When the artist meets the audience: amour, anxiety and ambivalence

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This is an unpublished paper, presented at the 13th Biennial IASPM Conference, *Making Music, Making Meaning*, Università La Sapienza, Rome, Italy, 25-30 July 2005. As several people have asked me about it over recent years I have made it available here, as presented at the conference.

My theme is the relationship between artists and audiences, the links that connect musicians, songwriters, or performers to their fans, and the dynamics and consequences of that relationship. In general terms I'm interested in linking the study of audiences and their activities to the creative practices of musicians. Rather than treating fans as separate or after the musicians and performers (interpreting and appropriating the words, sounds and images), I want to raise questions about how the activity of the public feeds back into or has an impact on the creative process. (Given the time available, this will inevitably be tentative and schematic).

At a basic level, the audience provides recognition. This is visible and audible at live events. We hear the applause, shouting, singing, and cheering. We see the dancing, and various bodily responses. The listener recognises the artist by buying the recording, writing letters, sending messages to websites, wearing the T-shirt. Recognition is accorded in various symbolic ways. The audience also rewards the artist by paying for concert tickets, purchasing recordings, and buying a whole lot of merchandise. The musicians make money out of their fans.

As we know, fans don't provide recognition and rewards in a rational, instrumental, or straightforward manner. Fans invest all kinds of beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and fantasies into their appreciation of an artist, as many studies have shown. Ultimately, many fans fall in love with the artist and when they attend concerts they often wish to express that love.

When Michael Jackson was at the peak of his popularity, and playing stadiums, it was common to see members of the audience holding homemade banners with the words 'We Love You Michael'. At Smiths concerts many young male fans would shout of their love for Morrissey, jumping on to the stage and embracing him.

But it's not just young fans doing this. At Bob Dylan concerts over recent years, I've noticed that a number of people over 50 years old (men and women) will stand up and shout 'We Love you Bob!' or 'We Love you Bobby!' (continually, throughout a concert). So, I'm not just referring to youth fan cultures or young people.

I want to show a brief clip to illustrate and extend this theme. This features David Bowie and is taken from a BBC Arena documentary, 'Cracked Actor', (first broadcast in 1974). This clip illustrates some of the points made in the literature about fans and stardom. It shows how the star provides an opportunity for fans to realise some aspect of themselves. It shows how fans become integral to the re-affirmation and endurance of the star's identity and persona. In this clip you can get a tangible sense of how the audience impacts on the artist, and how Bowie is quite reflexively aware of the audience. You can visibly see the connection between artist and audience – the performer shaking hands with and kissing members of the audience. [At this point a brief edited extract of about 3-4 minutes was shown].

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Well, it was Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band who sang: 'You're such a lovely audience, we'd like to take you home with us, we'd love to take you home'. That line was itself a playful comment on a cliché, a play on that moment when the artist expresses their love for the audience from the stage: The performer who tells the crowd 'you've been a wonderful audience'.

It wasn't The Beatles who sang 'you're such a lovely audience'. The Beatles had given up playing live because they couldn't hear their instruments above the screaming of the crowd. It was Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club band singing that, to a cheering audience constructed through recording technology, sampled from elsewhere and placed on to tape. The Beatles were actually getting away from the fans in the studio.

On this point I want to pick up on something Bowie said in the clip I've just shown. Bowie spoke about how sudden recognition made him nervous. He found it difficult to cope with. Fame and the public that it attracts can be very scary. In the extreme it leads to the tragic death of John Lennon. And this leads me to a more tense relationship between artist and audience, and its artistic consequences.

I want to illustrate this tension with another clip taken from a documentary about Pink Floyd, 'Behind the Wall', first broadcast by Channel 4 in the UK during 2000. The clip begins with commentators talking about the popularity of *Dark Side of the Moon* (released in 1973), a phenomenally successful album that brought Pink Floyd an entirely new sort of audience. The clip features members of the band talking about this experience. Here we can get a sense of a disjuncture or rift between the experience of the band and the pleasures of the audience. [At this point a short extract of about 4 minutes was shown. This featured band members talking about how the aims of the artist and expectations of audience had diverged. Roger Waters recalls how he spat in the face of an audience member clambering up the front of the stage. His alienation from the partying audience led to the idea of building a wall in

front of the stage to symbolically affirm the separation of artist from audience. It would become the concept album and stage show *The Wall*].

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This is the audience as a constraint, as a limitation. The audience as something the artist wishes to be distanced from, signified in the building of the wall. For Roger Waters the audience had become 'arseholes'.

Back in the 1970s, the same word (arseholes) was used by Lou Reed to refer to his record buyers when he suddenly found himself embraced by a large audience of glam rock fans who followed performers such as Bowie and Alice Cooper. It has been claimed that Lou Reed's double album *Metal Machine Music* - 4 sides of white noise derived from guitar feedback – was, at least in part, a provocative attempt to get rid of such fans (quite apart from the strange acclaim it has subsequently attracted in some art music circles).

About two years ago, The Coral achieved a lot of sudden public recognition after the release of their second album *Magic and Medicine*. In response, the lead singer James Skelly began to announce in interviews that it might be necessary for the band to get rid of what he called 'the MacDonald's public' - the new fans who had discovered the band and sent their album to No 1 in the UK charts (see Petridis, 2004, p13).

This ambivalence and anxiety about sudden recognition, and contempt for a certain type of audience goes back a long way. It's a significant strand within popular music history. Over 60 or 70 years, many rock and jazz musicians have been uncomfortable with the attention that has been paid to them by various audiences, fans, and obsessive. They have often reacted by symbolically turning their back on the audience in concert, or releasing material that has wilfully challenged the musical assumptions of record buyers.

As far as I'm aware there is not too much written about this dynamic. In an article first published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1951 Howard Becker wrote of the culture of the dance musician, drawing on his experience as a piano player in jazz bands in Chicago during the late 1940s. Eventually published in his book *Outsiders*, he considered how musicians differentiated themselves from the squares. Quote: 'The square is thought of as an ignorant, intolerant person who is to be feared, since he produces the pressures forcing the musician to play inartistically' (Becker, 1966, p89). For Becker the difficulty for the musician was that the squares could get their way because if they don't like the music in a club then they will not return.

The musicians in Becker's study considered themselves hip, and derived amusement from observing the behaviour of squares. But, they also feared the square, because 'the square is the ultimate source of commercial pressure ... it is the square's ignorance of music that compels the musician to play what he considers bad music in order to be successful' (p90).

Here is a quote from a 1940s jazz musician about the audience:

> Well, if you're working on a commercial band, they like it and so you have to play more corn. If you're working on a good band, then they don't like it, and that's a drag. If you're working on a good band and they like it, then that's a drag too. You hate them anyway, because you know they don't know what it's all about. They're just a big drag (p91).

As Becker remarked at the time, even the jazz fans that liked the good music were seen as a drag and despised. This is an enduring belief that can be tracked over time: the fans don't understand the musician's experience.

The constraints of a twenty-minute presentation now necessitate a jump in time to quote Brian Eno from the mid-1990s. Eno was contacted by a fan and asked if he'd like to participate in an e-mail list discussion of his music. He declined. I'll read just part of his response (which can be found in Eric Tamm's study of Eno's music):

> Of course success has many nice payoffs, but one of the disadvantages is that you start to be made to feel responsible for other people's feelings: What I'm always hearing are variations of 'why don't you do more records like - insert any album title' or 'why don't you do more work with - insert any artist's name'? I don't know why, these questions are unanswerable, why is it so important to you, leave me alone ... these are a few of my responses. But the most important reason is 'If I'd followed your advice in the first place I'd never have got anywhere'. I'm afraid to say that admirers can be a tremendous force for conservatism... (in Tamm, 1995, p183-4).

Eno acknowledged a key tension. He said, 'It's great to be acknowledged ... it makes you feel gratefully connected to your culture ... [but] ... there's a tremendously strong pressure to repeat yourself'.

So, there are tensions here. And, inevitably given the time available I've slightly simplified them. On one side is the fear of having a large audience of people who have no understanding of the musicians' life or their music. This is the 'Macdonald's public' with its pressure for more of the same, aesthetic repetition, and performances to people you despise. But some very significant economic benefits and an important

form of public recognition. On the other side, are anxieties about losing the audience, following the artistic muse, being innovative, doing something different. But playing to empty seats, with no record contract and no big house in the country. These are just some of the tensions that continually arise when the audience meets the artist, tensions that can have a direct impact upon the creative decisions taken by musicians.

References

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Petridis, Alexis, 'Dear fans: get lost', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2004, p13.