outcast elite of rock musicians as the champions of art and reserving their indignation for what ever falls so far short of this sublime standard of unfettered genius as to become merely popular (Pattison 1987,194).

When we add the concept of genius to this heroic artist figure we have a patriarchal template which in many ways still structures the discourses concerning authentic musical performance. However, there is a contradiction within patriarchal constructions of genius, for the romantic notion of the male genius, constructed in the nineteenth century, incorporated feminine characteristics into the ideal. Unfortunately, this did not mean that female artists were touched with genius. Today the very definition of genius carries with it historical baggage which clearly demarcates male creativity, situated in the mind, against female pro-creativity, situated in the "natural" female body (Battersby 1989,3). This romantic notion of the genius artist is important in relation to the way in which these same understandings are reflected in the contemporary representations of popular female musical performers. Claims to authenticity in the musical world contain many of the traditional romantic notions of the artist which have been constructed along hierarchical gendered lines. Thus the consequences of these romantic notions of the artist and/or musical genius are in the measurement of creativity in female performers. That is, the male genius is often used as a measure against which the individual female

performer is evaluated.

This ideology is clearly exemplified in a review of Sinéad O'Connor's album *Universal Mother*:

John Lennon's Plastic Ono Band, written while he was undergoing primal scream therapy in 1969, has some of his greatest moments, from howls of rage to painful self-recognition. But O'Connor lacks the insight and articulacy of Lennon to cany it off. Most of the lyrics are trite - occasionally they make it as far as embarrassing...There's barely a memorable note on offer on a record of half-finished ideas (Kashmir 1994,8s).

According to this critic, O'Connor cannot pull off the genre of "album as therapy" because she is not a "great" artist. She may be displaying her true emotions but she has not ordered them into an acceptable expression.

The importance of a mainly male dominated canon in rock criticism is exemplified in more subtle ways through stylistic criticisms. P.J. Harvey, a highly respected musician and performer, has been criticized for ruining a cover of a Bob Dylan song. Sinclair wrote that "a deconstruction of Dylan's Highway 61 Revisited...backs the song into uncomfortable, angular blocks, ruinously impairing the flow of the lyric" (Sinclair 1993, 102). Out of context these words could be interpreted as a positive vindication of Harvey's work as a feminist critique of the male canon of rock, yet the critic pans this album claiming it is suffering from "a depressing dearth of tunes" (Sinclair 1993,102).

However, it is not only negative criticisms that come out of such comparisons. The male lineage of the rock canon is often extended to female performers, like Harvey, to praise their individuality and musical credentials:

The virulent three piece guitar tunes of Harvey's debut *Dry* and the Steve Albini-produced distortions of *Rid of Me* have been supplanted by her growing fascination with the blues... And like the original bluesmen, she uses the form to assert herself, even if the content is vastly different (Mathieson 1995,80).

This quotation reflects the complexity and tension for women in rock genres. Yet, the construction of creativity, influenced by romanticism and its masculinised model of the artist, is not the end of the story. The "common sense" understanding which separates styles of music and music production into the two camps of pop or rock also works to construct authentic creativity in popular music. This dichotomy has further consequences for female participation in popular music.

ROCK AND POP: THE GREAT DIVIDE

Like the downgrading of certain literature attracting a majority female audience, music styles that have had both a high proportion of female performers and audience members have suffered a similar fate. The designation of the rock/pop divide articulates well the division of female/male performance and participation. However, it is a rather artificial divide which is used arbitrarily by critics and fans. It has less to do with musical content than the practices and discourses that make the music a meaningful social process. Rather, the rock/pop dichotomy reflects a set of social values placed on musical texts and is structured according to a gender divide (Coates 1997). In fact, gender becomes a signifier

of certain experiences in this pop/rock dichotomy. Until recently, women's experiences have been marginalised from rock genres (Coates 1997,51). The pop themes of romance and love, at times assumed to be ideological "food" for the masses, have been associated with the world of women and girls. There is an assumption, in "common sense" music discourse, that pop music is more manipulative and shallower than rock styles. This view is important for the maintenance of the representation of women in music (both pop and rock) as creatively suspect. Coates describes how the pop/rock divide also incorporates a gender division of musical aesthetics:

In this schema, rock is metonymic with "authenticity" while "pop" is metonymic with "artifice." Sliding even further down the metonymic slope, "authentic" becomes "masculine" while "artificial" becomes "feminine." Rock, therefore, is "masculine," pop is "feminine," and the two are set up in a binary relation to each other, with the masculine, of course, on top. The common-sense meaning of rock becomes "male," while "pop" is naturalised as "female". Real men aren't pop, and women, real or otherwise, don't rock. Further, according to this schema, authenticity in rock is something which, like pornography, one is supposed to know when one sees it. "Rock" is not so much a sound or a particular style of playing, but represents a degree of emotional honesty, liveness, musical straightforwardness, and other less tangible, largely subjective aspects. "Pop" music is allegedly slick, prefabricated, and used for dancing, mooning over teen idols, and other "feminine" or "feminised" recreations (Coates 1997,52-53).

It can be argued, therefore, that the rock/pop divide reflects a gendered division of labour and aesthetics. Furthermore, layered onto it are values which position principally male dominated musical roles, such as the individual composer/author, the instrumentalist, and the producer, as highly creative. In rock these roles are more visible and are presented as indicators of authentic music and, ultimately, artistic integrity.

Not only are the values of artistic integrity based on a male model of artistic achievement, rock has also been associated with the aggressive performance of male sexuality (Frith and McRobbie, 1990). However, it has not been the case that women have simply taken up the same position in their performances without consequences. Susan McClary, a feminist musicologist, has noted how difficult it is for women performers to indulge in the "enactments of sexual power and desire". Women's sexual pleasure and desire are often ridiculed in patriarchal discourses as whorish and this often undermines their musical status. This outcome has not been confined to popular rock music. In the history of Western music women have had to fight against presumptions that they were of loose morals and sexually available (McClary 1991,151).

Part of the reason for representations of male aggressive sexuality since the 1950s is the importance of rebellion in rock.⁵ Boundaries in rock have been continually transgressed by all sorts of performers, and in these performances taboos of sex, violence and authority have been broken (Martin 1981, 181). Yet these transgressions seemed, until recently, to have been applicable only to the male performer. The gender-bending androgyny of many male and female performers has not resulted in more equality in the music industry itself. However, in the 1990s we have seen more women move into rock and engage in breaking taboos of female sexual desire, violence and male authority. Thus popular music in general has seen female performers find new ways of transgressing

patriarchal stereotypes.

Yet these performances do not necessarily break down the dichotomy of rock versus pop, where rock is more artistically valued than pop. Thus the separation of rock and pop is relevant to the gender relations in popular music, because many of the representations of female musical performers draw on this dichotomy to make sense of the music and its "authentic" meanings. For example, on a list dedicated to discussing "alternative" female performers, Alanis Morissette's music is dismissed because of her former identity as a teenage pop singer:

listening to alanis morissette⁶ is a complete and utter waste of time she is a former bubblegum popqueen.. i mean this girl is a cliché' a passing fad and in two years she'll be gone out of rock/pop just like she got out of cheese pop... (19/10/96, Re: Courtney vs. alanis, alt.music.alternative.female).

This former identity clearly weakens her "authentic" musical position among some members of this newsgroup.

This newsgroup posting represents the values underlying the labels rock and pop. The musical style, in itself, does not define them, rather it is the values they seemingly represent (Harron 1988,209). The labels become categories that in reality rarely exist in any pure form. Yet, as Horrocks points out, the high art discourses of rock are concerned with the value of purity (1995,135). There is an obsession with the purity of form, style and intention to which both male and female performers are subject.

Furthermore, romanticism comes into this divide via the promotion of the values of originality, integrity and honesty. Pattison explains the label pop as not opposed to rock but as the lesser bearer of authenticity. He argues that pop contains many of the same values promoted in rock discourses, however it is always found lacking by rock purists (Pattison 1987,194.) Frith makes the point that often criticisms are "genre-centric" for once musical styles or performers have been labeled as pop they are not given the same critical scrutiny as others within a general rock label. For example, slight changes in the musical style of girl-group pop may be seen as insignificant, yet changes in the guitar playing style of a blues-based band becomes an important issue (Frith 1996,69). Female performers are more likely to lose out in the musical credibility stakes when such labels are used to identify "good" or "bad" music.

SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS OF AUTHENTICITY: THE MUSIC PRESS AND FAN TALK

Textual analysis can be used to identify the way in which some female performers are measured along a gendered authentic continuum of creativity. The ways in which musical authenticity is constructed and negotiated by critics and fans is demonstrated through substantive analysis of the music press and fan discussions on the Internet. Three areas are highlighted: the construction of authorship as highly placed within musical "authentic" criteria; the musical role of the female singer and the construction of the voice; and the resistance of some fans to traditional rock discourses designating musical authenticity.

One of the "authentic" criteria listed by critics is the role of the author or composer.

Emphasis is placed on the ability of the performer to write her/his own material. As Middleton points out, although academics may have taken up the postmodern turn in their approach to the issue of authorship "it is by no means clear that the popular music culture itself has followed suit" (1995,465). If a musical performer is to be perceived as an authentic and, thus, a creative musician, she/he must show, to some extent, that she/he has had some hand in the writing of the material. Yet, the evaluation of what kinds of activities fit into the authorship role marginalises the positive recognition of women's musical work. The record producer is positioned as creating the overall sound of a recording (Jones 1992) but the history of these occupational roles in the recording process shows that they remain male dominated (O'Brien 1995).

The following examples focus on the issue of authorship and the way in which it gives individual music performers a designated status as "authentic artists." This romantic ideal of an autonomous individual author is problematic for female performers. For example, an article entitled "Behind Every Great Woman" in the British music glossy *Q* Magazine provided profiles of several male collaborators who had worked with female musical performers, including Alanis Morissette. The by-line stated that "There's a male co-songwriter: horny-handed, platonic tunesman wearing at least one leg of the musical trousers" (Sutcliffe 1996,98). Most obviously this article suggests that many successful women of the 1990s rely on men for their musical ideas. Alanis Morissette's song writing partner Glen Ballard is singled out:

"I'm happy to be a silent partner," says Glen Ballard de facto midwife to Alanis Morissette's 12-million-selling *Jagged Little Pill*...Further, she says he guided her through moments when extreme confessional candour became frightening (Sutcliffe 1996,98).

This quotation presents the notion of male genius which appropriates feminine qualities (as noted in Battersby's comments). It also reinforces the notion that this woman performer is somehow lacking in musical ability. What is missing from this representation is the acknowledgment that many male performers rely equally on musicians, songwriters, producers and publicists to create their sound and image. In fact, the musical popular forms of today, dependent as they are on the recording process for distribution to a wide audience, cannot exist without collaboration.

Examination of the textual representations of female popular performers has revealed that those female performers who do not write their own material lose out in the authentic musical stakes because of their seeming lack of musical input. Creativity is clearly linked to a traditional notion of an author who is "in control." For example, in reviewing one of Kylie Minogue's albums a music journalist asserted that "Kylie actually co-wrote only one of the songs on her new album. For all the talk of 'expressing herself, she hasn't suddenly become Sinead O'Connor" (Ridgers 1994,13). This comment makes the link between an "honest" expressive performance and authorship - both important criteria of authenticity.

Related to the position of composer/author is the role of the record producer when evaluating the sound of musical recordings (Jones 1992,193). This role is viewed on par with that of the film director, at least in critics' circles. However, this occupation is even more male dominated than the performing roles (O'Brien 1995,430), with consequences

for female performers in regard to their creative involvement. The producer of recorded music is seen by most critics and many fans as an authority figure, and, at times represents the traditional role of composer or author, especially when the performer has not composed any of the musical material. Thus, the producer is often elevated by the critics to lend, in their eyes, some credibility to the recorded female pop performance. For example, Kylie Minogue was given a back-handed compliment in regards to her use of talented producers:

On this record, the singing budgie...is packaged and presented by hot mixers Brothers In Rhythm, Terry Farley and M People, among others. Dance gods the Pet Shop Boys contribute a track as well.,.there is more than enough talent twiddling the knobs to lend an air of credibility to proceedings (Casimir 1994,8s).

The credibility of the album is attributed to other producers who have been placed in the position of artists themselves. Minogue's talents may be regarded as suspect and "packaged", but her "technical" associates confer on her a degree of authentic talent.

Performers as diverse as Kylie Minogue, k.d. lang⁷ and Bjork are criticised both overtly and covertly for not having enough input into composing the material they perform and/or relying on producers for the more innovative sounds on their albums. One review of the Icelandic performer Bjork is an overt example of these kinds of criticisms:

Bjork has an intriguing and wild vocal style and Iceland has a certain otherworldly charm that renders its few international exports exotic, but how much of Debut's impact was down to the magic fingers of her producer and co-writer Nellee Hooper (Eimer 1994,47).

A similar and overt criticism of Bjork, from Q Magazine, was that she uses other musicians as producers to create an innovative new sound:

There's no mistaking Bjork's voice ("Eeeeeee-yoooo oowaaah. Eeeeeek, etc"...), but the dynamics and atmosphere of Bjork records don't appear to owe much else to Bjork at all. Nellee Hooper, Tricky, Howie B, 808 State's Graham Massey and Mark Bell: surely a Bjork record is only as good as its producers (Elliot 1997,7).

The importance of the producer is not limited to a few music critics but is also reflected in some of the discussions and comments made by fans. Their discussions reveal a constructed dichotomy between emotional and "objective" creativity: "I believe that true artists (such as Madonna and Tori) put so much of themselves into their art that maintaining an objective POV [point of view] becomes near to impossible" (27/2/96 RE: Could M produce an album herself?, alt.fan.madonna). This posting suggests that to maintain her musical standards Madonna should continue to collaborate with other producers. It also expresses a dichotomy of object/subject. That is, the emotional expression of the artist is apparently cut off from any "objective" appraisal of her work. Within this dichotomy of subjective/objective is the positioning of certain musical technology, and its users, as intervening and shaping the emotional and expressive artist's work into a meaningful product to sell. Here we see the equation made between the producer's role and the qualities of objectivity and creative power, as is clearly exemplified in one fan's response to another's disappointment in relation to Tori Amos' album *Boys for Pele*. The fan offers the following explanation to cushion another fan's disappointment at the sound of the new album:

maybe this is because Tori doesn't have someone to act as sounding board for her ideas, someone to say "perhaps this is all too much, perhaps this isn't enough." It does seem to me, after all, that Tori got real excited producing this on her own and released an album of "noteworthy" length. So perhaps so much of the disappointment in this album is not so much the music, but the production (3/2/97 Re: Could it be the Production?, rec.music.tori-amos).

We can see by the comment above that many fans may relate to and take on the artistic criteria which have both a gendered and a technological dimension. However, most importantly, the record producer signals power and control over the end musical product, traits traditionally associated with masculinity. It is no surprise, then, that the top producers in rock and pop are male and that the barriers for women in accessing jobs in the studio are still formidable (Negus, 1992:86-87).

The importance for feminists in exploring the gendered division of labour in the studio is that recording and sound technologies have been a central element in the success of popular music styles in the second half of this century (Tankel 1990,39). Thus the marginalisation of women in these areas has had consequences in the way rock has been masculinised as an art form as well as a technical process.

Another "authentic" musical criterion centres round the singing voice. The roles of composer and producer are made meaningful through a gender dichotomy which bestows masculine qualities such as power and control onto these roles. This is in contrast to the singer's position which is often associated with femininity and downgraded in terms of artistic creativity. In both rock and pop genres it has been played out in the binary opposition between the male guitar hero and the female singer. Layered on top of these roles are more oppositions between technology/nature and rock/pop. This section discusses some representations of female singers' voices via the popular music press and the way in which this reinforces these ideological dichotomies. A social theory of the voice will be outlined to put into perspective the link between the social construction of gender and of the singing voice.

The question of the voice is important as it has been the least studied and/or acknowledged part of popular music criticism. It has also been the major instrument that women have used as musicians to participate in popular music (Clawson 1993). Like other expressions of bodily practices, the voice is a place where identity can be projected. The social role of the voice is clearly summed up by the authors of *Gendered Voices*:

It would be surprising if people did not use their voice to project a culturally desirable image. Other parts of the human body which have been endowed with social significance are manipulated, groomed or decorated before being presented in public. We know that voices are socially significant, we know humans have the capacity to alter their voice; it would be strange indeed if the voice was not subject to socially motivated adaptations (Graddol and Swann 1989,26-27).

While the importance of the voice in identity formation and the social factors affecting the presentation of vocal sounds are acknowledged by researchers, the "common sense" understanding of the voice is tied to biology. This point can be understood partly by looking at the dominant (prestigious) art forms of the West and the way in which they

have been positioned as part of a "man-made" culture. This understanding is partly made on the assumption that the creative arts, and those disciplines which make up traditional Western art, involve using tools to create an end result (for example, painting, architecture, and sculpture). These tools have been conceptualised as "man-made" and separate from the body. However, singing is distinct from other musical instruments in that it seems inseparable from the body and thus has often been represented as expressing the most essential emotions in musical form. For example, the experience of hearing a singer's voice is often described as a physical and emotional one, unmediated by the social: "I was in a cd store and there was a cd playing. I was in a very vulnerable mood and could not believe this voice reaching into my heart. I could feel the pain, the anguish....oh heck!" (22/3/98, subject: annie lennox, k-d-lang@world.std.com).

The division of labour in rock positions men as musicians, that is, as instrumentalists, while women are the singers. Thus, the voice in rock, and especially in pop music, has been de-skilled by patriarchal discourses which undermine women's traditional position as singer in bands and as solo performers. The dominance of women in the role of the singer can be partly seen as an outcome of the essentialising discourses which conceive of the voice as biologically fixed and natural. Even when women are represented as "genuine" musical voices, their position can be devalued when their talent is positioned below roles such as composer, instrumentalist and/or producer.

This subtle de-skilling process can be seen in some genres and popular representations which position the voice as mere adornment. The criticism of Bjork's lack of musical input situates her voice as secondary to the success and genius of the overall sound of the music. As Frith has pointed out, pop performed by women as singers is seen "as something decorative and wistful, secret and available, addressed, by its very nature, to men" (Frith 1988,155). This phenomenon is subtly reflected in another review of Bjork's album *Post*, where it was said that "regular collaborators Nellee Hooper and 808 State's Graham Massey provide a suitable mix of textures for Bjork to wail and warble over" (Danielsen 1995,12s).

Although the social meanings of the voice are a product of many different influences (Graddol and Swann 1989,26), many of the cd, concert and video reviews in the popular music press use language which represents the voice as completely natural and outside the realm of work and social musical practices. For example, Bjork's voice is represented as "godsent" (Johnston 1996, 90) and "a force of nature" (Gardner 1993, 65). Bjork's first solo album (*Debut*) "is characterised by the eerie splendour of that voice; a voice which echoes the alien environment of her native country; all misshapen landscape, strange sulphuric eruptions" (Mair 1993,29). This description ties Bjork's voice to the landscape of her native home of Iceland. Thus, the voice, as feminine "body part", is metaphysically transformed into the very land itself, thereby naturalising Bjork's voice. Here the traditional linkage between femininity and the natural world is made.

Similarly, in discussions and criticisms in the popular press and fan groups the authentic voice is one which is "natural" - that is one that has not been digitally and technologically enhanced. Of course, digital recordings of all musical sounds do not capture the "real" live performance in the studio or in concert, but even so there still

exists the idea that the voice needs to be heard as "natural" to have authenticity. This notion can be measured to some extent through the reviews of female performers and the criteria used to evaluate their voices. For example, Madonna's voice on *Bedtime Stories* is described as "devoid of flesh and blood" (Snow 1994,134). The embodiment of the voice is central here and in many popular press reviews. This criterion designates "good" or "worthy" music. The music reviewer, Matt Snow, goes on to say that:

at the old fashioned heart of our decade-long love affair with Madonna is the human sound of her singing voice and what we choose to read into it. With that singing voice disappearing into a vague spectral presence, so does our interest fade (Snow 1994,134).

The constructed naturalness of the voice is clearly related to the constructed naturalness of the human body⁸. Thus the importance of sounding authentic, through the cultural meanings surrounding gendered bodies and their embodiment in musical expression, is important in understanding popular music meanings today.

For many women, musical identity has not only centered on the voice, but this has been defined in patriarchal ways. Frith argues that:

[t]he female voice in Anglo-American pop has usually stood for intimacy and artlessness - this is the link which has given women access to pop....We hear women as better able than men to articulate emotion because femininity is defined in emotional terms. The public world is masculine and there is no agreement about how public, unemotional women should sound (Frith 1988,155).

The characterisation of the singer's role as slightly suspect - that is, usually associated with feminine qualities - is reflected in some popular critics' comments. For example, one reviewer in *Vox Magazine* described k.d. lang as:

certainly a marvellous singer, always has been, but the number of songs that can be exclusively associated with her can be counted on one hand, or one digit if you're feeling ungenerous. She can turn any number ever written into a ballad ripped from the heart, but so what? Her enunciation is perfect, but this is music, not a Teach Yourself English tape (Blackburn 1997, 100).

In this way the human singing voice is measured for its emotional sounding content. It illustrates the difficulty in articulating the criteria for sounding "authentic" and what it may mean. The Blackburn quotation contains contradictory tensions which highlight the extreme difficulty in articulating a subjective response within a mode of criticism which positions itself as objective. However, Blackburn's response contains criteria of authenticity which align creativity with compositional skills, k.d. lang is characterised as a kind of singing machine without any real creative input into the song's creation. Moreover, her emotional interpretation is also constructed as suspect - that is inauthentic. Singing in a style "ripped from the heart" (Blackburn 1997,100) is a criterion for making the authentic grade, because the critic situates its performance as "style" rather than "real" content. Thus, lang's role as singer is positioned in the way which Frith has described as "mere adornment" (Frith 1988,155).

Of course, not all women are devalued for their role as singer. The high creative value placed on the black female singer is a case in point. Recently Aretha Franklin was

voted the greatest singer of all time by other singers (Edmonds 1998,86-88). This occurred partly because of the importance placed on black musical culture in the discourses of rock and roll history. Thus the female singer can be seen in a more creative light in terms of where they fit in a history of rock which traces lines of authenticity via measures of commercial success and romantic notions of the artist.

In fact, race has been one of the most powerful variables in the ideological measurement of the singer's importance. The importance of culture in the history of rock and roll has been well documented. However, it has been noted how this reverence for the black roots of rock and roll has been mythologised by white culture (Pattison 1987:34). The obsession with purity can be seen in the way that black musical forms have symbolised a non-commercial folk music for white rock fans and critics, yet this glamourisation of black music recalls the white paternalism that created the image of the noble savage. The irony here is that there has been a celebration of the music of Negroes while they have been subjected to social, economic and moral inequalities. This reverence has elevated black female singers to great heights of artistic integrity where their voices are "prized like instruments" (Garratt and Steward 1984, 12). Thus, there are various negotiations and social variables that influence how a female singer will be understood in terms of her authentic position. Yet, since the 1960s and the clear development of the rock band as a self sufficient unit of creativity, mainstream rock discourses have de-skilled the singer in ideological terms.

It may seem from the discussion so far that female performers are doomed never to gain the kind of recognition of their male counterparts. However, the active resistance to, and negotiation by, fans of the "authentic" criteria of rock, outlined above, can be seen in many discussions and opinions appearing on the internet. Recent research into newsgroups and how they operate has explored many different angles including the importance of cultural capital in successfully engaging in discussions (Tepper 1997), the internet emerging as a new public space (Knapp 1997) and the construction of community and community identities in cyberspace (Poster 1997). More specifically there has been some interest in fandom and the way in which it is practised within the newsgroup medium (Clerc 1996). The idea of the internet offering a new space for fan communities is the reason I have chosen it as a source of fan ideas and views. It also offers an accessible place to gain unobtrusive data on music fan cultures.

Of course, these fan discussions cannot claim to be representative of, for example, all fans or listeners. One reason is that the fans found on the internet are usually much more dedicated to their performer than the average listener, and are involved also in fanzines, website constructions, swapping rare recordings and bootlegs. The internet overall is not a democratic space (Lockard 1997,220) as users or fans represented on the usenet groups are usually from middle to upper-class backgrounds in first world English speaking countries. Thus, the ideas that are represented in the newsgroup postings cannot be said to be representative of all fans. However, these fans do offer an insight into an audience which does take their performer seriously and which discusses, in a public way, the more abstract issues surrounding creative values, and their own reactions and attachments to musical performers/texts. For example, a Hole fan clearly rejects many of those traditional rock ideas of what is "good" or "genuine" music:

I enjoy Hole's music. Live Through This is one of the best albums I own. Frankly, I don't care how much guitar Courtney plays or who REALLY wrote it. It's a fantastic album, and Hole is a fantastic band. As for her wild statements, don't you get it? It's all part of her act She WANTS people to think she's nuts because she wants to be a famous rock star. But at least she's honest about wanting to be a famous rock star, unlike lots of artists (3/6/95, alt.music.courtney-love).

This post contains an obvious rejection of some of the "authentic" criteria, especially the issue of authorship. In this way the discourses which represent performers in the music press are negotiated by audiences. This posting also contains a conception of the "truthful" presentation of the self as reflecting good, honest and thus authentic music. The writer has used a notion of authenticity but has negotiated some alternative criteria for it.

Resistance can also be seen in the way that fans negotiate traditional rock discourses concerning the hierarchical dichotomy of live versus recorded performance. Madonna fans discuss the issue of her apparent lip-synching (miming) in live concerts in complex and revealing ways:

More and more recently, lipsynching has been used to slam artists who do not sing live along with their music. I don't think that it's a valid critique in most contexts; 'course, when you just stand there and lipsynch, then the audience is bound to get bored with you, but in BY ["Express Yourself"] in the Blond Ambition tour, for instance, I'm glad Madonna lipsynched; she would have RUINED the song and the performance if she tried to make the moves she did and sing as well! Do you go to a Madonna show so that you can LISTEN to the music... or so that you can SEE Madonna perform? (21/11/95 Re: What's wrong with lipsynching, alt.fan.madonna).

This fan is quite prepared to have Madonna mime some songs because his/her criteria for an authentic and enjoyable live performance are focused on the spectacle of dance and movement, rather than aural codes, which in rock criticism seems to carry the largest part of the authentic meaning.

On the other hand, there were Madonna fans who were uncomfortable with the lip-synching which, according to one fan, was more pronounced in The Blonde Ambition Tour than on other Madonna tours:

Madonna employs top-notch musicians for her shows, and I want to hear them PLAY. That's what made the lip-synching at "THE GIRLIE SHOW" a lot easier to deal with: the band played live, and plus the songs were rearranged. So they were new things to listen to; not just a tape. Also, it was for only 4 songs, and each time it was pretty obvious. The rest of the show was completely live. In "BLOND AMBITION", though, it was a constant guessing game. The deception really bothers me. If she's going to lip-synch in order to do other things, fine, but let's not try to fake out the audience...

Madonna is an awesome singer with an awesome voice. She is so emotional. Lip-synching completely destroys that (21/11/95 Re: What's wrong with lipsynching, alt.fan.madonna).

This comment contrasts with the fan who accepts the lip-synching as appropriate for Madonna's style of performing. It contains some of the traditional ideas about the rock performer being "truthful" to the audience. This posting represents some of the tensions

and contradictions that audience members negotiate, sometimes without any real closure. It also illustrates the way in which female performers, usually working in pop genres as opposed to rock, are understood within alternative authentic criteria which break away from the values of traditional mainstream rock.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this article textual data have been cited to illustrate the discourses of authenticity which make it difficult for women to fit easily into the patriarchally defined identity/subjectivity of the creative artist. However, my method of textual analysis is not one that can make strong claims to representativeness or to a rigorous scientific reliability. Yet questions of gender equality are complex and cannot be simply answered or made meaningful through quantitative measures. As Frith states in his study of critical values in popular music, quantitative measures cannot tell us why people are listening and what values they place in the music (Frith 1996, 48). This article attempts to reveal the patriarchal constructions of musical authenticity. Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, needs to be done to verify more conclusively where these constructions exist and the consequences they have for women making and listening to music in the late 1990s and beyond.

The relationship between the construction of authenticity and the role of author is still very strong in mainstream music press accounts of female performers. This relationship has been fostered and influenced through Western constructions of the artist and rock's own constructions of itself in opposition to values of commercialism signified in the label "pop." The marginalisation of women within these constructions is still a relevant contemporary phenomenon and is shown in the representations of women's musical roles. However, these patriarchal constructions are not completely dominant in that there are many tensions and negotiations that fans and listeners bring to the meaning-making process. There seems to be room for alternative ideas about what might constitute "valuable," "authentic" contemporary music. However, the extent to which these alternatives affect the dominant discourses which set up criteria which popular female performers find difficult to fulfill, is limited. There is also little recognition of the female singer as having any creative input into the musical text on any sophisticated level. This is especially true in the more conservative mainstream music publications which put the composer and the producer into the prime creative roles.

The masculine rock and roll tradition is enmeshed in the values developed in a nineteenth century model of the artist. Yet I concede that this is not the only model on offer, but in terms of much mainstream music criticism the high status of the author and the instrumentalist in evaluating musical texts is remarkably dominant despite the influence of postmodern ideas and buzz words in the popular media. To put it much more simply, the subject is firmly centred in critics', and many fans', accounts.

It is important for some female performers to invest in a musical persona that fits some of the criteria based on a patriarchally defined humanist subject. Of course fans ignore and resist this model. The question needs to be asked whether mainstream recognition of women's art is an important feminist goal. Certainly, the dominance of

one model of understanding the production of popular music needs to be challenged. This article has tackled this by exploring the possible meanings made by fans that contradict and resist the dominant understanding of the authentic musical artist.

Ambiguities, tensions and contradictions exist for female performers in attaining status in the dominant discourses expressed in rock criticism. For each female performer the stakes are different and are negotiated by those involved in various ways. Yet:

[f]or all the transgressions of the rock and roll industry's masculine gender order, though, the order itself is largely intact. Although a new feminist sensibility has entered the rock industry, it is usually cast in terms of novelty, and presented as something that needs to be understood and evaluated from the perspective of a masculine rock and roll tradition (Martin 1995,71).

This contradiction in rock music between its possibilities for change and rebellion and its conservative tendencies (at least in terms of female participation) is important to recognize in any analysis of the gendered nature of popular music. Yet, this recognition of the contradictions in popular music tells us that there is some room to challenge female stereotypes, even if these challenges struggle to maintain resistance to the hegemonic patriarchal discourses circulating through popular cultural sites and institutions.

NOTES

- 1 The female performers used in this paper include Madonna, Bjork, k.d. lang, Alanis Morissette, Sinead O'Connor, Courtney Love of Hole and Kylie Minogue. The performers discussed here are part of a larger study containing eleven female musical performers which I am undertaking.
- 2 There are two sources where text based discussions on popular musical acts by fans can be found. The fan discussions I mostly cite can be accessed via Usenet, which is divided up into thousands of notice boards. Each notice board is referred to as a newsgroup. To participate in and read Usenet discussions requires a newsreader program, which connects to one of the many Internet computers (or news servers) which store all the different newsgroups and the articles they contain. The other way of sourcing newsgroups is to subscribe via email to mailing lists (Neely 1997,43,58-59).
- 3 The term performer is used here as a general blanket term. That is, I am referring to all musical performers whether they are a composer or not. When identifying more specific roles I use specific terms such as singer, composer, guitarist.
- 4 It should be noted that this article only deals with a handful of examples within Western popular music culture. Thus, the argument that authorship is highly valued cannot be made beyond Western commercial popular music with its connected history with European values of creativity.
- 5 It has been argued that poets such as Byron in the late 18th and early 19th centuries influenced the development of the stereotype of the romantic artist as passionate and rebellious (Butler 1981, 2-3).
- 6 The internet postings have been transcribed exactly with all grammar, spelling and format mistakes.
- 7 k.d. lang uses all lower case letters in her name.

- 8 This essentialising can be found in Barthes' notion of the "grain of the voice" which seeks to categorise singing voices based on the extent to which the body can be heard in the vocalisation of the singer (Barthes 1977).

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alt.fan.madonna
alt.music.alternative.female
alt.music.courtney-love
k-d-lang@world.std.com
rec.music.tori-amos

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Madonna (July 1983)
Like A Virgin (1984)
True Blue (1986)
Like A Prayer (1989)
I'm Breathless (1990)
The Immaculate Collection (1990)
Erotica (1992)
Bedtime Stories (1994)
Ray of Light (1998)

PJ Harvey

Dry (1992)
Rid of Me (1993)
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To Bring You My Love (1995)
Dance Hall at Louse Point (1996)
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Sinead O'Connor

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I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got (1990)
Am I Not Your Girl (1992)
Universal Mother (1994)
So Far...The Best of Sinead O'Connor (1997)

Kylie Minogue

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Enjoy Yourself (1989)
Rhythm of Love (1990)
Let's Get To It (1991)
Kylie Minogue (1994)
Impossible Princess (1998)

Hole

Pretty on the Inside (1991)
Live Through This (1994)
Celebrity Skin (1998)

k.d. lang

A Truly Western Experience (1984)
Angel With a Lariat (1987)
Shadowlands (1988)
Torch and Twang (1989)
Ingenué (1992)
All You Can Bat (1995)
Drag (1997)

Bjork

Debut (1993)
Post (1995)
Homogenic (1997)

Alanis Morissette

Jagged Little Pill (1995)
Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie (1998)