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4 'So You Want To Be a Rock 'N' Roll Star'

Auteurs and stars

At the pinnacle of the success continuum discussed in Chapter 3 are stars and auteurs.

Following an introduction to these two concepts, I provide a number of case studies of such figures in popular music, with reference to examples of their work: 1930s' bluesman Robert Johnson; producer Phil Spector and his 'wall of sound' in the early 1960s; the Spice Girls and manufactured pop; country crossover star Shania Twain; and Lady Gaga, a pop star born in and of the internet age. In each profile, with brief reference to their career, I want to situate these performers in terms of their influence and status and in relation to issues of creativity and commerce, genre and authorship.

An important starting question here is how do you 'justify' a particular figure and their music as worthy of attention? The majority of the artists included in this chapter were selected for their innovative break with, or reworking of, established traditions and conventions. They generally exemplify two central aspects of a popular music aesthetic: first, extending the traditional form; and, second, working within the form itself, breaking it up and subverting its conventions. While this is arguably not the case with either the Spice Girls or Lady Gaga, I have included them as they established new approaches to the production and marketing of pop and are examples of debates around authorship, authenticity and celebrity.

While attention is given to the musical qualities of each performer, they are also situated in terms of genre, the music industry, the personal stance of the musicians and their place in popular music history and the audience reception of the work. The musical examples included show that we must go beyond simple musical aesthetics to explain why particular songs 'work' in terms of creating an audience and establishing an artist's profile.

Authorship and stardom

Auteur theory attributes meaning in cultural texts to the intentions of an individual creative source. The auteur concept is historically linked to writing and literary studies, where it has been applied to 'significant' works deemed to have value, which accordingly are considered part of high culture. An ideological

construct, it is underpinned by notions of creativity and aesthetic value. The concept of auteur has been especially important in relation to film, emerging as a core part of fresh critical studies in the 1950s, with the auteur usually regarded as the director (see Hayward, 2000). The concept has since been applied to other forms of popular culture and their texts, in part in an attempt to legitimate their study vis-à-vis 'literature' and 'art'.

Applying auteurship to popular music means distinguishing it from mass or popular culture, with their connotations of mass taste and escapist entertainment and instead relating the field to notions of individual sensibility and enrichment. The concept underpins critical analyses of popular music which emphasize the intentions of the creator of the music (usually musicians) and attempts to provide authoritative meanings of texts and has largely been reserved for the figures seen as outstanding creative talents. It is central to the work of some musicologists, who identify popular music auteurs as producers of 'art', extending the cultural form and, in the process, challenging their listeners. Auteurship has been attributed primarily to individual performers, particularly singer-songwriters, but has also been attributed to producers, music video directors, songwriters and DJs. Indeed, in some cases, as Phil Spector demonstrates, these figures, rather than the musicians, may provide the dominant input. It can also be argued that, as with contemporary filmmaking, the creative process in rock is a 'team game' with various contributions melding together, even if a particular musician is providing the overall vision. Despite this multiple authorship, however, as Will Straw acutely observes, 'typically we evaluate a musical recording or concert as the output of a single individual or group' (1999: 200).

In the late 1960s popular music criticism began to discuss musicians in auteurist terms. John Cawelti, for example, claimed that 'one can see the differences between pop groups which simply perform without creating that personal statement which marks the auteur, and highly creative groups like the Beatles who make of their performance a complex work of art' (Cawelti, 1971: 267). American critic Jon Landau argued that the criterion of art in rock is the 'capacity of the musician to create a personal, almost private, universe and to express it fully' (cited in Frith, 1983: 53). By the early 1970s:

self-consciousness became the measure of a record's artistic status; frankness, musical wit, the use of irony and paradox were musicians' artistic insignia – it was such self commentary that revealed the auteur within the machine. The skilled listener was the one who could recognize the artist despite the commercial trappings.

(Frith, 1983: 53)

The discourse surrounding 1960s rock established a paradigm aesthetic that has, until recently, dominated the application of the concept of authorship in popular music.

At a common-sense level, auteurship would appear to be applicable to popular music, since while they are working within an industrial system, many individual

performers are primarily responsible for their recorded product. There are also 'artists' – the term itself is culturally loaded – who, while working within the commercial medium and institutions of popular music, are seen to utilize the medium to express their own unique visions. Such figures are frequently accorded auteur status and, on the basis of their public celebrity and visibility, will frequently be stars as well. The concept of auteur stands at the pinnacle of a pantheon of performers and their work, a hierarchical approach used by fans, critics and musicians to organize their view of the historical development of popular music and the contemporary status of its performers. Auteurs enjoy respect for their professional performance, especially their ability to transcend the traditional aesthetic forms in which they work.

Particular popular music metagenres (see Chapter 6) have their own commonly recognized auteurs. In rock and pop, for example, musicians often accorded the status of auteur include the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie, Prince, Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen and Radiohead, all of whom have achieved commercial as well as critical recognition. (Note the general absence of women from this list and, further, its domination by 1960s performers.) The status of several has waned, with their later work largely being found wanting when placed against earlier recordings, as with Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. However, such figures retain auteur status on the basis of their historical contribution, as do auteur figures whose careers were cut short, for example Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Kurt Cobain. There are also performers whose work has had only limited commercial impact but who are regarded as having a distinctive style and oeuvre that has taken popular music in new and innovative directions, such as Frank Zappa, Brian Eno and Captain Beefheart.

Since all music texts are social products, performers working within popular genres are under constant pressure to provide their audience with more of the music that attracted that same audience in the first place. This explains why shifts in musical direction often lose a performers' established audiences, while hopefully creating new adherents. This is to emphasize the contradiction between being an 'artist' and responding to the pressures of the market, and to claim particular performers as auteurs despite their location within a profit-driven commercial industry (a similar process to that applied in film studies in the 1950s to Hollywood cinema's studio system). This leads to pantheons of musical value that are problematic, since all musical texts 'arrive on the turntable as the result of the same commercial processes' (Frith, 1983: 54). Furthermore, as in any area of 'creative' endeavour, there is a constant process of reworking the 'common stock' or traditions of generic popular forms, as continuity is self-consciously combined with change.

Stars and stardom

Stars are individuals who, as a consequence of their public performances or appearances in the mass media, become widely recognized and acquire symbolic

status. Stars are seen as possessing a unique, distinctive talent in the cultural forms within which they work. Initially associated with the Hollywood film star system, stardom is now widely evident in sports, television and popular music. While there is a large body of theoretically oriented work on film stars (see Hayward, 2000, for a helpful overview), the study of stardom in popular music is largely limited to personal biographies of widely varying analytical value.

The important question is not so much 'what is a star?' but how stars function within the music industry, within textual narratives, and, in particular, at the level of individual fantasy and desire. What needs to be explained is the nature of emotional investment in pleasurable images. Stars are invested with cultural value and are popular because they resonate with particular lifestyles and cultures, while also representing a form of escapism from everyday life and the mundane.

Stardom in popular music, as in other forms of popular culture, is as much about illusion and appeal to the fantasies of the audience, as it is about talent and creativity. Stars function as mythic constructs, playing a key role in their fans ability to construct meaning out of everyday life (see the essays in Kelly and McDonnell, 1999). Such stars must also be seen as economic entities, used to mobilize audiences and promote the products of the music industry. They represent a unique commodity form, which is both a labour process and a product. Audience identification with particular stars is a significant marketing device. Several popular music stars have continued to generate enormous income after their death, which freezes their appeal in time while enabling their continued marketing through both the back catalogue and previously unreleased material. Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, Kurt Cobain (Nirvana) and Michael Jackson are examples of what has been termed 'posthumous celebrity'.

Madonna must be viewed as much as an economic entity as she is a cultural phenomenon, as over the course of her contract with Time-Warner she generated more than \$US500 million in worldwide music sales. Madonna represents a bankable image, carefully constructed in an era of media globalization, an image that made her attractive to Live Nation, to which she moved in October 2007. Similarly, pop star Britney Spears, whose wealth was estimated at US\$123 million by *Forbes* magazine in 2004, had by then sold more than 76 million records worldwide for her label Zomba. While Spears did not release any new recordings in 2005–2006, the media attention devoted to her marital split in late 2006 demonstrated her continued celebrity status. In 2011 country singer-songwriter Taylor Swift sold more than 1.8 million copies of her albums in the US and had a highly lucrative world tour. Such success helped establish her as a brand, with her own management company, lucrative contracts with companies such as Covergirl and the launch of her own line of perfume, Wonderstruck. All of these combined to place Swift at the top of *Billboard* magazine's list of the biggest music industry money makers for the year.

Yet the enormous fascination with stars' personal lives suggests a phenomenon that cannot be simply explained in terms of political economy. Fans both create and maintain the star through a ritual of adoration, transcending their own lives

in the process. Stars appeal because they embody and refine the values invested in specific social types; e.g. Kylie Minogue in the 1980s as 'the girl next door'; Bruce Springsteen, whose work and image is founded on associations with urban working-class authenticity. Contemporary 'established' stars are frequently at pains to exercise considerable control over their artistic lives, perhaps because this has often been hard won; all have an ability to retain an audience across time, either through reinventing their persona and image or through exploring new avenues in their music. Many have produced a substantial body of work, often multimedia in form; while seeking, to varying degrees, new ways of reinterpreting or reaffirming popular music styles and traditions. In these respects, such stars are frequently considered to be auteurs.

The construction of a popular music star's persona and image may change across time, at times in a calculated attempt to redefine a performer's audience and appeal. A number of commentators have observed how Madonna has been able constantly to reinvent her persona and retain a high degree of creative control over her work. Her audience appeal and commercial success lies primarily in performance, through both concerts and music video, and her ability to keep herself in the public eye and the creation and maintenance of image is central to her success. The career of Lady Gaga follows a similar pattern.

The two most extensively considered popular music stars are Elvis Presley and the Beatles. The Beatles are routinely considered to be auteurs: they dramatically altered the status of popular music in the 1960s and their commercial and critical success made them iconic public figures. Elvis was certainly a star and, as the appeal of Graceland shows, continues to be one. In *Dead Elvis*, Greil Marcus (1991) offers a fascinating account of the ongoing cultural preoccupation with 'the King' since his death in 1977. However, Presley is rarely accorded auteur status, although he has a claim to this based largely on his early career at Sun Records. Springsteen and Madonna are the popular music stars and auteurs of the past 30 years who have generated the greatest amount of academic and popular analysis and discussion, with considerable attention being paid more recently to U2, Radiohead and Lady Gaga. In sum, the discourse surrounding these performers shows how authorship and stardom have become linked constructs with a number of dimensions: the economic, the cultural and the aesthetic. This is also the case, to varying degrees, with the following examples.

Robert Johnson: 'Hellhound on my Trail'

Robert Johnson was an auteur who posthumously became a star. He is regarded as the 'key transitional figure working within the Mississippi Delta's blues culture. He bridged the gap between the music's rural beginnings and its modern urban manifestations' (Barlow, 1989: 45).

Born in 1911, Johnson was raised by his mother, who routinely moved from place to place in the mid-south. His own adulthood was similarly restless and provided a recurring message in his work. Fellow bluesman and travelling

companion, Johnny Shines, said of Johnson: 'People might consider him wild because he didn't think nothing of just taking off from wherever he was, just pack up and go. He had that about traveling.' Johnson had only limited commercial success during his short life. His few recording sessions were held in San Antonio late in 1936 and in Dallas in early 1937, when he recorded a total of just 29 blues tracks. This small output was to have an influence out of all proportion to its size, not only on the blues, but also on the development of 'rock' in the 1960s, as British bands such as the Rolling Stones and Cream covered songs by Johnson (see Weisman, 2005). The singer was murdered in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1938, poisoned by a jealous lover, aged only 27.

While Johnson started out in the blues as a harmonica player, he soon switched to guitar. He was strongly influenced by Son House's bottleneck slide technique, which formed the core of his own playing style, and by other contemporary Delta bluesmen such as Charley Patton and Willie Brown. But Johnson assimilated a range of other influences, incorporating them into his own distinctive style: 'His guitar work was also influenced by the recordings of Kokomo Arnold, Scrapper Blackwell, Willie Newbern, and Lonnie Johnson, who also influenced many of his vocal inflections, along with Leroy Carr, Peetie Wheatstraw, and Skip James' (Barlow, 1989: 45–6). Contemporaries commented on the breadth of Johnson's musical tastes, and marvelled at his ability to 'pick a song right out of the air. He'd hear it being played on the radio and play it right back note for note. He could do it with blues, spirituals, hillbilly music, popular stuff. You name it he could play it' (Robert Lockwood, Jr.).

He'd be sitting there listening to the radio – and you wouldn't even know he was paying any attention to it – and later that evening maybe, he'd walk out on the streets and play the same songs that were played over the radio, four or five songs he'd liked out of the whole session over the radio and he'd play them all evening, and he'd continue to play them.

(Johnny Shines, cited in Barlow, 1989: 46)

Johnson was influential in three areas. First, through his guitar playing:

As a guitarist he almost completely turned the blues around. His tightening of the rhythmic line was the basis for the instrumental blues scene that followed him in Chicago – letting the upper strings play a free melodic part, but using the thumb for a hard rhythm in the lower strings that was also a drum part.

(Samuel Charters, cited in Barlow, 1989: 47)

Robert Palmer notes how Johnson made his guitar:

sound uncannily like a full band, furnishing a heavy beat with his feet, chording innovative shuffle rhythms and picking out high treble-string lead with his slider, all at the same time. Fellow guitarists would watch him with

unabashed, open mouth wonder. They were watching the Delta's first modern bluesman at work.

(*ibid.*)

Second, Johnson recorded a number of strikingly original songs, which captured a timeless feeling of desperation and intensity. In songs like 'Rambling on My Mind,' 'Dust My Broom' and 'Sweet Home Chicago' Johnson celebrated mobility and personal freedom; double entendres and sexual metaphors abound in 'Steady Rolling Man', 'Terraplane Blues' and 'Traveling Riverside Blues'; and in 'Crossroad Blues' and 'Hellhound on My Trail' Johnson encouraged the legend that he had flirted with the devil:

I've got to keep moving, I've got to keep moving
Blues falling down like hail, Blues falling down like hail
And the days keeps on 'minding me
There's a hellhound on my trail

Third, Johnson's voice is particularly effective at conveying a fatalistic sense of the social and spiritual forces he saw arrayed against him. His vocal intonation is especially compelling in his poignant 'Love in Vain', with its themes of painful departure and separation:

I followed her to the station with her suitcase in my hand
And I followed her to the station with her suitcase in my hand
Well it's hard to tell, its hard to tell when all your love's in vain
All my love's in vain.

(On *King of the Delta Blues Singers*, Vol. 2, CBS Records UK, 1970; also available on the boxed set *Robert Johnson. The Complete Recordings*, Columbia, 1990)

An analysis based on the song lyrics would not convey the emotional impact of Johnson's voice and its interplay with guitar in the recorded version of the song. In performance, the song is stripped down to its bare essentials, making it almost minimalist in contemporary terms. Obviously, if judged by the standards of traditional, classical musicology, it would be found wanting. The vocal is weak and wavering and the singer does not project well. Yet Johnson's voice has an edge of desperation and hints at depths of experience. This is abetted by the use of repetition and the interplay between the amplified acoustic guitar and the voice. The piece also exemplifies the role of improvisation and performance in styles such as rock and blues. Although its contemporary impact is limited by the primitive recording technology of its day, this also contributes to the song's authenticity.

Johnson has a claim to being an auteur on the basis of his recordings and their influence, but his now iconic star status owes much to other factors. The singer was widely thought to have sold his soul to the devil in return for the ability to be

an outstanding blues singer and guitarist, since he disappeared for a short period and returned amazingly proficient. This, along with his early death and the lack of details about his life, created Johnson as a mythic figure in the history of popular music. The force of this myth, and public and scholarly fascination with it, has led to a spate of books and documentaries on Johnson (for an excellent review of these, and the creation of 'the Johnson myth', see Pearson and McCulloch, 2003). When one of only two known photos of him was used on a US commemorative stamp, the fact that it had been altered to remove the cigarette from Johnson's mouth created a good deal of controversy.

There is continued interest in his recordings and his performing style and Johnson retains the ability to affect listeners today. My own students regard his recording as somewhat maudlin, yet remain conscious of its force. They also find Johnson's original of 'Love in Vain' an interesting comparison with the Rolling Stones' 'cover' version (on the album *Let It Bleed*) that they are more familiar with. Certainly they concede that their 'appreciation' of the song is greatly enhanced by locating it as a key text in the development of post-1950s 'rock'. This is to emphasize the point that knowledge of the performer and their influence on the 'popular music canon' adds dimensions beyond simple listening to the piece purely on its own terms.

Phil Spector: behind the wall of sound

In the 1960s, producer and songwriter and occasional performer Phil Spector was an auteur and a star. Later musicians and popular music history were to recognize his achievements despite his subsequent relative commercial decline.

Spector started by writing songs and achieved initial success with 'To Know Him Is To Love Him', sung by the Teddy Bears, a group he created. In 1960 Atlantic Records permitted him, at the age of 19, to produce some sessions. He created hits for Ray Peterson and Curtis Lee, wrote 'Spanish Harlem' for Ben E. King and then founded his own label, Philles. Three years of whirlwind success followed, during which he produced a series of songs which became teen anthems: 'Then He Kissed Me', 'Be My Baby', 'You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling', 'Da Doo Ron Ron' and 'He's a Rebel'. Although these featured some great female vocalists, the performers were virtually interchangeable; the star was Spector. As a producer, he celebrated the girl group phenomenon of the 1960s, while transcending it, using quality songs, first-class arrangements and leading session musicians. The noise he created, the so-called 'wall of sound', was overwhelming in its intensity:

Through multitracking, he made his rhythm sections seem like armies, and turned the beat into a murderous mass cannonade. No question; his records were the loudest, fiercest, most magnificent explosions that rock had yet produced, or dreamed of. And Spector stood in the center, swamped by this mayhem, twiddling the knobs, controlling everything.

(Cohn, 1980: 153)

At one level, the wall of sound was simply putting a lot of instrumentalists in the studio and have them all play at once. For example, on 'River Deep, Mountain High', recorded with Ike and Tina Turner in 1966, the recording sessions included:

Four guitars
Four basses
Three keyboards
Two percussionists
Two drummers
Two obbligato vocalists
Six horns
And a full string section

(Ribowtsky, 1989: 221)

According to Billy Preston, one of the keyboardists, Spector 'had every machine going all at once; it was a circus and he was the ringleader' (ibid.: 155). His approach to production also incorporated extensive use of echo chamber and tape echo effects.

There is a tendency to see Spector as a pure innovator, a perception encouraged by essays such as Tom Wolfe's 1963 essay 'The Tycoon of Teen' (reproduced in the boxed set, *Back To Mono*: see Further reading):

He does the whole thing. Spector writes the words and the music, scouts and signs up the talent. He takes them out to a recording studio and runs the session himself. He puts them through hours and days to get the two or three minutes he want. Two or three minutes out of the whole struggle. He handles the control dials like an electronic maestro.

Spector was certainly the dominant figure, but he was influenced by earlier producers, notably Leiber and Stoller, with whom he worked, and by Sam Phillips' use of echo at Sun Records in the 1950s. Also, as did most producers of the period, Spector worked with a group of regulars, including arranger Jack Nitzsche and engineer Larry Levine. And his songwriting credits were shared, or reluctantly conceded where Spector's input to them was minimal, with Brill Building teams such as Gerry Goffin and Carole King.

A millionaire at 21, Spector was hailed by the industry as a genius, but the impetus slackened in the mid-1960s. In 1966 he made his finest record, 'River Deep, Mountain High', with Ike and Tina Turner. When it failed commercially, Spector announced his retirement. A subsequent return from several years of self-imposed exile saw a few successes. He produced 'Imagine' with John Lennon and 'My Sweet Lord' with George Harrison and albums for both the former Beatles. But the dizzy earlier heights were not to be scaled again, in part because he no longer had total control, but was working as a hired hand. His presence alone was now insufficient to virtually guarantee a record's success. Writing his profile at the

end of the 1970s, Nic Cohn painted a picture of a reclusive figure whose myth had swamped his present reality.

Spector's success can be attributed to a combination of two factors. First, he established the concept of business independence, seeking to control every aspect of his own enterprise: production, publicity and distribution. Second, Spector was one of the first self-conscious pop artists, 'the first to rationalize, the first to comprehend precisely what he was up to. With him, there was immediately a totally new level of sophistication, complexity, musical range' (Cohn, 1980: 154). Paradoxically, Spector managed to raid every musical source he could and still be completely original; to be strictly commercial while concerned with the records as art. He combined the two great rock 'n' roll romances – rebellion and teen dream – into one.

Spector's achievement remains impressive and the positive response to the 1991 reprise of his work, the CD set *Back To Mono (1950–1969)*, was indicative of the continued interest in his work. On this, Spector remastered 60 of his singles (plus his attempt to create an album as a total entity, *Christmas Gift to You*), retaining their original mono sound. Spector's claim to auteur status rests on a combination of initial musical innovation and the aura of mystery and controversy created by his 'star' lifestyle; a mix of eccentricity (episodes with guns in the studio), a messy divorce in the 1970s and his increasing social isolation. His arrest on suspicion of murder in 2003, and subsequent lengthy trial, added to this mystique, yet, ironically, prompted fresh interest in his work. As Virgil Moorefield concludes: 'By taking total artistic control of a recording, Spector in fact redefined what it meant to produce a record. He changed forever the way the producer's role would be viewed' (Moorefield, 2005: 12).

The Spice Girls

As with Madonna, the Spice Girls' success story raises issues of the status of musical genres, image and representation, the commodification of popular music and the nature and operation of celebrity in pop culture more generally.

The Spice Girls were originally put together by the management team of Bob Herbert and his son Chris. Chris drew up a flyer, which he distributed in London and the southeast of England: 'R.U. 18–23 with the ability to sing/dance. R.U. streetwise, outgoing, ambitious, and dedicated?' Four hundred showed up for the auditions at Danceworks Studios, just off London's Oxford Street. The original five Spice Girls (including Michelle Stephenson, who dropped out and was replaced by Emma Bunton) met for the first time in March 1994. Victoria Adams, Melanie Brown, Emma Bunton, Melanie Chisholm and Geri Halliwell came from varying backgrounds and the combination of personalities to make up the group was chosen quite deliberately. The press, and their fans, later referred to them as Posh (Victoria), Sporty (Mel C), Baby (Emma), Scary (Mel B) and Ginger (Geri); labels which became pervasive public signifiers and helped consolidate the Spice Girls' image.

Chris Herbert used Trinity, a dance/rehearsal/recording studio in Woking, Surrey, as a base for the group, who spent almost a year there, working on their

singing, developing embryonic songwriting skills and beginning the process of selling themselves to the music industry. The Herberts had no official contract with the girls and were a relatively small company and the band, now increasingly confident in their abilities, looked around for a deal that offered greater support to their increasing ambitions. In April 1995 they left manager Chris Herbert and signed with Simon Fuller's 19 Management. In 1996 they signed to Virgin Records for a reported £2 million advance.

Fuller commissioned three teams of songwriters, all of whom had considerable music industry experience, credits and success, to work with/for the group, to develop their song ideas. Their input is shown on the group's debut album. Stannard and Rowe, who had previously written material/hits for East 17 and Take That, came up with three of the Spice Girls' four number 1 singles, 'Wannabe', '2 Become 1' and 'Mama', and also wrote 'If U Can't Dance'. Absolute (Paul Wilson and Andy Watkins) provided 'Who Do You Think You Are', 'Something Kinda Funny', 'Naked' and 'Last Time Lover'. The remaining two songs on the first album, 'Say You'll Be There' and 'Love Thing' were written by Eliot Kennedy (one with Cary Bayliss). The Spice Girls get songwriting credit on all the songs on the *Spice* album, but Davis (1997) claims that they actually only got about one-twentieth of the composer's royalties apiece.

The debut single 'Wannabe' was released in July 1996. It went to number 1 in the UK within a few weeks and stayed there for two months – a record for a debut single by a UK girl group. Subsequently it reached the number 1 chart position in 31 countries, including the US, selling four million copies worldwide. The Spice Girls next three singles also topped the UK charts, making them the only group to have had four UK no. 1s with their four first singles and already the most successful British girl group ever. The appeal of the group was enhanced by their videos and energetic dance routines and performances on leading music television show *Top of the Pops*. The *Spice* LP went triple platinum in the UK within three weeks of its release and by mid-1997 had sold over 10 million copies worldwide. The Girls' personal lives, notably earlier modelling efforts and personal relationships, came under intense scrutiny by, first, the British and then the international press, especially the tabloids. The group's slogan, 'Girl Power', 'a hybrid of 90s' good-feel optimism and cheery fun-pub feminism which alienates no one' (Davis 1997: 35), attracted considerable debate (see Lemish, 2003).

During 1996 and into 1997, the Spice Girls solidified their success in Britain and then tackled America. A carefully orchestrated marketing campaign was undertaken by Virgin in the US, partly to offset initial critical reception of the records. For example, the *Rolling Stone's* negative March 1997 review of *Spice*, which labelled the music a watered down mix of hip-hop and pop and accorded it only one and a half stars (on a five-star scale). 'Despite their pro-woman posing', wrote reviewer Christina Kelly, 'the Girls don't get bogged down by anything deeper than mugging for promo shots and giving out tips on getting boys into bed' (cited in Dickerson, 1998: 205). Virgin marketed the band with heavy emphasis on their videos and the Girls visual appeal, largely avoiding the more potentially awkward print media. This meant 'high profiles for MTV, short

interviews for television, and staged events where cameras could only get passing glimpses of the Spice Girls in controlled situations'. MTV was crucial, 'showing the Girls' nipple-friendly video (for "Wannabe") at every opportunity' (Dickerson, 1998: 205). In July 1997, *Spice* topped the *Billboard* album charts and *Rolling Stone* ran a cover story headlined 'Spice Girls Conquer the World', a nine-page article, which told readers everything they could possibly want to know about the Spice Girls (10 July 1997 issue). All this without playing a concert or playing live, except on the television show *Late Night with David Letterman*.

The Spice Girls filled a market niche. As Chris Herbert observed:

The whole teen-band scene at that time was saturated by boy bands. I felt that if you could appeal to the boys as well, you'd be laughing. If you could put together a girl band which was both sassy, for the girls, and with obvious sex appeal, to attract the boys, you'd double your audience.

(Davis, 1997: 35)

The Spice Girls also provided an antidote to the 'laddish' culture of UK Brit Pop in the early 1990s, associated with performers such as the Gallagher brothers (Oasis). The Spice Girls were the subject of considerable hostility from many 'rock' critics/fans, who saw them as a media artifact, a view underpinned by the historical denigration of dance pop as a genre.

Their success was made possible by a combination of their music, their marketing and their personalities. The Spice Girls' music is 'a mixture of dance, hip-hop, R&B, and smooth-as-silk pop ballads. Technically solid. Middle of the road. Nothing extreme' (Dickerson, 1998: 203). This is to overlook the appeal of the clever and catchy lyrics of songs such as 'Wannabe', with its catchphrase 'Zig-a-zig-ah' for sex and the highlighting of ongoing friendship and a streetwise attitude toward relationships:

Yo, I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want,
 So tell me what you want, what you really really want,
 I'll tell you what I want, what I really really want,
 So tell me what you want, what you really really want,
 I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna,
 I wanna really
 really really wanna zig-a-zig-ah
 If you want my future forget my past,
 If you wanna get with me better make it fast,
 Now don't go wasting my precious time,
 Get your act together we could be just fine.
 If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends,
 Make it last forever friendship never ends,
 If you wanna be my lover, you have got to give,
 Taking is too easy, but that's the way it is.

What do you think about that now you know how I feel,
 Say you can handle my love are you for real,
 I won't be hasty, I'll give you a try
 If you really bug me then I'll say goodbye.

(The Spice Girls, 'Wannabe', Virgin, 1996)

However, this well-crafted pop is not the foundation for their mega-success, which was due mainly to the band's public image, which they partly created for themselves through force of personality and an irreverent attitude to the music industry and the media. They were seen as five 'sassy' individuals who combined girl-next-door appeal with considerable sex appeal. 'They introduced the language of independence to a willing audience of pre-teen and teenage girls – girl power' (Whiteley, 2000: 215). In a discourse reminiscent of Madonna's early career, critics pointed to a contradiction between the Spice Girls' self-expression and their subversion of standard 'feminine' images and their incorporation into a male-dominated industry. The group members themselves, and their defenders, claimed in response that this was of their own choosing and on their own terms.

The franchizing (through product endorsements) of a huge range of Spice Girl products added to the Girls' ubiquitous presence through 1997 and 1998. In December 1997 *Q* magazine rated the Spice Girls the 'biggest rock band in the world', based on the amount of airplay they had received, total income from record sales, concert tickets etc. and the number of appearances on national magazine covers (both music and 'general' titles). In 1998 the Spice Girls released their second album, *Spice World*, again topping the charts internationally, and a movie of the same name. In August 1998 'Viva Forever' became their seventh UK number 1 single and they sold out a 40-concert 'world' tour. During 1999 and into 2000 the group's momentum eased: Geri departed and was not replaced; the remaining members devoted themselves to individual projects (e.g. Mel C's *Northern Star*); and Victoria and Mel B became mothers. A third Spice Girls' album was released in November 2000; its limited success contributed to the effective breakup of the band.

Shania Twain: on her way

Country emerged in the US as a major market force in popular music in the 1990s (see Sernoe, 1998) and classic stereotypes associated with the genre (especially its maudlin themes and limited appeal) no longer hold up. *Billboard* placed Garth Brooks as 'Top Country Album Artist' and 'Top Pop Album Artist' for the years 1990, 1991 and 1993. In 1993 all six of his albums were included among the 100 most popular albums of the year, with two – *No Fences* and *Ropin' the Wind* – having sold about 10 million copies each. His crossover success opened the way on the pop charts for other country artists, often referred to as 'new country', with Billy Ray Cyrus, Dwight Yoakum, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Reba McEntire among the best-selling artists of the early to mid-1990s. At the

same time, country radio became the second most listened to music format in the US, second only to adult contemporary, and video channel CMT (Country Music Television) achieved a significant market share. The success of Shania Twain during the late 1990s was in part made possible by this aggressive resurgence of country music and the receptive context that it created. Her crossover to the commercial mainstream and massive success, however, lifted the 'country' tag from her and by 1998 she was an international pop star.

Shania Twain was born in Canada. Her life story has, slightly cynically, been compared to a fairytale:

A country girl from Timmins, Ontario, is raised dirt poor, starts performing in bars as a child, loses her parents at age 22 when their car collides with a logging truck, sings to support her three teenage siblings, then finds her prince – reclusive rock producer Robert John (Mutt) Lange – who gives her a studio kiss of stardom.

(Brian Johnson, 'Shania Revealed', cover story in *Maclean's*, Canada's leading magazine, 23 March 1998; Hager, 1998, provides a detailed and balanced biography).

Her success is based on a combination of her songwriting, her striking and attractive looks, her music videos and, as Johnson suggests, the role of Mutt Lange in her recordings. The weighting variously accorded to these factors, illustrates the controversy that has surrounded her status as a star and a popular music 'auteur'.

Twain moved to Nashville in 1991 after signing a deal with Mercury Nashville, changing her name from Eileen to Shania, which means 'I'm on my way' in Ojibwa (the language of her foster father). Her self-titled debut album (1993) featured only one of her own compositions, her producers opting instead for songs from established songwriters, a common practice in Nashville. The debut was respectable, without making a major impact: it sold around a hundred thousand copies, two singles from it got to no. 55 on the *Billboard* Hot Country Singles Chart and Shania made *Billboard's* 1993 list of promising new artists. The accompanying music video for 'What Made You Say That', her own composition, broke with country tradition, celebrating her 'wholesome' sexuality, as she frolicked on a tropical beach with a male 'hunk'. It featured her bared navel, which became a 'trademark' on later videos and magazine covers. Screened on CMT Europe, the video also brought Shania to the attention of leading English producer John 'Mutt' Lange. The two started collaborating on songwriting, became close friends and were married in December 1993.

Shania's second album, *The Woman in Me* (1995), was produced by her husband, who also partially financed it. Featuring a number of the songs turned down for the first album, *The Woman in Me* took a year and a half and more than half a million dollars to complete, a recording effort which stunned Nashville, where budgets of one-tenth of that amount were standard (Hager, 1998: 54). It sold 12 million copies by the end of 1998. Of the 12 songs, 10 were co-written by Shania and Lange and there was a solo contribution from each. As Hager

describes it, this was a creative collaboration, with each contributing from their strengths and complementing the other. In producing *The Woman in Me*, Lange drew on the 'rock' style that he had used for very successful records with Def Leppard, AC/DC and Bryan Adams. The album was a combination of 'irresistible songs, sassy lyrics, all backed by Lange's onion-skin production, which reveals more of each song with each play' (*Q* review, November 1999). Her third album, *Come on Over* (1998) sold 4.2 million during its first five months of release. The first single from it, 'You're Still the One', topped the *Billboard* country chart in May 1998 and went on to reach no. 1 on the pop chart. Both the album, and the several singles from it, topped charts internationally.

This success was achieved, her critics observed, without Twain performing 'live'. This claim conveniently overlooked the fact that she had been performing in public from the age of three, but really referred to the singer's not initially undertaking a concert tour to promote her albums. Instead, Shania did a series of promotional appearances, in shopping centres, on talk shows and at industry showcases. This led to claims that her songs were largely the product of the recording studio and raised questions about her ability to present them in performance. Twain was also frequently accused of being a 'packaged' artist, created by her high-powered management (Jon Landau, who also represents Bruce Springsteen). The success of her extensive touring in 1998 and into 1999, and the quality of her stage performance, erased these doubts. The tour also enabled the production of a best-selling concert video.

Cover stories (for example, *Rolling Stone*, 3 September 1998; *Q*, November 1999) accentuated Shania's 'natural' physical appeal, particularly her bare midriff, a feature of several of her early videos. In her songs and videos, Twain combines a flirtatious glamour and self-empowerment: 'a country singer who looks like a supermodel' who 'on camera projects a playful allure that is part come-on, part come-off-it' (Johnson, *Maclean's*, 23 March 1998: 50). This is feminism very much in the mould of the Spice Girls.

Her songs, mainly co-written with Lange, reinvigorate tired county formats. They range from ballads of domestic bliss ('You're Still the One') and feisty reassurance ('Don't Be Stupid. You Know I Love You'), to clever assertions of women's rights ('Honey I'm Home' is a neat role reversal). Within its pop ballad format and catchy tune, 'Black Eyes, Blue Tears' alerted listeners to domestic violence.

Come On Over established Shania Twain as a successful crossover artist. Remixed versions of singles from the album placed less emphasis on country style instrumentation, creating greater airplay on non-country radio. Her next album, after a two-year 'time out' suffering from exhaustion, continued this marketing strategy. *Up!* (2002), a double album, featured 29 songs in a country mix on one disc and the same songs in pop mixes on the other. The album, and several singles from it, topped the charts. *A Greatest Hits* album, in 2004, maintained Twain's commercial success. Over the next few years, the singer took 'time out' to become a mother, divorced from Lange and published her autobiography. In December 2012 she will start a two-year residency in Las Vegas, with a show 'Shania: Still the One' and is planning to record again. Shania Twain is a

popular music auteur whose work and marketable image made her a star, although her success illustrates the frequent contribution of others to musical authorship.

Lady Gaga

Stefani Germanotta, better known by her stage name Lady Gaga, is a pop star born in and of the internet age. She has exploited the reach of the web and social media, constantly communicating with her dedicated and extensive fans (the 'little monsters') through Facebook and Twitter; she debuts her videos on YouTube and is the most downloaded artist in history. As leading business magazine *Forbes* observed in November 2009: 'Lady Gaga isn't the music industry's new Madonna. She's its new business model' (cited Callahan, 2010: 12).

While some accounts see Gaga as moving in 18 months (2009–2010) from being an 'unknown' performer to being 'the biggest star in the world' (Callahan, 2010: 1), hers was not an overnight success story. Gaga, who began learning piano at age four, had been song writing and performing since high school and in New York clubs since 2005. Early performance clips on YouTube, demonstrate her already evident talent in musicianship, vocal ability and commanding stage presence. Biographical accounts and interviews (Grigoriadis, 2010; Hiatt, 2009), emphasize her drive and determination from an early age to succeed in the music business. Indeed, in many ways, Gaga personifies the traditional route to success, based on hard work and live performance, sketched earlier (Chapter 3).

Gaga created a performance persona and spectacle, which creatively pulled together a bricolage of hundreds of pop art threads. Maureen Callahan, attending a sold-out Lady Gaga concert at the Manchester Evening News Arena, the largest in the UK, holding 21,000, observed that among the people and things Gaga referenced, overtly and covertly, on the night were:

The Wizard of Oz; the late designer Alexander McQueen's 2006 fashion show, in which Kate Moss appeared as a ghostly 3-D floating hologram; a famous image of McQueen binding a model – face painted white, streaks of red paint streaming from the eyes, mouth gagged with black ribbon – in swathes of white; the Broadway musical *Rent*; the archly art-directed interstitial clips MTV pioneered on its award shows; Elton John and Billy Joel; Rob Reiner's classic 1984 rock spoof, *This is Spinal Tap*; Cirque du Soleil; Japanese horror films of the 1950s; shock artists Tracey Emin and Damien Hurst; David Bowie and Freddie Mercury; the entire gay subculture of the past three decades; the stark black-and-white aesthetic of the great rock photographer Anto Corbijn. And, of course, Madonna.

(Callahan, 2010: 6)

Lady Gaga's debut single 'Just Dance' was released on 8 April 2008; it preceded her first album by four months, to set up the album release and create a demand for it. *The Fame* (or *Fame*, in some markets) was released on 8 October

2008. By this time, 'Just Dance' had done well internationally, especially in the European dance music market and the single now spent the North American summer on the *Billboard* Hot Dance Music – Club Party Chart, peaking at no. 1 in January 2009. It was followed by the release of a further single from the album, 'Poker Face', which was an international no. 1 hit. The market trajectory of the album reflected the success of the singles and the impact of Gaga's subsequent success at major music awards, along with several high-profile media appearances. A career 'tipping point' was her performance of 'Paparazzi' at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards (13 September), when she won Best New Artist. Gaga was then *Billboard's* Artist of the Year for 2010 and *Time* magazine named her one of the most influential people in the world.

The Fame peaked at no. 2 on *Billboard* and by mid-2011 had sold 4.2 million copies in the US alone. The success of her next release, the eight-track EP, *The Fame Monster*, which reached no. 5 on *Billboard* and sold 1.5 million copies, enabled Lady Gaga to embark on the 18-month long Monster Ball Tour, which became one of the highest grossing concert tours of all time. Her 2011 album, *Born This Way*, also topped charts internationally, selling 1.1 million copies in the first week of its release in the US market, boosted by online retailer Amazon's controversially selling the album for 99c, to promote its new cloud service.

Lady Gaga is not only a highly successful contemporary recording and touring artist, she is a celebrity within the wider pop culture. She continues to be featured in numerous music and fashion magazine cover stories and appears on leading talk shows and at music and fashion awards. In October 2010, eight wax models of the singer were unveiled by Madame Tussauds' waxwork museums around the world, at a cost of US\$2.4 million, with each dressed differently in celebration of the singer's provocative fashion sense. Gaga is actively and publicly involved with humanitarian causes. Her stage show statements and tweets following the Japanese tsunami disaster (in February 2011) brought the rebuilding effort to the attention of her 20 million followers on Twitter. In 2012, at Harvard University, she launched her 'Born This Way Foundation' aimed at empowering young people through addressing issues such as self-confidence, well-being and stamping out bullying.

Conclusion

The auteurs and stars I have considered here share a number of characteristics. At a fairly self-evident level, in their musical careers they all exercise considerable control over their artistic lives, perhaps because this has often been hard won. All have an ability to retain an audience across time, either through reinventing their persona/image or through exploring new avenues in their music. They all have produced a substantial body of work, often multimedia in form; and they have all been, to varying degrees, seeking new ways of reinterpreting or reaffirming popular music styles. These characteristics apply to both auteurs and stars, but the latter go beyond them, to function as mythic constructs, related to their audiences collective and individual relationship to the music and performer (Marshall,

1997: 163). Popular music stars and auteurs also represent economic entities, a unique commodity form which is both a labour process and product. The continuity of their careers contributes to stability in the marketplace, thereby enhancing the cultural and potential commercial value of their musical 'texts'.

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