

CHAPTER 11

The gendered narratives of nobodies and somebodies in the popular music economy

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A wide variety of research illuminates the significance of gender and popular music production. This encompasses conventional academic scholarship with its valuable generalisations and analytical reductions. It includes published autobiographical memoirs or privately kept diaries delving into unique personal experiences, or local history archives expansively evoking the drama of details. It embraces practice research, bringing insights from composition, songwriting and a wide array of creative performance activities.

Such diversity is rarely acknowledged let alone incorporated in most popular music research. Popular music studies has largely ignored James Clifford's call, made back in the 1980s, for researchers to adopt an inclusive ethnographic approach to the materials that contribute to knowledge and understanding of human cultures. Clifford argued that "ethnography appears in several forms" and refers to "diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from the standpoint of participant observation" (Clifford 1988, 9), encompassing the perspectives of poets, novelists, artists and sculptors, creators of artefacts and so-called 'native informants'. Clifford advocated a stance towards research and writing that involves the juxtaposition of different voices as a means of expressing the dynamism of culture as "an open-ended, creative dialogue of subcultures, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions" (ibid., 46).

It was also during the 1980s that Paul Ricoeur published his influential studies of time and narrative (1984, 1985, 1988, 1991b, 1991c), arguing that our experiential uncertainty of existence is "refashioned by its passage through the grid of narrative" (1991a, 338). Identities and experiences are comprehended as we narrate events and interactions that will always incorporate the views and behaviour of others. Although Ricoeur's insights influenced cultural and social theorists, rarely have they featured in the study of popular music. This seems a particularly conspicuous absence because Ricoeur stressed the "complementarity between fictional and empirical narratives ... our fundamental historicity is *brought to language* by the convergence of the different modes of narrative discourse" (1983, 4). Our grasp of the temporal world is acquired as much through the 'fictional' as it is through the 'factual'. Ricoeur supported his argument through an analysis of literary fiction, yet his arguments imply that all narrative forms – songs being a notable example – are important for mediating and organising our knowledge of life.

As I write this, nearly thirty years later, in light of the institutional growth of popular music studies, the writings of Clifford and Ricoeur seem to be more pertinent than ever. Augmenting these ideas with Derek Scott's suggestion that musicology should strive to be 'an intertextual field of inquiry rather than a discipline' (2010, p. x), we might embrace an orientation to research informed by an ever richer, wider and more inclusive range of materials.

In this chapter I am advocating an approach informed by these methodological precepts and suggesting one amongst many possible routes for research that traces the material and moral narratives of fame and failure; the voluntary and involuntary shifts from amateur nobody to acclaimed somebody as these are shaped by commercial music production. Exploring the circumstances within which music is made, from the earliest days of gaining skills and becoming an amateur musician to the struggles to 'make it' and subsequent responses to stardom, entails asking questions about the acquisition of musical proficiency, occupational opportunities, and the individual and collective labour of musicians.

Rather than stake out a theoretical ‘position’ on gender and apply this, I want to approach the issue in a more open and oblique manner by asking when gender becomes articulated and experienced as an issue in the narratives of fulfilment and success. We can examine the relevance or irrelevance of gender in popular music culture, the pressures on women and men, the expectations for the adoption of masculine and feminine identities, by being attuned to the tales told by amateur, semi-professional and successful musicians. We may potentially weave together many strands of popular music research, juxtaposing diverse voices by focusing on the material dynamics, ideological beliefs and biographical narratives of fame and failure; grounding an understanding of how individual creative activities and identities are realised within systems of production characterised by stark contrasts between the wealthy pop star (secluded, protected, powerful, enjoying freedom from necessity) and the pop pauper (investing in music making without return, living in relative poverty, struggling for recognition and reward and with no bargaining power).

Persistently mediating the practices of musicians is the ideological dream of ‘making it in the music industry’ along with the accompanying anxiety of being a ‘nobody’, beliefs that are reinforced or resisted through the material sacrifice and unrewarded labour of countless amateur musicians. Given the scope of these issues, the size of this chapter and the aims of this book (to provoke further thinking and research), I shall inevitably leave a number of these questions open to further research and debate.

The narratives and negotiations of nobodies

One starting point is Ruth Finnegan’s acclaimed and unique detailed study of ‘hidden musicians’ based on observation and interviews during the 1980s in the English new town of Milton Keynes. Finnegan focused on amateurs (those not professionally making a full time living out of music) and recognised that there was no simple way to define such musicians other than at the “amateur end of the complex amateur-professional continuum” (2007, xii) which allowed for “many different possible variations” (ibid., 14). Researching across generations and musical styles (taking in choirs and brass bands as well as pop and rock groups), Finnegan provided numerous insights into the way school, family life, neighbourhood and community are integral to the acquisition of musical skills, the personal satisfaction gained and the social recognition accorded. Drawing insights from ethnomusicology – notably, the perennially important research of John Blacking (1973) – Finnegan argued that amateur music making “may play a far larger part in the experience and fulfilment of human beings and the patterning of society than is usually allowed by social scientists, musicologists or the conventional wisdom on the topic” (2007, 341).

Similar themes weave throughout Sara Cohen’s ethnography of rock musicians in Liverpool during the 1980s, and in her subsequent research on music making in Liverpool (Cohen 2007). Like Finnegan, Cohen described the importance of peers, family members and friends, and the significant role of experienced older musicians. Family life is central to becoming an amateur musician. Musical skill and understanding is achieved within kinship networks, distinct local face-to-face communities and encounters across generations. Cohen’s research reveals two important issues that shape how popular music is made and which permeate the transition from unknown amateur to recognised musician – that of gender, and the dreams and dilemmas of seeking to ‘make it’ in the music industry.

When Finnegan was researching pop and rock bands in the early 1980s eight out of 125 musicians she studied in Milton Keynes were female (Finnegan 2007, 119). She found that girls tended to be more involved with western classical repertoire within school, whilst boys were more active in making popular music outside of school. Cohen’s study, at a similar moment during the 1980s, found a comparable division, with one Musician’s and Band’s Association containing 66 performers – only one being female.

Cohen's study included an important chapter entitled "The Threat of Women". In this she referred to varied narratives from the history of jazz and rock music, evidencing how women have been absent, marginalised or viewed as intruders in many music scenes. Cohen provided detailed case studies of how this was maintained by young rock musicians at the very start of any possible career. Male members of the bands she studied judged women in bands largely in terms of their appearance rather than their musical skills and considered having a woman in a band as something of a novelty. Cohen found that the women she interviewed – whether present as performers, friends or partners – spoke of feeling intimidated within the rehearsal or gig environments, and recounted incidents of disputes between band members and partners about the amount of time being devoted to music.

Cohen's research has been extended by Mavis Bayton's study of women rock musicians (Bayton 1998), Marion Leonard's research into 'female centred' alternative rock bands (Leonard 2007), Helen Reddington's account of female musicians during the punk era (Reddington 2012), and a range of memoirs, including those of Kim Gordon (2015) and Viv Albertine (2015) offering occasionally bleaker insider's accounts. All demonstrate how children and young adults, along with their teachers, parents and carers, have been grappling with enduring historical legacies whereby certain instruments and performance styles are deemed more appropriate for boys and girls – the by now almost clichéd gendering of electric guitars, drum kits, flutes, harps and so on (Green 1997). When young musicians have formed bands they have often unwittingly mobilised all manner of inherited ideas and assumptions about the musical activities that are more appropriate for women and men (Green, 2002). This has even been apparent in 'alternative' musical circles and illustrated in Mary Ann Clawson's influential study of women bass players in indie rock bands (Clawson 1999). Clawson provides an astute insight into the paradoxes and tensions as the bass guitar provides an opportunity for girls and women to find a route in to rock performance but simultaneously reinforces taken-for-granted assumptions about the restricted space for women in male dominated bands, a theme that weaves through academic and insider accounts of women in music during this period.

Academic narratives can sometimes seem irrevocably at odds with the moments of ambiguity and paradox experienced by musicians, often alluded to in interviews and memoirs. For example, in Tracey Thorn's compelling recollections of how she "tried to be a pop star" she remembers buying her first electric guitar in 1979: "I'm amazed at myself – where have I found the audacity to buy this, well, very masculine icon? And it does feel masculine – that's one of the things I like about it" (Thorn 2013, 29). She was getting an electric guitar at the very moment when it was indeed an icon of the inherently masculine style of 'cock rock' (Frith and McRobbie 1978). In the same year that Thorn bought her guitar, Richard Dyer was polemically arguing that, "... even when performed by women, rock remains indelibly phallo-centric music" (Dyer 1990, 415). Some 20 years later such sentiments were echoed in an account of the voice in dance music: "The rock voice is almost definitively masculine. Even on those rare occasions when women sing music which can be unproblematically defined as 'rock', the vocal style tends to take on the 'masculine' characteristics of traditional rock singing" (Gilbert and Pearson 1999, 83).

Such assertions, whilst a valuable polemic against male dominance in rock music during this era, tend towards absolutist theorising and avoid lived experiences such as Thorn's that do not fit the pattern. In their study of 'disruptive divas' Lori Burns and Melisse Lafrance acknowledged that woman had been "traditionally denied access to that form of anger or aggression" (Burns and Lafrance 2001, 131) associated with rock, but set about narrating an alternative story that allows for "moments of female appropriation". If we take the musicians discussed by Burns and Lafrance (such as Tori Amos, Courtney Love, Me'Shell Ndegéocello and PJ Harvey) along with Thorn's memoirs, we catch glimpses of an alternative narrative, a more varied counter-history.

The masculine cultures of bands and gendered assumptions about instruments infiltrate the experience of trying and buying instruments and technologies. Again, historically, the ‘organisational culture of musical instrument stores’ has proved to be an intimidating environment for girls and women (and also for many boys and men). This is illustrated in Carey Sargent’s participant observation study of interactions between workers and customers in retail outlets on the East Coast of the United States from 1999 to 2005. Predictably she found that more males were employed in and frequented the shops and that men were usually more confident in talking to workers in the stores. Women reported finding the stores intimidating and staff assumed that men would be more likely to understand technical jargon. Sargent identified two exclusionary masculine habits which she characterised as ‘competitive fraternization’ and ‘geeky paternalism’:

Competitive fraternization offers a high degree of (male) social bonding and limited amount of information about music technologies in a setting that ascribes women positions as noninsiders and nonmusicians. ... Geeky paternalism offers limited opportunities for social bonding but copious information in a setting with fixed hierarchies where most, but not all, of the authority figures are men (2009, 684).

Again, a slightly different story might be told about women and technology. This is a narrative of accessible instruments and cheap recording technologies (from tape machines and cassettes through to digital hardware and studio production software) allowing girls and women to find ‘a space of one’s own’ – an idea that Paula Wolfe develops by drawing on the writings of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. Wolfe emphasises how female musicians have been able to work on music on their own, at home or in their bedrooms, on laptops and using software such as GarageBand. This has allowed autonomy, independence, flexibility and self-production, along with growing confidence, self-belief and creative fulfilment. It has enabled girls and women to develop music without needing to negotiate the male camaraderie of bands. Working in solitude has been particularly beneficial to women musicians: “the steady rise in self-production practices amongst women not only points to artistic and career potential for the individual but may also serve to address an inherited gender imbalance in the field” (Wolfe 2012, n.p.).

There is, inevitably, more that can be written and researched about the experiences of unknown and amateur rock musicians and the myriad ways that gender shapes opportunity, creative practice and the dynamics within ensembles. My point in this section is to highlight the tensions and dilemmas; the opportunities, achievements and enduring constraints that confront boys and girls, women and men, wishing to make music from the earliest days prior to any formal commercial negotiations and deals.

Aspiration, ambivalence and industry

The activities of amateur musicians are not outside or independent of the networked webs of the music industry. Musicians acquire their skills from industrially manufactured instruments and technology, and engage with repertoire from commercially available recordings and software. Antoine Hennion has noted that the growth of media and recorded music from early in the twentieth century led to an “intensification of amateur practices” (Hennion 1999, 1) inspiring people to take up instruments and to learn from recordings rather than resulting in a shift towards passive consumerism. A history of ‘do it yourself’ culture (Spencer 2008) has been inspired by recordings of blues, skiffle, rock ‘n’ roll, punk and hip hop, whilst digital technologies have “increased amateur creativity” (ibid., 85), allowing “non-professionals to create, remix and publish content online” (Wikström 2009, 7) evidenced in remixes, mash-ups, user-generated tracks and videos. Amateurs are not outside of nor simply recipients of the music industry but implicated in commodified music production through their use of technologies, adoption of repertoires, embracement of imagery and ideas.

The music industries seek to contractually engage recording artists from a large pool of ‘unknown’ musicians seeking to ‘make it’ and acquire a contract. This motivation characterised the music business during the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll and soul during the 1950s, and has continued to inform the aspirations of musicians, as Cohen found in her 1980s study in Liverpool, researching during the peak moment of recorded music production when it was possible to claim, with some justification, that recording was the core music business from which all significant profits derived. She made a distinction between two types of bands. First were bands that opposed or sought to ‘resist’ commercial pressures and which sometimes responded “to commercialism by expressing its alienating effects in their music” (Cohen 1991, 196). In contrast, Cohen identified bands that adopted a “capitalistic attitude”; the band members “took on commercial values and ambitions and constructed their music accordingly” (ibid.).

During interviews with musicians and music industry personnel between 1988 and 1991, I became acutely aware of the dilemmas encountered by musicians whose repertoire did not conform to the criteria required by the industry. The instrumental line-ups of amateur bands have often been more varied than the conventional ensemble of drums, bass and guitars. It was not uncommon to find young people, at school, college and university, making music in groups that included instruments that were not conventionally part of a pop or rock ensemble – clarinet, violin, flute and trumpet, for example. Original compositions often displayed eccentricities of song structure and arrangements that were seldom found in professionally produced, commercially successful music (this was more than just amateurism in the pejorative sense of the term). Since the 1950s, many amateur musicians have made music that has only ever been heard and appreciated in private spaces (parties, family occasions, for friends) or at marginal public places (school hops, proms, youth clubs and community centres). During the 1980s in the UK an entire subculture developed whereby recordings were circulated on cassettes. This is alluded to in Thorn’s memoirs, and how I first heard the Marine Girls, on the band’s home produced cassette, played to me by a friend in a bedsit; a friend who I had also made recordings with on cassette and which were circulated in the mail to other non-publicly performing musicians across the country (in an age before the Internet and mobile media).

Additional research could detail and document the neglected repertoire of amateur musicians and might broaden our understanding of the sounds that are assumed to be representative of rock and mainstream pop music from the 1960s (celebrated in histories and biographies of bands) to the 1980s (when Cohen was writing), and perhaps during more recent times (and might connect with a critique of the assumptions about the male sound of rock referred to above). There are many tales to be told about other ‘hidden musicians’.

By extending Cohen’s distinction, I would suggest that it is possible to identify dependent amateurs adopting an acquiescent relationship to the music industry, uncritically accepting a ‘making it in the music business’ ethos and endorsing commercial values. These may be contrasted with autonomous (I do not mean ‘indie’) amateurs adopting a more critical or ambivalent stance. Again, in practice, such a blunt heuristic dichotomy may be blurred and result in tensions and paradoxes through which the music industry lives off and exploits this activity, quite regardless of the fulfilment and satisfaction gained by hobbyists and amateurs.

It is also at this moment when discourses of expectations of appropriate female and male behaviour are mobilised by those deciding whether or not to offer deals to unsigned musicians and when musicians shape their sounds, images and identities to be suited to commercial criteria prevalent at any one time, an issue I shall loop back to below when I discuss the imperatives of the economy of stardom. For the moment it is worth noting that, some 25 years after Cohen’s account of unknown bands, the orientations of musicians have changed as revenues from consumer sales of sound recordings has become increasingly irrelevant and as recorded songs are used as a “customer

engagement tool” used to sell mobile phones (Seabrook 2014). The romantic belief that signing a deal to produce recordings equates with ‘making it’ is being superseded by recognition that being a musician entails what has often been characterised in recent years, euphemistically, as a ‘portfolio career’. A new term, perhaps, for what was always the case for musicians – a ‘portfolio’ that might entail working in bars, busking, paying to record songs in studios and to play gigs, whilst working in an Apple store, as freelance proof reader or in a small web design company.

Making it in the big city

At this point our narratives leave behind ambivalent amateurs and hobbyists and crossfade into another episode in the chronicle of musicians seeking attention, recognition and reward. Yet another familiar story is told. The musician acquires their skills and struggles with adversity, battles against indifference, and supports themselves through working as a waitress or by eking out an existence on ever dwindling state benefits, until there is a breakthrough moment, after which recognition and reward follow.

Early struggles are energised by a pivotal geographical move; a physical relocation from small town, village or suburb to city. Whilst the characteristics of place, and movement across space, have been extensively interrogated as themes in the geographies of musical identity (Stokes 1994; Connell and Gibson 2002; Whiteley, Bennett and Hawkins 2004), discussions of place have rarely addressed the geographical movement that is central to the desire to get a deal and a prominent theme in the narratives of success: rewards reaped in the city allow successful musicians exclusive access to secluded country estate, security fenced mansion or island hideaway. In this story the city is the site of opportunity and exposure, contacts and networks, deals and patronage, critical recognition and financial reward.

This is a persistent narrative, celebrated in numerous songs. It continues to inform the aspirations of countless unknown musicians, even in the age of Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter and networked communication. Although it is apparently so easy to create and distribute music across space and link with entrepreneurs, investors and audiences, a real sense of place endures. Evidence can continually be found in media profiles of new performers. For example, the band The Wild Beasts formed during 2002-04 in Kendal, a small town (population about 30,000) in the Lake District, Northern England. In 2005 they then moved to Leeds (population about 750,000) where three of the four members attended University. After this they moved about 190 miles south to Stoke Newington in North East London, a neighbourhood that was a small village outside the city at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For much of the twentieth century it was considered a Pooterish suburb, until it formally became part of the inner London borough of Hackney in 1965.

Five miles from central London, with no underground line, it can take longer to reach the centre on public transport than many of the commuter trains that come into London from 20 miles outside the city. But, you can tell people you are living in London. You have a London postcode (N16). And, at this moment it had become something of the place to be for conventional male rock bands like the Wild Beasts, who decided to move to Stoke Newington because – to quote their bass player Tom Fleming – they were “close ... to being just another pub band from Leeds” and in London “[you] have to have something to say otherwise you are just guys pretending” (Brey 2011). The band clearly felt that they had something to say, and this move to northeast London was one way of articulating it.

Comparable tales about moving to make it in the big city have been narrated throughout Europe and North America, with similar location hopping from small town or village to the nearest big town with a scene. In the UK this might be a move to Liverpool, or Manchester, or Cardiff or Glasgow or Sheffield or Belfast, and then a subsequent move to London. Tracey Thorn, who grew up in

Brookman's Park, Hatfield, some 20 miles from London, remembers that as soon as she got her degree from Hull University she "straight away moved to London". Recalling how she abandoned any alternative plans to pursue a PhD "there was a music career here which seemed mine for the taking ... Morrissey and Marr were living in London now too" (Thorn 2013, 150), the two songwriters of The Smiths having moved down from Manchester.

The move from suburbs to city was celebrated in accounts of 1970s rock culture in the UK with the south London suburbs providing a backdrop to the aspirations of, amongst others, David Bowie, Siouxsie Sioux, The Cure and Kate Bush, with a biography of the latter suitably entitled *The Princess of Suburbia*. Louise Wener of the band Sleeper grew up in the north east London suburb of Gants Hill and in her memoirs of Brit-pop recalled her plan as "something like this: come to London, find a room in a shared house, sign on, write some chart toppers, get a huge record deal, sign off, move to Hawaii" (Wener 2011, 127). She vividly conveys the feelings of increasing anxiety and desperation, familiar to many bands but not often articulated so candidly:

How long is this supposed to take? How long are you meant to give it? Two years? Three years? Four? (p130) ... The days turn to months, the months turn to years, each of them blurring into one another: waitress for six months, office temp for six months, gig a few times, record new demo tape, write new songs, form new band, dump old songs, sign on, sign off, waitress, temp, gig again, save up to record the definitive demo tape (p134)... ... our pop clock is ticking (p135).

Some 15 years prior to Sleeper, The Members, from Camberley (some 35 miles south west of London) ironically satirised their anxieties and observations of the move to London in two songs released in 1979, "The Sound of the Suburbs" (listing boring details of small town life) – a title that has been used in at least two academic articles on popular music and suburbia; and "Solitary Confinement", in which they sneered at an unnamed naïve suburbanite who makes the move "up to London Town" where they "think everything's happening" and ends up "living in a bedsit" in "solitary confinement".

The image of solitary confinement in a bedsit (a single room in a house of many occupants with shared bathroom) evokes the city from a prisoner's cell of isolation and loneliness, the antithesis of participating in a place where everything is happening. This is a capital that, in the words of The Clash's "London's Burning" (1977), is "burning with boredom" and where "everyone's sitting round watching television" and where "I run through the empty stone because I'm all alone". The sense of urban alienation – of being in close proximity to strangers (as neighbours, on transport, on the street) yet experiencing a loss of connection – is a poetic sensibility that Raymond Williams has traced back to the writings of William Blake and William Wordsworth. Williams writes of how Thomas Hardy evoked a "sense of paradox: that in the great city itself, the very place and agency – or so it would seem – of collective consciousness, it is an absence of common feeling, an excessive subjectivity, that seems to be characteristic" (Williams 1973, 215).

In discussing a long history of literary representations and commentary, Williams highlights how the city as site of opportunity became mapped onto a dichotomy of country and city. The rock musician's belief that the city is the site of possibility and cosmopolitanism (the limitations of the country, village and small town to be escaped) is part of a much longer history of ideas and imagery. Williams quotes from Arthur Young, writing in 1768: "Young men and women in the country fix their eye on London as the last stage of their hope ... The number of young women that fly there is incredible" (ibid., 146). Despite the fact that women have been moving to cities for centuries, the distinction between country and city has sometimes been mapped on to the binaries of culture/nature, public/private and male/female. Elizabeth Wilson challenged these dichotomies in her research, whilst arguing that the masculine has tended to dominate in the architecture, imagery

and behaviours of urban public space (Wilson 1991). Male dominance was also apparent in the strand of writing about youth subcultures, perhaps at its peak in the late 1970s, in which the visible public masculine street subcultures were celebrated whereas the more private female bedroom cultures were ignored, although later recuperated and revalued following feminist critique, notably in the writings of McRobbie (1980).

Stardom and the commodification of the self

As women and men negotiate the contradictory demands and paradoxes of city life, the attraction is not only the bright lights and the stages in clubs and venues, but commerce and ‘the deal’. The main offices of the large and many of the significant small music companies have been based in London since the days of music publishing and then recording. If ‘making it’ in the big city is ultimately about anything (other than illusions) it is about fame, fortune and freedom from necessity. The music business, as part of a wider entertainment industry, is structured around the dynamics of stardom. It is towards some form of stardom that musicians who move to the city aspire – as evidenced in Wener’s wry quote about moving to Hawaii. The attractions of stardom for individual musicians hardly need stating in terms of the financial rewards and their consequences. Fame not only benefits the musician, stardom is crucial for a music company’s profitability. Stars impact upon a company’s share value, and the willingness of investors to put money into a company; stars are indicators of a company’s ability to attract, retain and manage talent. Stars also act as a magnet to attract other musicians (see Negus 1999; Marshall 2013).

In media and cultural studies most discussions of stardom (whether directly or indirectly addressing questions of gender) have tended to focus on representations – the image of the star, or the identifications expressed by audiences. Far less attention has been paid to the materiality of stardom as work and labour, despite Dyer’s argument about the production of stardom in the film industry back in the 1980s: “Stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces. They do not produce themselves alone” (Dyer 1986, 5). The star persona or identity is the result of individual effort and labour, and this inevitably begins with dedication and enthusiasm of amateur musicians acquiring skills. It then gains intensity with recognition by the music and entertainment industries, and may lead to a type of egotistical labour focused on self-regulation and presentation. Once musicians are within the networks of the music industries they work as much (if not more) on their personas as their music. As bands become brands (Forde 2012) rather than simply recording artists, ever more time is devoted to training in media presentation and stagecraft, exercise, workouts and diets, often with recourse to ‘cosmetic’ surgery and the use of prosthetics. Stardom epitomises “the view of the self as an experimental identity or object that does not say I am what I am, but I am what I can become” (King 2007, 339).

The pressures to labour on bodily transformation in producing the pop persona are compounded by the pressures and possibilities allowed by the circulation of copyrighted images and sounds. As Rosemary Coombe has observed,

A celebrity could, theoretically at least, license her signature for use on fashion scarves, grant exclusive rights to reproduce her face to a perfume manufacturer, voice to a charitable organisation, legs to a pantyhose company, particular publicity stills for distribution as posters and postcards, and continue to market her services as a singer, actress, and composer. The human persona is capable of almost infinite commodification, because exclusive, nonexclusive, and temporally, spatially, and functionally limited licenses may be granted for use of any valuable aspect of the celebrity’s public presence (1998, 91).

Stars are a “commodity amongst commodities ... the cybernetic monitor which returns all efforts to the same apparent core of meaning” (King 1987, 149). Kembrew McLeod quotes Elizabeth Taylor,

when promoting her brand of perfume, declaring without any apparent irony: “I am my own commodity” (McLeod 2005, 197), a clear indication of how stars begin to experience their identity and those of their competitors as comprised of fragmented fungible parts.

An insight into intensive commodification of identities can be found in Yeran Kim’s (2011) account of how an aesthetic of ‘Lolita nationalism’ has been central to the construction of South Korean ‘girl industries’. Drawing on extensive research and analysis of the experience of girl and boy K-pop musicians, Kim makes three pertinent points. First, she argues that a highly selective version of young girl bodies and identities has been systematically constructed and strategically commodified in the creation of ‘girl industries’, exaggerating the existing star system whereby musicians are encouraged to commodify themselves and to break down their bodily personas into copyrightable components, framed according to notions of beauty, style and sex appeal. Second, on this point, she suggests that an ‘ambiguous’ and ‘innocent’ form of sexuality has been disseminated and normalised in visual representations and practice as the required mode for performers, and their fans, to adopt and to deploy when presenting themselves. Third, this ‘girl identity’ has been exploited both within Korea and globally as a form of ‘Lolita nationalism’ and as an integral part of the ‘idol republic’. Kim calls for a feminist critique of the normalisation of this exploitative commercial process and its representations, and an assessment of its consequences for how girls and young women act, perceive and present themselves, and a critique of its impact on international perceptions of South Korean female identity. Meanwhile, a short hop across the planet, the paradoxes and contradictions of the US pop star system are articulated in the seemingly post-ironic ‘commodity feminism’ (Goldman, Heath and Smith 1991) of Rihanna or Beyoncé.

Has beens and never weres

Employing a metaphor that has become almost a cliché in tales of music business stardom, Louise Wener narrates the decline of the band Sleeper and her disillusionment with the music industry and showbiz – “the circus motors on to its inevitable end” (Wener 2011, 303). An end that has been looming, it has caused her to reflect in these terms: “All pop careers, like political ones, end in failure and I knew I would reach this point sooner or later, but the pace with which it happens is shocking. One moment you’re elated and immune on a platinum tour, the next you’re clinging to the rock face, trying to stop yourself falling” (ibid., 298).

Many more stories of successful bands and musicians get published than tales of decline and fall. Yet, the latter can be insightful, moving and occasionally bathetic. In Nicky Forbes’ memoir of his time in The Rezillos/Revillos he narrates the increasingly desperate state of a group in decline as he accepts a New Year’s Eve gig with a local band whose leader apologetically says, “I don’t like to ask you, ‘cos I know you’ve ‘made it’ now, but our drummer’s ill. But the gig only pays you 20 quid” (Forbes 2008, 117). As Forbes remembers:

The year had started with me happily on Virgin Records: a pop star on Top Of The Pops, hobnobbing with the rich and famous on myriad TV shows and interviews, chart singles, promo videos, radio sessions; an album release plus packed, wild, crazy gigs. The group had been splashed across the covers of the music papers, national and European press, with photo sessions galore. We had toured Britain, Holland, Belgium, France and Ireland. And now, 1980 had stumbled to a close with a pub band gig at the King’s Head in the village of Tiptree, Essex, on the stageless, swirly-carpeted floor of the lounge bar. Worst of all, I’d never been so grateful for £20 (ibid., 118).

In this woeful tale of a band on the way down he recalls a gig in the wooden hut of a Territorial Army Centre in York (a city where they had once played to a packed University) and where no one

had thought to book a PA. On they go, playing to fewer people, their final UK tour being a “sad, pathetic affair” (ibid., 235).

Forbes concludes his memoirs by reflecting on why he persevered for so long and asks what, if anything, he got out of the experience. He refers to long-term physical damage to his ears and stomach, and mentions that other members of the band suffered addictions and had problems with their physical and mental health. Towards the end he recounts a conversation during which someone says to him, “You’re just a forgotten old has-been” (ibid., 246). It is a familiar phrase and one used to caustic and ironic effect in William Shatner’s song of that title, “Has Been”, in which he angrily intones a response to such a comment over spoof spaghetti western rhythms, twanging guitars and distant trumpets – “you calling me ‘has been’? What did you say your name is?” Shatner addresses ‘the never was’, talking about ‘still trying’, and those who ‘laugh at others’ failures’ yet have done and achieved nothing. Forbes conclusion is similar – better a ‘has been’ than a ‘never was’.

The ultimate stigmatisation of those investing their efforts in the pop music circus is signalled by these two terms casually used to describe musicians; phrases seldom, if ever, subject to critical reflection. The term ‘has been’ defines a musician who was once ‘somebody’, an acclaimed and successful person now deemed to be past their best, in decline, their creative currency and public recognition devalued. The ‘never weres’ are those musicians (or bands) that never achieved the requisite level of acclaim, the ones who never ‘made it’. Out of the ‘public eye’ they remain invisible and inaudible, deemed to have failed. These categories indicate how an entertainment industry shapes public discourse through systems of values about life trajectories, endurance and repeated achievement, restricted notions of fame, fashion and commodity aesthetics. Such critically neglected judgements (‘has been’, ‘never were’) influence (often unobtrusively) the activities and values of musicians, critics, academics and fans. It is a long way from the pleasure and perseverance of amateurs making music for the intrinsic pleasure.

Yet, musicians are not the hapless victims of a dynamic beyond their control, as evidenced in more voluntary steps from the spotlight. In Tracey Thorn’s account of her self-confessed attempt to be ‘somebody’, an aim admitted to in the first part of the book, she recalls a moment when Everything But The Girl were offered the opportunity to support U2 on a major US tour. Not only does Thorn wonder about the wisdom of stepping on to a stadium stage in front of an impatient rock audience, she begins reflecting on life and a conversation she has had with Liam Gallagher who told her that he was “desperate to have kids” (Thorn 2013, 316). Her response to the offer to tour with U2 is, ‘I think I want to stop now’ (ibid., 320).

As Thorn becomes a mother of twins and then attempts to tour with two toddlers, her reflections succinctly raise many of the issues about becoming a musician and the meaning of success that I have been alluding to in this chapter. She recalls preparing for a gig:

At that point I’d have to try and turn myself into someone else. Someone less like a mum with sick down her T-shirt and more like a pop star ... No, it wasn’t just the exhaustion. It was more the split-personality thing of having two different people at different times of the day. ‘Mummy’ in daylight hours, except when I was also called upon to do my job of soundchecking for the night’s gig. Then, later that night, when the audience had arrived and the lights were down, I’d go onstage and have to become someone else, a character I’d never been that comfortable with anyway – a singing show-off – only now I felt even more of a phoney and a fraud than ever before. It was all my onstage nightmares rolled into one (ibid., 330).

Narratives of pop music success and failure are replete with the anxieties and experiences of how a nobody works their self into someone else in order to become a somebody, and must then assume a character and adopt a persona (see Negus 2011). Such stories also include reference to the true self, the real person (quite regardless of academic suspicion of notions of authenticity). If our roles in social life – mother, father, musician, accountant, nurse, soldier – entail a performance (Goffman 1959) and if gender identities are performed, whether on stage or in our everyday lives (Butler 1990), a study of the narratives of fulfilment, fame and failure could provide rich insights into how these identities collide, provoking further questions: In what ways is it different for girls? In what ways is it different for boys? In what ways might a focus on gender lead us to ignore other relevant narratives and experiences of class, race, sexuality, disability, age and geography (all could be inserted in this chapter at various points)? The category of gender provides one way of illuminating aspects of popular music culture. Circumstances, events, situations and experiences may be narrated in contrasting ways, from other perspectives. Such experiences may be recounted in the written, sung and studied narratives of musicians who join the circus, those dropped by the circus, those who run away from the circus and those who have no inclination to become part of the circus in the first place.

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