

### 3 'I'm Just a Singer'

#### Making music, the rock musician and the success continuum

In addressing the question of how meaning is produced in popular music, a central role must be accorded to those who actually make the music. But this is not to simply accept the 'creative artist' view of the production of cultural products, which sees 'art' as the product of the creative individual, largely unencumbered by politics and economics. Those involved in making music clearly exercise varying degrees of personal autonomy, but this is circumscribed by the available technologies and expertise, by economics and by the expectations of their audience. It is a question of the dynamic interrelationship of the production context, the texts and their creators and the audience for the music.

This chapter is concerned with the nature of music making and the roles and relative status of those who make music, primarily, but not exclusively musicians. While they are credited as the authors of their recordings, their ability to 'make music' is, to varying extents, dependent on the input of other industry personnel, including session musicians, song writers, record producers, sound engineers and mixers, along with those who regulate access to the infrastructure of the industry (such as venue owners, promoters).

For reasons of space, and reflecting their historical prominence, I am largely concerned with 'mainstream' rock and, to a lesser extent, pop, and the demarcations present within their musical production as sounds. I also focus on musicians seeking, at least ideally and in part, to make a living from their work. Other genres, notably disco and dance music, and 'musicians' such as the contemporary dance DJ, subvert many of the traditional assumptions of the 'rock formation' about the nature of musicianship (see Straw, 1999).

My discussion begins with the initial creation of a musical text. For performers 'starting out', this is through learning to first play one's instrument and reproduce existing songs, a form of musical apprenticeship. If the intention is to move beyond this, attention then turns to songwriting and the 'working up' of an original composition, for performance and (possibly) recording. The role of the producer is central to the preparation of the musical text as a material product – the sound recording. I then consider the role of live performance, with reference to the issue of authenticity and some of the situations live music occurs in. The final part of the chapter considers the differing roles and status of those who create music. I examine the distinctions frequently used by musicians themselves, as

well as critics and fans, to label various performers. There is an obvious hierarchy of values at work here, both between and within various categories, and in the discourse around the application of terms such as creativity and authenticity.

#### Making music

As most biographies demonstrate, the career trajectory of popular musicians involves skill and hard work, not to mention a certain amount of luck. Our detailed knowledge of this process, of how performers actually create their music and attempt to create an audience for their efforts, was initially sparse. Writing in 1990, Sara Cohen's summary of the available literature observed that there had been a lack of ethnographic or participant observer study of the process of making music:

What is particularly lacking in the literature (on rock) is ethnographic data and micro sociological detail. Two other important features have been omitted: the grassroots of the industry – the countless, as yet unknown bands struggling for success at a local level – and the actual process of music making by rock bands.

(Cohen, 1991: 6)

In addition to Cohen's *Rock Culture in Liverpool*, there are now a handful of 'classic' accounts (including Finnegan, 1989; Shank, 1994), along with more contemporary studies of musicians involved in particular genres and local musical scenes (Fonarow, 2006; Stahl, 2011), and a large body of biographical profiles of varying usefulness (among the more informative are Cantin, 1997; Cross, 2005). To these we can add several compendiums of reflections from musicians (including Pollock, 2002; Shute, 2005); a number of producer autobiographies (for instance Boyd, 2006; Stock, 2004); in-depth studies of the making of particular recordings (such as Berkenstadt and Cross, 1998, on Nirvana's album *Nevermind*); and several insightful discussions of musical creativity (Negus and Pickering, 2005; Toynbee, 2000). I have drawn on these, and similar work, in the following discussion.

#### The 'musician'

To begin with, the term 'musician' is not as straightforward as it seems. Ruth Finnegan, in her study of music making in Milton Keynes, found it difficult to distinguish 'amateur' from 'professional' musicians:

local bands sometimes contained many players in full-time (non-musical) jobs and others whose only regular occupation was their music; yet in giving performances, practising, sharing out the fees and identification with the group, the members were treated exactly alike (except for the inconvenience

of those in jobs that had to plead illness or take time off work if they travelled to distant bookings).

(Finnegan, 1989: 13)

Furthermore, the local musicians tended to use 'professional' in an evaluative rather than an economic sense, to refer to a player's standard of performance, musical knowledge and qualifications and regular appearances with musicians themselves regarded as professional. Later studies (Fonarow, 2006; Shank, 1994; Shute, 2005), and my own conversations with local musicians, also demonstrate this more expansive use of the term. Since the end of the 1950s, the demarcation between performer, songwriter and producer has gradually become blurred. Currently, while the three roles can be distinct, the term musician frequently embraces all three activities.

### ***The realities of practice***

There are still few formal study or apprenticeship programmes for aspiring popular musicians, in sharp contrast to the opportunities for classical and jazz instrumentalists. Learning the required musical skills takes time and perseverance as well as inclination and talent:

The hardest thing to dawn on us was that if you practise a lot you get better a lot faster. I didn't realize that maybe there was a big distance between an hour and five hours of practice a day. We went through a transitional stage from being proud of being a garage band to really seeing the limitations and wanting to take it one step further.

(Dan Zanes, guitarist, cited in Pollock, 2002: 30–31)

Even the proficiency of a 'genius' like Jimi Hendrix has its pragmatic foundation:

Practising his guitar was the central activity of Jimi's life that year [1962]. He went to bed practising, he slept with the guitar on his chest, and the first thing he did upon rising was to start practising again. In an effort to find even more time to practise, he occasionally bought cheap amphetamines so he could stay up all night.

(Cross, 2005: 98–9)

Stith Bennett's detailed early account of 'The Realities of Practice', showed that learning a song for most rock musicians was a process of 'copying a recording by playing along with it and using the technical ability to play parts of it over and over again' (Bennett, 1990: 224). The two Liverpool punk bands that Cohen studied demonstrated a complex process of musical composition, rehearsal and performance. Their creative process was typically incremental and participatory (Cohen, 1991). Later (auto-) biographical accounts of rock musicians, and various

documentaries on the making of particular recordings, show a similar process at work. Reflecting the limitations of conventional notation when applied to rock music, little use is made of sheet music: 'It's so simple just to get things off the record, sheet music is just for people who can't hear' (piano player, cited in Bennett: 1990: 227). Composition and song copying initially takes place in private, with the next step the expansion of the song-getting experience to the group situation – transforming the song into a performable entity – and its extension to the creation of 'sets' of songs. These blocks of material, usually consisting of 10 to 15 songs to be played over a live set, are constructed for specific audiences and contexts (gigs) and, as such, usually represent a compromise between what bands want to play, what audiences want to hear and what is marketable.

### ***Songwriting***

With its romantic connotations of creativity and authenticity, composition is at the heart of discourses surrounding authorship in popular music. Examples of artistic and commercial success frequently accord song writing a key place:

Kurt Cobain's ability to write songs with such strong hooks was the crucial ingredient in Nirvana's eventual world wide appeal. The melodies he wrote were so memorable, people found themselves singing along without even knowing or understanding the lyrics.

(Berkenstadt and Cross, 1998: 63)

A canonical metalist of 'the top 30 albums' shows that, with one exception, all were composed by the musicians responsible for the recording (see Chapter 6). That exception was the Beach Boys *Pet Sounds*, for which Peter Asher contributed most of the lyrics.

While composing popular music can encompass several modes, such as the bricolage of electronic practices underpinning dance music, I am interested here in songwriting in mainstream, chart-oriented rock and pop music. In comparison with the writing or other roles in the music industry, and the nature of the creative process in popular music, the role of the songwriter initially received only limited attention. Published work has concentrated on song composition and the process of songwriting, and the contributions of leading songwriters (see Flanagan, 1987; Thompson, G., 2008; Zollo, 1997) and there are numerous personal accounts of the process of songwriting. For example, Paul McCartney's recollections of his collaboration with John Lennon (Miles, 1997), Mike Stock's account of his work as part of the Stock Aitken Waterman production team (Stock, 2004); and Cantin's discussion of the collaboration between Alanis Morissette and Greg Ballard:

she would sit on the floor. Ballard would perch on a chair. They'd both take acoustic guitars and fool around with melodies and lyrical ideas and see what

happened. When they really got rolling, Alanis would fall into a kind of trance-like state.

(Cantin, 1997: 126)

Keith Richards' recollections of his composition of the well-known guitar riff for the Rolling Stones' 'Satisfaction', provides another example to illustrate the at times almost 'unworldly' nature of musical creativity:

I wrote 'Satisfaction' in my sleep. I had no idea I'd written it, it's only thank God for the little Phillips cassette player. The miracle being that I looked at the cassette player next morning and I knew I'd put a brand-new tape in the previous night, and I saw it was at the end. Then I pushed rewind and there was 'Satisfaction'. It was just a rough idea. There was just the bare bones of the song.

(Richards, 2010: 176)

Such accounts place songwriting in the realm of romantic views of creativity, but this must be tempered with an appreciation of the social conditions under which it takes place and the sheer graft involved:

But it wasn't easy. The secret of our success lay in hard work, long hours and those magical 'eureka' moments. Our success rate didn't happen by accident. We knew exactly what we were doing on each record and, having discussed the artist and the song, we understood the audience we were trying to reach.

(Stock, 2004: 100)

Songwriters have historically exercised considerable influence over artists/styles. In the 1950s Leiber and Stoller got an unprecedented deal with Atlantic to write and produce their own songs; the resulting collaborations with performers such as the Drifters and Ben E. King produced sweet soul, a very self-conscious marriage of R&B and classical instruments, notably the violin. In the 1960s Holland, Dozier and Holland contributed to the development of the distinctive Motown sound. In the 1970s Chin and Chapman composed over 50 British top 10 hits in association with producers Mickie Most and Phil Wainman, 'using competent bar bands (Mud, Sweet) on to whom they could graft a style and image' (Hatch and Millward, 1987: 141), to produce highly commercial power pop, glitter rock and dance music. In the 1970s Stock, Aiken, Waterman wrote and produced successful dance pop for performers such as Kylie Minogue: 'Down at the Hit Factory, Matt and I were the band and the singers were the guest vocalists. The songs were doing the selling and the artists were an adjunct' (Stock, 2004: 100).

During the late 1950s and early 1960s a factory model of songwriting, combined with a strong aesthetic sense, was evident in the work of a group of songwriters (and music publishers) in New York's Brill Building. Incorporating

Tin Pan Alley's melodic and lyrical trademarks into R&B the group included a number of successful songwriting teams: the more pop-oriented Goffin and King; Mann and Weil; and Barry and Greenwich; the R&B-oriented Pomus and Shuman; and Leiber and Stoller. Several also produced, most notably Phil Spector, Bert Berns, and Leiber and Stoller, who wrote and produced most of the Coasters hits. One factor that distinguished these songwriters was their youth: mainly in their late teens or early twenties, with several married couples working together, the Brill Building songwriters were well able to relate to and interpret teenage dreams and concerns, especially the search for identity and romance. These provided the themes for many of the songs they wrote, especially those performed by the teen idols and girl groups of the period. Pomus and Shuman, and Leiber and Stoller also wrote some of Elvis Presley's best material.

Collectively, the Brill Building songwriters were responsible for a large number of chart successes and had an enduring influence (Shaw, 1992). London in the 1960s had its own group of successful pop and rock songwriters (see Thompson, 2005: Chapter 5, for a detailed discussion of their work and influence). The role of such songwriters, however, was challenged by the emergence of a tradition of self-contained groups or performers writing their own songs (most notably the Beatles), which weakened the traditional professional songwriting market.

Professional songwriters are now more visible, often also producing, working with or for the proliferation of manufactured pop performers. Among the most successful examples of this process was 'Can't Get You Out of My Head' (2002). Written by Cathy Dennis and Rob Davis for Kylie Minogue, the song topped the charts internationally, revived Minogue's career and the two songwriters won the British 2002 Ivor Novello Award.

### *Singer-songwriters*

Some songwriters have been accorded auteur status, in several cases after initially writing for others and later recording their own material (e.g. Carole King: *Tapestry*, Ode, 1971; Neil Diamond; Jackson Browne; Joni Mitchell). The term 'singer-songwriter' has been given to artists who both write and perform their material and who are able to perform solo, usually on acoustic guitar or piano. An emphasis on lyrics has resulted in the work of such performers often being referred to as song poets, accorded auteur status and made the subject of intensive lyric analysis. The folk music revival in the 1960s saw several singer-songwriters come to prominence: Joan Baez, Donavon, Phil Ochs and, above all, Bob Dylan. Singer-songwriters were a strong 'movement' in the 1970s, including Neil Young, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne and Joan Armatrading; most are still performing and recording. In the 1980s the appellation singer-songwriter was applied to, among others, Bruce Springsteen and Elvis Costello; in the 1990s to Tori Amos, Suzanne Vega, Tracy Chapman and Toni Child; and more recently to performers such as Dido, David Gray, Lucinda Williams and Taylor Swift. The female predominance here led some observers to equate the

'form' with women performers, due to its emphasis on lyrics and performance rather than the indulgences associated with male-dominated styles of rock music. The application of the term to solo performers is awkward, in that most of those mentioned usually perform with 'backing' bands and at times regard themselves as an integral part of these. Nonetheless, the concept of singer-songwriter continues to have strong connotations of greater authenticity and 'true' authorship.

Once a song is composed, even if only in a limited form (partial lyrics, a melody or a riff to build on), it becomes 'worked up' for live performance and recording. Beyond creating a distinctive musical sound and original material, successful performers must also develop the different skills required of the live and studio recording settings. The way bands operate in the recording studio, or in home studios, until recently received limited attention in popular music studies, although is frequently the focus of accounts in the music press (and see the website for the Association for the Study of Sound Recording: see Further reading). It is a process that brings the role of the producer to the fore.

### *The producer*

The occupation of producer emerged as a distinct job category and career path in the popular music industry during the 1950s, initially as someone who directed and supervised recording sessions and who also frequently doubled as sound engineer (e.g. Sam Phillips at Sun Records). Successful producers, such as songwriters Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller at Atlantic, and George Martin at EMI, began exerting pressure on their recording companies to receive credits (on recordings) and royalties, rather than just a flat fee. By the mid-1960s, the studio producer had become an auteur figure, an artist employing multi-track technology and stereo sound to make their own mark on recordings, rather than simply documenting the musicians' performance. The most prominent examples of this new status were Jerry Wexler (primarily for his recordings of Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles), George Martin (primarily for his work with the Beatles), Leiber and Stoller and Phil Spector (see his profile in Chapter 4). In the UK, the work of Joe Meek acquired cult status (see Thompson, G., 2008: Chapter 2). During the 1970s and 1980s, the important role of producers as cultural intermediaries was consolidated with the development of new technology: synthesisers, samplers, and computer-based sequencing systems: 'Of course, technology helped. By the late 1980s we were using 48-track recording facilities and filling virtually every track ourselves' (Stock, 2004: 101). Producers became central figures in genres such as dub and techno and, above all, with disco and dance pop.

The way in which producers operate, their contribution to the session and the level of reward they are accorded vary widely, depending on the stature of the musicians they are working with and the type of music being recorded. Producers approaches to recording vary from the naturalistic, 'try it and see what happens', to a more calculated, entrepreneurial attitude. Production practices represent an

amalgam of established techniques and the possibilities offered by the new technologies and a number of autobiographical accounts insightfully reveal the processes at work here (e.g. Boyd, 2006). Virgil Moorefield (2005) documents how recording has gone from being primarily a technical to an artistic matter, with the contemporary producer as auteur.

### *Live performance*

Live music has been a central aspect of popular music, in its various forms operating to create audiences, to fuel individual fantasy and pleasure and to create popular music icons and cultural myths. Investigating the processes involved in how performance communicates musical meaning to its constituent audiences in different contexts has been a significant part of popular music scholarship, especially in relation to genres such as rock (Pattie, 2007), EDM and jazz. Elsewhere in this study, I have considered the significance of the live sector in terms of income (see Chapter 1) and state regulation of live music (Chapter 14). Here, I consider its role in giving – or not giving – musical credibility (or authenticity) to performers and genres; and to how it occurs in particular settings/venues: concerts, tours and festivals.

The equation of live performance with musical authenticity and 'paying your dues' as a performer remains a widely held ideology among fans, musicians and record company executives. Once a band or performer has 'learned' some music, assuming ambition and confidence, they will usually seek to perform live in public. Such performances take place in a range of informal and formal settings and social situations and are closely related to different valuations of authorship and authenticity (depending on the genre/performers involved). Live music is experienced in venues such as clubs, discos and pubs; and through concerts and music festivals.

'Pseudo-live' performances take place at one remove, as it were, from the original or actual performance and are usually experienced through intermediary technology: on film and television or in one of the various recorded formats via radio and sound reproduction systems, the internet or web broadcasts. The pseudo-live experience of music is not usually in the same time frame as the original performance, although this can be the case with radio and satellite TV linkups with 'live' events.

For both fans and musicians, there is a perceived hierarchy of such performances, with a marked tendency to equate an audiences' physical proximity to the actual 'performance' and intimacy with the performer(s) with a more authentic and satisfying musical experience.

Historically, prior to the advent of recorded sound, all music was live and was experienced as such. The term 'live' performance is now usually reserved for those situations in which the audience is in physical proximity to the performance and the experience of the music is contiguous with its actual performance.

This view was central to the ideology of 'rock' created during the 1960s. This emphasis on the 'live' as a key signifier of musical authenticity has since been

undermined by performers who work primarily, and at times exclusively, in the studio setting. Some genres are now largely studio creations, especially recent styles of techno.

At times, performance events ('gigs', concerts, festivals) have had the capacity to encapsulate and represent key periods and turning points in popular music; examples include the first performance of the modernist composer Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1919), the Beatles' first appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* (1964) and Bob Dylan 'going electric' at the Newport Folk Festival (1965). Their significance is indicated by their use in a cultural shorthand fashion among fans, musicians and writers; e.g. 'Woodstock', with an assumed set of connotations: the counterculture, music festivals, youth and 1960s' idealism. Such performances and their participants – promoters, musicians and audiences – are commonly celebrated in the musical press, documentaries and are the subject of several studies (Inglis, 2006).

Playing live is important to develop and trial new material and to popularize and promote recordings, especially on their initial release. It is also central to rock ideology, with its connotations of authorship and creativity, and the physical energy, emotional tension and release associated with live acts:

That's what keeps you going. Those two hours on stage where everybody's in complete sync and it's like the universe is perfect. There's no flaw in the universe until the next morning. And then you can't find your breakfast and you gotta travel twelve hours in a day [to the next gig].

(Joe Ely, in Pollock, 2002: 111)

### **Club gigs**

Clubs and pubs remain the main venues for live music on a regular and continuing basis. Both serve as training grounds for aspiring performers operating at the local level, and provide a 'bread and butter' living for more established artists, often through being part of an organized 'circuit' of venues. Club appearances include 'showcase' evenings, similar to variety style concerts, with a number of performers featured; 'one-nighters', and extended engagements. All are important for gaining experience in live work, building an audience and making contacts in the music industry. Clubs also remain the main site for most music fans' engagement with live music, particularly in smaller towns not on the national concert itinerary of touring performers.

Clubs have historically assumed mythic importance for breaking new acts, as in the 1960s with the Who at the Marquee in London and the Doors at the Whisky in LA. They can also establish and popularize trends and musical genres, as in the 1970s with American punk at New York's Max's and CBGBs, Cleveland's Clockwork Orange and the Viking Saloon, English punk at London's 100 Club and the Roxy and Manchester's Electric Circus; and disco in the 1980s, DJ culture and techno and its various genres in the 1990s and indie rock.

Where there is not a strong club scene, pubs will sometimes take on the same role. In the process, they can legitimate a particular sound and performance ethos. In Australia, the strongly masculine 'Oz Rock' historically dominated the 1980s music scene and was defined by its association with the pub circuit there. A local network of clubs or pub venues can foster a local scene and arguably create a 'local' sound (see Chapter 11).

### **Tours and concerts**

As with club and pub gigs, concerts, usually part of a tour, expose performers and their music to potential fans and purchasers, building an image and a following. Tours were important historically, for helping 'break' English bands in the US during the 1960s and remained a crucial part of the national and international music industry. During the 1990s purely promotional 'tours' became significant in building a fan base, for example Shania Twain's shopping mall stops in 1993–1994; and the importation of name DJs from the UK was a major factor in consolidating the international dance music scene in Australia and New Zealand in the past decade. As indicated in Chapter 1, tours currently represent a major income stream for musicians and the music industry.

The nature of tour concerts is an oddly ambivalent one. On the one hand, for the fan, it is a rare opportunity to see a performer, especially if you live in locations where the opportunity may be literally a once in a lifetime one. On the other hand, for the performer, each concert blurs into a series of 'one-night stands' and the challenge is to maintain freshness at each performance. Tour books, band biographies and music magazine profiles, and many classic rock songs document 'life on the road', with its attendant excesses and exhilaration at audience enthusiasm coupled with fatigue:

It's funny; the road's like that. You never know what to expect. Especially when you're out of the country and you have all of these communication problems. You have transportation problems, and problems with the food and hotel reservations, and then you hit these places in the middle of nowhere and it turns into a memorable night.

(Joe Ely, in Pollock, 2002: 112–13)

Concerts are complex cultural phenomena, involving a mix of music and economics, ritual and pleasure, for both performers and their audience. Different genres and performance styles create different forms of concert experience. Clearly, a slickly lit and choreographed boy or girl band pop concert is a different visual and aural experience from a drum and bass DJ's presentation in a club. At the heart of concerts is the sense of community that they engender, albeit a transient one. At their head, by way of contrast, lie economics and promotion.

The backstage area of the larger rock concerts is a highly complex work site, with a range of specialized workers. The number of personnel reflects the size of the tour and the economic importance of the performers, but can include

technicians in charge of the instruments and equipment (amplifiers, etc.); stagehands, often doubling as 'roadies', people to work the sound and lighting boards, security guards and the concert tour manager. The successful operation of the backstage area at concerts involves the integration of these workers into a stable and impersonal time schedule, where each person does their job as and when required. The scope of this task, at its most extreme, is shown in the documentary *Rock in Rio*, on the staging of the Rolling Stones free concert in Rio De Janeiro in 2006, with an estimated audience of almost two million.

There still exists a clear hierarchy of rock and pop tours and concerts. For a relatively unknown act, seeking to publicize a new or first release and create an audience, opportunities for live work will be few and venues will usually be small. The pub and university campus circuit remains essential for such performers. The scale of most 'national' tours is actually often localized, 'hitting' only a dozen or so urban centres. For established visiting bands and local acts, which have 'broken' into the charts and the marketplace, there are larger scale 'national' tours. These still largely play selected main centres, where venues and audiences are large enough to (hopefully) make the exercise economic. At the top end of the scale are the global tours of the top international acts, which are massive exercises in logistics and marketing – and also hugely profitable. The Rolling Stones' 2006 Tour, with more than 100 shows staged over half the world, involved effectively having three stage sets being shipped and flown at the same time and the band's entourage included 125 technical staff.

Tours remain central to creating consumer interest and sales and are about promotion as much as performance. Where artists once took part in radio and TV shows and made personal appearances at record stores, they are now more likely to appear on talk shows and via internet social network sites. Currently, the importance of revenue from the live sector has seen a proliferation of large-scale tours, undertaken by leading performers such as U2, Bruce Springsteen and Taylor Swift. As the music press indicates, a wide range of performers are on tour at any particular time, often coming together for the major festivals held during summer holiday seasons, especially in the UK, Western Europe and North America.

### **Festivals**

There is an established historical tradition of popular music festivals, with regular events such as the Newport Folk and Jazz Festivals and the New Orleans Mardi Gras in the US and the UK's Cambridge Folk Festival. Festivals play a central role in popular music mythology. They keep traditions alive, maintaining and expanding their audience base, legitimating particular forms of that tradition and giving its performers and their fans a sense of shared, communal identity. This role has been maintained through historical retrospectives and anniversary celebrations, as with the recent 40th anniversary of the 1969 Woodstock festival, which saw the (re-)release of a number of celebratory books, documentary films and recordings.

A number of festivals at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s helped create the notion of a youth-oriented rock counterculture, while confirming its commercial potential: Monterey, 1967; Woodstock, 1969; the Isle of Wight, 1970. The 1980s saw the reassertion of the music festival, with the success – both financially and as ideological touchstones – of the politically motivated 'conscience concerts': Live Aid, 1985 (see Chapter 12) and the various Amnesty International concerts. A summer festival season is now a feature of the UK, Europe and North America music calendars. The festivals usually include a range of performers, often spread across several days on multiple stages. In the face of an attractive range of choices facing fans, festivals often place an emphasis on a particular musical style, a grouping of artists aimed at attracting a particular fan constituency.

Since the early 1990s France has been the European leader in terms of the number and scale of festivals, including a variety of music, dance and theatre events. In 2006 French rock and pop music festivals had a combined audience of over 1.6 million people, including upwards of 650,000 at the Festival Interceltique de L'Orient, an 'ethnic' Celtic event launched in 2001 in Brittany. Barbara Lebrun identifies a tight regulatory system that codifies such festivals, 'whose structural and economic rigidity is somewhat at odds with the experience of them by audiences (and artists and critics) as places of instability' (Lebrun, 2009: 136). As her analysis demonstrates, popular music festivals are subject to a series of contradictions and inconsistencies, placing them at the intersection of commercial imperatives and 'alternative' authenticity.

The major festivals, such as Glastonbury and Knebworth (now Sonisphere) in the UK, are big business, while local communities are using (usually smaller-scale) music festivals as a form of cultural tourism. In addition to their economic importance, music festivals, as a form of extended concert, reinforce popular music personas, creating icons and myths in the process. The performers are made 'accessible' to those attending the festival and, increasingly with large-scale festivals via satellite television and documentary films, to a national and even a worldwide audience. At the same time as it forms a temporary community, joined in celebration and homage to the performers/the genre, the festival audience is being created as a commodity. If it attracts the projected audience, the festival is a major commercial enterprise, with on-site sales of food and souvenirs, the income from the associated television broadcasts via satellite to a global audience/market and the subsequent 'live' recordings, for example from Knebworth and Rock in Rio. In sum, music festivals are sites at which commerce and popular ideology interact to produce historically significant musical meanings.

The different aspects of live music were fruitfully brought together in a three-year team research project in the UK (2008–2010): 'The Promotion of Live Music – A Historical, Cultural and Institutional Analysis'. This included a wide range of musical events, venues and genres, exploring live music 'both as a social event and aesthetic experience, and as something produced in the context of legal and state regulations and economic and marketing strategies' (Friih, 2011).

I turn now to the discourse surrounding various perceived categories of musician, primarily 'rock' musicians, and the hierarchy of value frequently attached to these. Popular music is, for the majority of its participants, an essentially 'amateur' or 'quasi-professional' activity that may become a career option. Indeed, the great majority of people who make their living playing music live near the poverty line. In the late 1990s there were said to be 10,000 functional bands in the greater Los Angeles area alone, 'all slugging it out night after night in a never-ending cacophony of competition, strategic repositioning, and reconfiguration' (Kirschner, 1998: 250).

Writing in 1988, Simon Frith identified a traditional model of the rock music career, which he termed the 'Rock', involving a career process that was established in the 1960s. Musicians started at the base of this pyramid model, working the local scene through clubs and pubs, building up a following. They then might move up through several tiers, first, to regional live work, recording for small, indie labels and gaining success and recognition at the regional level. Beyond this were a major recording contract, with national exposure and hits and touring. At the highest level, there are international hits, tours, media exposure and 'superstar' status. He regarded this model as underpinned by a dynamic and ideology emphasizing 'a Horatio Alger-type account of success being *earned* by hard work, determination, and skills *honed* in practice' (Frith, 1988: 112). However, Frith was concerned that while there were still careers (e.g. U2) that followed this model, the 1980s' corporatization of the music business and the key role of video in selling new pop groups had seen the rise of an alternative success story:

The Talent Pool: The dynamic here comes from the centre. There are no longer gatekeepers regulating the flow of stardom, but multi nationals 'fishing' for material, pulling ideas, sounds, styles, performers from the talent pool and dressing them up for world wide consumption.

(*ibid.*: 113)

MTV, which began in 1981, played a major part in this (see Chapter 8).

As Frith acknowledged, the two models are ideal types. During the 1990s, there was both a reassertion of the significance of the traditional model and a merging of the two career paths. While video exposure remained important, it no longer had the status it enjoyed in the mid-1980s. Genre is a factor here, with clear differences between the success routes for 1990s' dance pop bands, such as the Spice Girls and S Club 7, and alternative and grunge performers in the early 1990s and beyond. For the latter, as the Seattle scene indicated, success at the local and regional level, or nationally on a smaller scale, with a niche or cult audience, on 'independent' labels and via college radio and the club scene, was necessary to attract the attention of the major record companies. Over the past 15 years, the proliferation of pop and rock reality TV shows have provided fresh example of Frith's talent pool at work. At the same time, the 'Rock' model of hard work, self-belief perseverance and live performance remains applicable to genres such as

indie rock and some styles of electronic dance music and is also evident in the careers of performers such as Lady Gaga.

Creating and working-up new musical material for performance, studio and home recording and touring, and once again back to creating and recording to keep the momentum going, is the musicians' work cycle. Furthermore, musical skills are not all that is involved. While the original basis of most groups is in peer friendships, this will change once things get 'more serious', with problems created by the differing levels of ability and commitment of group members and commitment to a practice schedule and the need for group cohesion and leadership:

Being successful definitely put a whole lot of pressure because the band was so communally oriented. People joined the band just 'cause of the vibe of the music. What happened once the money and the fame got involved was that everybody wanted their own manager, so everyone got management, everyone got lawyers, and everything got very complicated.

(Speech from Arrested Development, in Pollock, 2002: 96)

Then there are the well-documented physical and emotional strains of 'the rock/pop lifestyle', amply illustrated in many popular memoirs of drugs, sex and music (e.g. Kiedis, 2004; Richards, 2010), and its growing list of casualties (most recently Whitney Houston, Amy Winehouse and Michael Jackson).

One reason, and probably the dominant one, behind the willingness of so many musicians to enter the Darwinian struggle for commercial success is the ultimate possibility of stardom, with its allure of a lifestyle of glamour and affluence. This is not to ignore the appeal of gaining the approval of fans and critics, but it is clear that the majority of performers aspire to that *and* 'the money'. As Tony Kirschner (1998: 252) observes, 'Success should be seen as a central trope in popular music, informing and motivating the entire domain of rock culture' and creating what he terms the 'continuum of success'. Talent aside, success is governed by access to the differing resources and opportunities available for making music. Accordingly, our interest now moves to the 'pecking order' of popular music.

### **The success continuum**

There exists a status hierarchy among performers, especially evident in rock music, a hierarchy endorsed by critics and fans, as well as by musicians themselves. This hierarchy ranges from those starting out, largely reliant on 'covers', to session musicians, to performers who attempt, with varying levels of critical and commercial success, to make a living from music. This last group has its own differentiations, with tribute bands, house bands and notions of 'journeymen' players. There are hierarchies of 'artists' and stars, often likened to some sort of sports league table: a minor or major league band; first and second division performers; stars and 'megastars'; and supergroups. The bases for such evaluations

are vague and the status of particular performers frequently varies among critics and over time. Taste and subjectivity necessarily feature, as much as any elaborated artistic and musical criteria.

### **Cover bands**

At the base of this hierarchy are cover bands, which are often accorded little critical artistic weight. A common view is that reliance on someone else's material concedes that you have nothing of your own to say. However, playing covers fulfills aesthetic, educational and economic roles. Some covers, as I shall show in Chapter 5, take the original recording as a starting point and modify, reinvent or subvert it in a creative manner. Bands starting out rely on cover versions for a large part of their repertoire out of necessity, mastering them as part of a learning process. Even 'original' performers will usually play a few covers. The distinction between 'cover' and 'original' is important, since upward career mobility is directly tied to notions of originality (Kirschner, 1998: 265). Learning such songs is part of the apprenticeship process in acquiring musicianship through engaging with a musical tradition. An example is the development of 'rock' in England in the 1960s through local bands covering imported copies of American rhythm and blues hits, as with the Rolling Stones' versions of Arthur Alexander's 'You Better Move On' (1966) and Solomon Burke's 'Everybody Need Somebody To Love' (1965). Cover songs are literally music to the ears of the managers of smaller venues like clubs and pubs, as they are tapping into a proven product that the audience can identify with. For each new generation of listeners, a 'good' song is a good song, regardless of any historical memory.

### **Tribute bands**

The extreme example of cover bands are those performers who not only directly model themselves on established bands, but actually copy them, presenting themselves as simulacra of the originals. Such tribute bands, as the industry prefers to call them, rate few plaudits artistically, but they have become big business, with several enjoying lengthy and successful careers (Homan, 2006). Australian band Björn Again, primarily performing the music of Swedish band, Abba, had played over 1500 shows in some 40 countries worldwide by 2000, and undertook a highly successful 10th anniversary world tour in 1999.

There are hundreds of tribute bands internationally, imitating almost everyone from defunct groups such as CCR, the Beatles and the Ramones, to bands that are still performing, such as Metallica. On the positive side, the imitators are bringing the music to a new, younger audience, a generation who never saw the original performers, encouraging them to seek out the earlier material. Other views are less complimentary, pointing to the difficulties in policing copyright and the fact that the original artists are frequently having to share audiences with their imitators. The main objection made to the nostalgia and cover bands, however, is that they generally do not create new music. Ironically, the same charge has not

been levelled at the industry's tendency since the 1990s to produce a steady stream of 'tribute' albums, in which various artists pay homage by covering the work of artists as varied as the Clash, Gram Parsons and Jimi Hendrix.

### **Session musicians and house bands**

Generally anonymous, session musicians are the pieceworkers of the music industry, yet their role is more important than is usually recognized. The label is a generic one, referring 'to a range of practices, all of which involve the participation of a musician in a recording session featuring an artist or band with which the session musician does not regularly perform' (Bowman, 2003: 104). The emergence of session musicians as musical labour was historically tied to greater professionalism and spiralling costs of recording sessions. During the 1960s music centres such as Nashville, New York and London, developed highly competitive session musician scenes, with a select group of players able to make a lucrative living playing sessions. The role could be a demanding one:

To be a session musician, one was generally expected to be able to sight-read musical notation quickly and accurately, to be able to transpose a part from one key to another instantly, to be able to play in a wide range of styles and emulate the licks, techniques and stylistic nuances of other notable instrumentalists, and, in some genres, to be able to continuously develop appropriate and catchy grooves, riffs and lines for recording after recording.

(Bowman, 2003: 105)

Some session musicians attain critical recognition for their contributions. Reggae performers Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare established themselves as 'the' rhythm section and keyboard player Billy Preston is credited, along with the Beatles (the only time they shared authorship), for their single *Get Back*. The efforts of a few session musicians attain near legendary status, as with Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page's guitar solos on a variety of records in the 1960s, but usually only when they later become successful in their own right, creating interest in this aspect of their back catalogue. Session musicians continue to be widely used, with their contribution to recordings now usually indicated by their inclusion on the album credits.

House bands are the backing musicians used by particular record labels at a majority of their recording sessions, usually drawn from leading session musicians in an area. Their emergence was also linked to increased musical specialization and studio costs, as well as studio recording convenience. The practice began with jazz in Chicago in the 1920s and was revived by rock music in the 1960s. Several house bands, such as Booker T and the MGs, at Stax in Memphis, received considerable credit for their creative input. Others, equally talented, tended to remain more in the background, as with the Funk Brothers at Motown in Detroit.



**Current trends**

There are several types of group that have become more prominent recently: revival, or reunion bands; supergroups; and virtual bands. Each would be worth further investigation but can only briefly be referred to here.

*Revival/'reunion' bands*

These are performers who have reformed to tour and, at times, to record. At times their credibility and authenticity have been questioned, as their line-up no longer includes key members. For example, still touring Creedence Clearwater Revisited include the bassist and drummer from the original 1960s' band (Creedence Clearwater Revival), but are minus its central figure, singer-guitarist-songwriter John Fogerty. The trend is not confined to 'classic rock' bands, as in the 2000s, a number of alternative bands have already reformed to exploit the nostalgia market and the current prominence of live music, among them Suede, the Pixies and Soundgarden. Once prominent pop acts such as the Spice Girls and Take That have also briefly re-formed and toured.

There are obvious opportunities offered by the name recognition the members of such groups bring to the marketplace. Longevity can be considered a factor here. Surviving performers have aged along with their earlier fan base, for whom seeing them/buying their new recordings functions as a form of homage and a celebration: 'I'm still standing and so are they', as I heard one fan observe at a Leonard Cohen concert, when Cohen, aged 76, undertook a global tour in 2010–11.

*Supergroups*

Consisting of well-known musicians from several established, at times no longer active, bands, coming together to record and perform, a 'supergroup' as a notion is hardly new and dates back at least to the 1960s with Cream, which brought together Eric Clapton, formerly with the Yardbirds and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, on lead guitar; Jack Bruce, from Manfred Mann, on bass and Ginger Baker from Graham Bond's Organisation, on drums. The blues rock power trio enjoyed a short-lived but very successful career. Later similar collaborations included the Traveling Wilburys (1988–90), whose members included Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Roy Orbison and Tom Petty. Current 'supergroups' include SUPERHEAVY (Mick Jagger, Dave Stewart, Joss Stone, Damian 'Jr Gong' Marley, A.R. Rahman); the Good, the Bad, and the Queen; the Dead Weather; and Chickenfoot. At times, such collaborations have produced critically well-received live performances and recordings, as with SUPERHEAVY's 2011 album (SUPERHEAVY, A&M Records, 2011). As with reunion bands, name recognition is a factor with the marketing of these groups, although there is the added weight of expectation on these performers to produce 'new music', rather than simply replicate former glories.

*Virtual bands*

The term 'virtual band', sometimes called a cartoon band, refers to groups whose members are animated characters rather than 'real' musicians, although their recordings are made by human musicians and producers. Media related to the virtual band, including stage performance visuals, videos and album artwork, will feature the animated line-up. The best known historical example is the Archies, whose bubblegum pop was a feature of the late 1960s. The most notable contemporary example is Gorillaz, formed by Damon Albarn, formerly in Blur, in 2001, and still active. The appeal of such bands would repay further investigation, but would appear to be linked to the multimedia environment, with their use of fantasy characters and worlds, sometimes drawing from graphic novels and comics; and their extensive use of sampling, remix and music video technology.

**Conclusion**

I have outlined the nature of music making and the roles and relative status of those who make music, primarily, but not exclusively musicians. Beyond the bands at the base of Frith's performance pyramid of the 'Rock' are those who are working at the middling levels of the industry. These performers are sometimes described as 'journeymen': they may enjoy a fair measure of commercial success, but they are not seen as particularly innovative, even though they may have a distinctive style and themes. But this label is unnecessarily pejorative, resting as it does on contestable (in part because they are rarely fully articulated) aesthetic distinctions. It makes more sense to talk of 'mid-level' status performers, who enjoy a mix of commercial and critical recognition. These are performers whose names are recognizable to the majority of popular music fans, even when they may not necessarily buy their records or attend their performances. Beyond this are performers who are considered stars and auteurs, the subject of the next chapter.

**Further reading**

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