Niedzwiecki; Hal. Hello, I'm Special.

3

EVERYONE'S A STAR

POP CULTURE INVENTS THE NEW CONFORMITY

THE SCENE IS thousands of youngish pop-star wannabes corralled in a gravel field awaiting their thirty seconds with the judges. We could be almost anywhere in the Western world. The image is certainly familiar. A mortgage broker croons tremulously; a mother keeps a tired watchful eye on her tattooed, belly-button-pierced sixteen-year-old daughter; a twenty-something secretary fingers her crucifix, closes her eyes, and imagines, just for a second, what it would be like to *make it*.

As I said, we could be anywhere. But this is Canada in 2003, and the place is the first ever *Canadian Idol* tryouts in Toronto. Young people, ages sixteen to twenty-six, have turned up at the Metro Convention Center to audition for the show, a spinoff of the popular American talent-search show (itself a spinoff of a British version). They have come in droves, in numbers that surprise everyone and leave the organizers struggling to accommodate a mass congregation of pop supplicants. They start arriving on Saturday morning, prepared to sit in front of the building until the Monday-morning tryouts begin. And they keep arriving. All day Saturday, a mass influx Sunday night, and a final staggering swell—spurred on by news reports—Monday morning. To wander through the anxious

corridors of pop-star wannabes lining up behind plastic barriers and watched over by a flotilla of private security guards, cops for hire, and *Idol* factotums is to encounter a veritable herd of new conformists. Here is the "I'm Special" sameness in all its contradictory glory. Here are thousands of young people planning on singing interchangeable pop songs, and they all share the same dream: Each believes that he or she is a unique individual soon to be singled out and led to the altar of stardom. This is a new-conformist coming-out party, a where-were-you-when moment for a generation of perpetual teens searching for that elusive feeling of specialness.

"Anyone can become what they want to be," says sixteen-year-old Brooke. "If it doesn't happen, you can't give up, you gotta keep going." Delilah, twenty-six, has been waiting since 4:30 Sunday afternoon and works for the Salvation Army. "I've been singing since I was very small. It's a dream of mine to go further with that." Ben, a university student studying theater, is twenty years old and showed up around 3:30 A.M. Monday. "I'm looking for my break. I'm doing it for the experience, for the pressure. I want to be a rock star."

Everyone I speak to says exactly the same thing, regardless of age, ethnicity, what part of Ontario they have trekked from or how many hours they have been standing in the crowd. All of them think that they have a good chance, that they have what it takes to be famous, and that singing is their dream. When I ask what makes them different from the ten thousand people patiently waiting beside them, they simply reiterate that they want it more because it is their dream and passion. When I ask them how they might feel if they are summarily dismissed by the judges, they are ready for that too. The kids in line are so steeped in the myth of instant stardom that they are already figuring out how even rejection will benefit their bid. Afrodhasia, twenty-three-years-old, explains that even if you don't make the final cut, "you get seen and maybe picked out for something else in movies, or singing or dancing." Mark Albay, seventeen, insists that I use his last name in anything I write. He tells me that it doesn't matter if he gets on the show, it's all about the marketing. "I see myself as a singer. I'm doing this for

the publicity, to get myself known." Billy, a twenty-year-old house painter, hadn't even planned to try out; he just accompanied friends. But the infectious attitude got to him, so now he's prepared to sing a song the title of which he can't even remember until a pal prods him. No matter, "I'm confident I can make it. I don't want to have regrets that I didn't try. If you really want to make it there's always a way. If you don't have your dreams, what do you have?"

Inevitably, there are those who emerge from the other side rejected and dispirited. There are complaints about the poor organization, the lack of any kind of consideration for those trying out. I speak to people as they come out of the pre-audition tent having waited twenty-plus hours in order to sing for thirty seconds. About one-third emerge wearing wristbands that confer upon them the honor of coming back the next day for a real, two-minute tryout. (Much later in the day, these wristbands are bestowed like candy on all the people still left in the gravel parking lot, mainly so that they will disperse and the security guards can be sent home.) The two-thirds who emerge without wristbands somehow have to face up to the impossible: failure. And yet even these rejects manage to cling to the pop dream: Bianca, a young woman, exudes confidence despite her disappointment. "It's still a dream. This isn't the last of me. I know I'm going to be a star. The only person who can make your dreams not come true is yourself."

The young people at the *Canadian Idol* tryouts seek freedom. They seek the freedom that they think comes from attaining the dream of pop stardom. To them, celebrities are liberated from the drudgery of school, family, work, everyday life. Celebrities are lifted out of the grind of normal. They are noticed, unique, special. Even Denham, a twenty-five-year-old mortgage broker who is smart enough to know that his chances are slim, makes no move after telling me he's going to give up and go home. The dream remains, difficult to relinquish. "I wish I'd started singing earlier," he sighs. "I wish I'd thought about it as a talent from early on."

At the *Canadian Idol* tryouts I find thousands of bright, funny, interesting, horribly deluded people, new conformists every single

one of them. They all share the same dream and pursue it in exactly the same way. Coincidence? Human nature? I don't think so.

Introducing the Pop Theme

Pop culture comes with a message that is suspiciously similar to the ideology of new conformity: It's the story of you.

In her song "Vogue," Madonna tells us we are all superstars. Nike exhorts us to "Just do it." These are catchy summations of the grand pop-culture theme that bombards us every day. Each and every manifestation of pop culture purports to be telling the story of how the individual transcends obstacles and the masses to earn recognition, success, happiness. Though the plot may be about a sultry maid from the wrong side of the tracks working for a repressed rich guy (nineties sitcom *The Nanny* or Jennifer Lopez's feature *Maid in Manhattan*), the story is really concerned with how all of us ordinary people can transcend our limitations; the story is really how *you* feel, work, live, love.

The purveyors of popular culture want to connect an audience to the character, song, or message they have created. Of course, this is economics: The more people who connect, the greater the number of tickets bought or copies sold. But it's also something intrinsic to the way pop culture functions. It is, after all, the only mass-produced product that makes us cry, laugh, momentarily rethink our lives. Does your lawn mower do that? Does your new hat? Pop culture gets inside us in ways that the old-style arts never could.

Adolescent psychologist Ron Taffel notes in his book *The Second Family* that teenagers now often attach more importance to the world of commercial pop culture and peer relationships than they do to their real families. "While our real-life friends still matter," writes Juliet B. Schor in *The Overspent American,* "they have been joined by our media 'friends.' We watch the way television families live, we read about the lifestyles of celebrities and other public figures we admire, and we consciously and unconsciously assimilate this information."

What is the "information" we are assimilating about our new pop culture pals? They are (or at least pretend to be) secretaries, doctors, janitors, divorcees, hen-pecked husbands, and disgruntled daughters. The message of pop culture is one of transcending ordinary life by combining adventure, heightened excitement, and, inevitably, success (fast-food combo order of everlasting love, luxury, and life purpose). Every pop-culture narrative tells us that, despite ordinariness, you too can be special, super, noticed, discovered, successful. You too can alter the narrative of your life, make a dramatic U-turn, become a better person, become more you. The message of pop culture is always that of the triumph of the ordinary person who, in the process of following his or her heart, bucks the system and becomes the exception, a larger-than-life but still completely regular it-could-happen-to-you hero.

While art forms like the epic poem, the play, and the novel laid the groundwork for the omnipresence of these narratives, it took Hollywood to iron out the ambiguities and perfect the instant connection between the audience and the inevitably triumphant "regular" movie star. Novels, let's face it, allow for too much distance, too much abstraction. The movies are immediate; they seem to put you right into a parallel reality, show you a person who could be you. *Pretty Woman* and *Erin Brockovich* (both starring Everywoman Julia Roberts) are about working women whose status is elevated when the rich and powerful recognize how really special they truly are. In *Patch Adams* and *Dead Poets Society* (both starring Robin Williams), unlikely rebels challenge the strictures of an ossified education system and "seize the day." In *Rocky* and *Rambo* (both played and written in whole or part by Sly Stallone), not-too-bright muscle-bound heroes succeed even as society and a proliferation of evil types stack the odds against them. And, of course, in the blockbuster *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogies, the lonely farm boy stuck on the planetary equivalent of Idaho turns out to be none other than the last hope for the world as we know it.

The theme of the solitary individual conquering adversity has been the bulwark of Hollywood movies since their inception.

Consider the films of Frank Capra, best known for his *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). In Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), a suddenly rich Everyman must struggle to reclaim his average-Joe status. The film was remade as *Mr. Deeds* by Adam Sandler, whose only contribution was to make the "I'm Special" premise even cornier and more obvious: Money doesn't matter; what's inside you is what counts; we're all important in our own special way. Almost seventy years passed between the two films, but the theme of the Hollywood movie rarely changes—exceptionally ordinary main character overcomes adversity in order to become a much better person (but also a richer, more famous, more loved person).

This, of course, contrasts with the prevailing ethic of previous years, when hubris and vanity were punished, not celebrated and raised up as the ideal. From the Greek dramas to Shakespeare to Hans Christian Andersen, relentless self-absorption and concern for one's own happiness and status led to insanity and tragedy—not redemption and reward.

Those times are long past. Now, each mass-cultural product is carefully tested to ensure that audience accessibility and enthusiasm is in no way diminished by as piddling a problem as depressing content. At the same time, pop culture's overarching theme of the normal individual who overcomes abnormal circumstance is becoming more and more persistent in our culture. Even as Frank Capra was giving us the archetypal pop-culture plot, mass culture was moving out of the movie theater and into our living rooms. Television quickly became the perfect medium to preach the pop theme of the exceptional individual. TV features recurring characters whose lives are at once more exciting, triumphant, and difficult than ours ever could be, despite seemingly humble and unpromising jobs and situations. The very nature of its repetitive ubiquity makes it the perfect medium to articulate a world of the exceptionally mundane. Everything from *The Dukes of Hazzard* (two good old boys fight the system) to *The A-Team* (rag-tag misfits help the unfortunate) to *M*A*S*H, ER, NYPD Blue, Letterman, Cheers, Buffy*, the aforementioned *Idol* spinoffs, and a whole host of shows we haven't heard of yet all assert the specialness of the ordinary individual while implanting in us entire decades of made-up memory.

Ah, what memories! Mass-market tales of a motley crew of losers, school kids, secretaries, orphans, servants, bartenders, cops, convicts, waiters, and hillbillies who fought the law, the boss, the administration, the vampires. How many hours have we spent with these characters, plots, situations? And how little has television's central pattern changed over the years? Even the plots of the videos on MTV convey the message of overcoming authority or adversity or a bad breakup. Writes one disapproving critic: "MTV . . . offers blips savoring freedom and disdaining authority." And so the seemingly rebellious and edgy MTV joins its peers in preaching incessant selfhood, a recipe for individuality that calls for just the right amounts of rebellion, free will, style, and, ultimately, acceptance.

Trapped in a Theme World

John Conte plans to play the piano continuously from Christmas Eve to Boxing Day. It's a fifty-hour stint that he hopes will earn him the world record in non-stop piano playing. But, a few weeks before the December 2002 attempt, the thirty-nine-year-old classical musician seems oddly, well, unenthusiastic. "If it advances my career, that's fine," he says. "But it's a pretty dubious achievement. I'm not sure in what way it will help."

Playing fifty hours straight onstage at the Cornelia St. Café in Greenwich Village is not something one simply does out of the blue. The obvious question is: If Conte isn't doing it for his career, why is he doing it? "We're shooting a documentary of this event," Conte explains. "Everything leading up to it, my preparations. And we've got this radio show from Jersey City that's following our progress week by week."

What is the relationship between these chronicles of the event and Conte's decision to try to break this obscure record? Conte says that he is doing it to help an independent production company. He has written the score for two of the company's films, which so far have

not been picked up for distribution. The director decided to put a stunt together that might earn his company some quick attention. "It started out as a much bigger plan," Conte says. "We were going to try to get several of us to break a record of some kind and we were trying to synchronize it. But I'm the only one who was left."

So he's signed on to help out the director's career? Not exactly. Says Conte: "We were just trying to find a way to get some attention for these two small pictures. We thought this might do it." The plan is to sell the documentary to something like the Sundance Channel and, in the process, turn the buyers on to the other films. In other words, the stunt is less about the director or the world record attempt than it is about the fate of the two movies.

Who is John Conte and what does he want? He's a classical piano player with an interest in the avant-garde. He's a twelve-year veteran of a "fantastic" orchestra that, by his own admission, "just can't seem to break through." He acknowledges that the record-breaking stunt will do little for his career as a musician, but at the same time tells me that he itches to "try to do something different." He's ambivalent about the feat that looms before him, and admits that there's a good chance he might not succeed. "We'll still have a movie," he is quick to add. "It might even be better."

Conte represents how far pop's reach extends—pulling the most unlikely figures into a world of fairy-tale fakery and radical restlessness. Incidentally, he set a new world record for "longest keyboard marathon": He played non-stop for 52 hours, 20 minutes.

He is hardly alone in his attraction to the allure of the special.

Ken Hechtman is a Montreal database programmer who spent six days as a Taliban prisoner after wandering through the southern Afghanistan front lines in search of a story for an alternative weekly newspaper. With war-correspondence experience consisting, as one Canadian newspaper put it, "largely of reading *Soldier of Fortune* magazine," Hechtman headed off to Afghanistan. What was he looking for?

In a nutshell, Hechtman wanted to be noticed. In his reports on being held captive and very nearly executed, he seems pleased with

the outcome of his antics. And why not? What better scoop is there than: "I Was a Taliban Prisoner!"? His commentary—which appeared in the *Montreal Mirror* and the online magazine www.straightgoods.com—is oddly jocular. "Mistake #4," he jokes, describing his attempts to explain away a notebook full of information about Taliban troop movements. "Nobody wants to hear that all their military secrets can be compiled in an afternoon of net-searching and the Taliban is no exception." In Afghanistan at the time, people were dying, families were starving, hundreds of thousands were displaced, but Hechtman, well, Hechtman was Hechtman. He's lucky he made it out of there alive, but it's obvious from his delighted reports that Hechtman would do it all again in a second.

Unlike Conte, with his ambivalence and reluctance, Hechtman is a type that everyone can understand. After all, what is he but a slightly more extreme version of your average Idolite? Here is a pop-culture-fed, *Soldier of Fortune*–reading data programmer willing to risk his life to claim the pop mantle of individuality. Did Hechtman get rich from this stunt? No. Did he get noticed? Oh yes. All over the world and, most particularly, in his home country. And yet the usual denouement is absent. In the movie version, there would be a family to rescue, a George Clooney-led *Three Kings*-like refugee situation to resolve. In real life, there's only Hechtman to rescue, Hechtman reporting on . . . Hechtman. His actions, triggered by neither financial gain nor altruism, create a kind of vacuum. Hechtman is a lot more like John Conte than he is like a movie hero. Hechtman, Conte, and the Idolites all seek to insert themselves into pop culture to overcome the dullness of their everyday lives. They all seek to be something more, something bigger. And all end up in a shadowy zone of ambiguity, doing things not for the sake of doing them, but for the sake of creating a narrative about having done . . . something.

This is more than a matter of fringe individuals pursuing weird cultural antics devoid of meaningful consequence. In the case of Hechtman, death was very nearly the outcome. And in the case of Conte, his decision constituted a potentially wrenching and cer-

tainly radical break from a high-art aesthetic that eschews fame. The number of people across North America and the world who have tried out for *Idol*-like shows and their spinoffs in the past five years (let's not forget *Junior Idol*!) surely reaches the hundreds of thousands. What makes people willing to risk life and limb, willing to stand in a hot gravel parking lot for twenty-four hours, willing to toss away a lifetime of artistic conviction?

Conte's stunt illustrates how far the pop-culture dream permeates contemporary thinking. It is no longer restricted to the lives of suburban teenyboppers, but also the thoughts of an experienced classical musician. Hechtman and the Idolites do not necessarily recognize the conformity of their actions. *(Note to self: Quit job as a programmer and pursue childhood obsession with war zones!)* Conte, on the other hand, is far more willing to locate his own participation in this pop-culture game somewhere in the realm of the silly. Nevertheless, he too is pulled in. Both men, in different ways, sought to change their lives in order to gain access to that ultimate dispenser of individuality, pop culture.

Ultimately, Conte's record breaking feat would be noted in newspapers across the continent from the *Albany Times Union* to the *Clevland Plain Dealer* to the *Regina Leader Post*. "It's kind of a celebration of the ridiculous," he told me on the eve of the attempt. "If that has any redeeming value."

The Creeping Shrink: Pop Culture Everywhere

As John Conte and Ken Hechtman show us, the ridiculous is now everywhere. It has moved into our houses in the form of television sets, DVDs, stereos, laptops, and every other form of device that serves as a platform to some aspect of mass culture. The invasive creep of the culture of entertainment and constant stimulation—each incarnation preaching the pop *theme*—at once renders pop culture invisible and invincible, everywhere and nowhere. How much of your living space is specifically arranged to make it easy for you to interact with devices that allow you to engage with

pop culture and compose your personal spectacle? It's not uncommon to see TV sets in the living room, bedroom, and kitchen. Laptops have wireless connections for games, downloading MP3s, and checking out websites devoted to your particular pop-culture kink. Stereos, VCRs, DVDs, Gameboys—much of our living space is arranged for pop culture consumption.

It wasn't always that way. I grew up pre-VCR, pre-cable, and presatellite; my parents grew up pre-TV; my grandparents grew up pre-radio; their grandparents grew up . . . and so on. In the United States, total recreational spending, adjusted for inflation, jumped from $91.3 billion in 1970 to $257.3 billion in 1990, an average annual gain of 9.1 percent that well outstrips population growth of 1 percent a year. So over twenty years, people went from spending roughly 5 percent of their total earnings on recreation to nearly 8 percent. Evidence suggests that this number is continuing to rise as more and more people invest in things like TiVo, satellite television, video games, high speed internet, and all manner of custom recreation technologies designed to give us what we want, when we want it.

At the same time, a 2003 survey found that 77 percent of Canadian citizens (whose spending on entertainment parallels spending in the US) see control over access to entertainment and information as the real benefit of new entertainment technologies. In other words, we are not so much paying for more entertainment as for the ability to choose, to participate—even in some marginal way—in our own cultural life. Why? Because pop looms large in our lives in a way that no previous culture, no previous era, could even imagine.

The message to turn your life into a success story is everywhere, beamed directly into our brains. The issue is not mind control (exactly). We want this stuff. We crave it. We seek it out. It feels good. Whether on film or TV or in song, the tale of the little guy making good is one that we simply can't get enough of. It appeals to all of us, rich or poor, success or failure, black or white, gay or straight. Who's going to argue against the little guy? Who's going to

cheer for the corporations, the governments, or the Establishment when we can cheer for someone like ourselves, someone whose struggle is just and whose (fictional) struggle is invariably going to succeed? Do we cheer for the status quo that keeps us laboring over our daily business, or do we cheer for the surprise loner who surpasses the status quo and, best of all, *always wins*?

Once, film was the only peddler of the fantasy of transcendent reinvention. But now there are also pop songs, TV shows, video games, celebrity magazines. This material all promotes a whole new relationship to the self: a philosophy of "I'm Specialism," a belief that not only do we want to live in fancy houses and drive fancy cars like pop stars do, but we also desire their all-powerful sense of self, the validation they exude just by being who they are.

So urgent is society's need for a sustained connection between audiences and their dream-conveying pop stars that there is a trend in the media to demonstrate the ordinariness of celebs. The same month that *The Osbournes* went on the air (as a form of reality TV showcasing a heavy-metal star's dysfunctional family), *US Magazine* started a recurring photo feature called "Stars—They're Just Like Us." The feature shows celebrities doing ordinary things, like holding a plunger (former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell) and pumping gas (actress/Bond-girl Denise Richards). Such pictorials are now a regular occurrence in everything from glossy magazines to such tabloid TV shows as *Celebrity Justice,* which reports on the lawsuits, bar brawls, traffic tickets, and divorces of the Hollywood set.

Performers have also learned to star in vehicles that articulate their ordinariness. Jennifer Lopez felt it necessary to reassure her fan base that despite her immense fame and wealth, she remained "Jenny from the Block." She followed that hit song with a movie called *Maid in Manhattan,* in which she plays a poor servant girl discovered and elevated by the millionaire who comes to love her despite her low-class origins. India.Arie sings on her breakout album *Voyage to India* about the contrasts between her ordinary self and the usual sexy babes featured in videos. The gorgeous pop star tries to convince us she really isn't all that pretty but is simply a

beneficiary of the pop theme. She's made it because she "kept it real," believed in herself, etc. And, since she isn't gorgeous and superficial, the implicit suggestion is: If she can do it, you can too!

Is it a coincidence that several people I met at the *Canadian Idol* tryouts were planning to sing the songs of Lopez and India.Arie? Celebrities are presented in what Michael Bracewell has called a "carefully edited form of stylized 'docu-drama'" that satisfies the public's need to see behind the scenes of fame and to be offered a "sniff of intimacy" with the stars. But India.Arie is stunningly attractive, despite her protests to the contrary. And for all Lopez's rhetoric, she is no longer a girl from the block whose existence promises similar opportunities to the poor and downtrodden. Whatever she once was, today she is a canny pop star trying to leverage the pop theme of ubiquitous specialness into continued love from a barrio demographic whose poor residents stand in stark contrast to Lopez's jet-set lifestyle.

"WHEN A SUBJECT APPEARS to be all around him," wrote American public relations specialist Philip Lesly in 1974, "a person tends to accept it and take it for granted. . . . It becomes part of the atmosphere in which he lives. He finds himself surrounded by it and absorbs the climate of the idea." Steeped in the "climate of the idea," more and more people want to make good on the pop promise that everyone can elevate themselves to new heights.

The message of pop compels us to be more ourselves, because we are intrinsically interesting, beautiful, worthy of attention and notice. But pop culture doesn't specify what about us is actually all that special. Nor does pop tell us how to garner notice upon successful completion of our reinvention. Like the semi-despairing John Conte, the compulsion to be noticed often translates into confusion and even a certain degree of sadness. Do we really want to quit our jobs, abandon our responsibilities, seize the day, break the record? Silly, of course we do. Who doesn't? But, all too often, seizing the day is not so easy. It's not clear what ambition we harbor, what world-changing activity we might embark on. Too often, we

end up simply feeling depressed and devalued as we carry on through lives that have become all the more ordinary because glamorous pop stars are urging us to *just do it*.

Unable to realize either instant tycoon status or sudden pop-star recognition, many of us turn to fulfilling far more esoteric aspirations. If you don't succeed as a celeb in business or onstage, you can still reshape the narrative of your life and have some relationship to fame and specialness. We see this in the growing trend to participatory pop, from video game addiction to wrestling wannabes to Elvis impersonators. Is it a coincidence that more and more people are steeping themselves in pop culture as a way to give identity and order to their lives?

The stunning growth of spending on video games and entertainment on the Internet are both evidence of the way in which we are increasingly willing to spend money to find some way into the pop world. Price Waterhouse Coopers projects that revenues from video games in the United States, the second-largest market in the world, will grow from its 2004 high of $8.2 billion in revenues, to 15.1 billion in 2009. Meanwhile, a study of what American's bought online in 2004 concludes that "the biggest increases in 2004 came in spending for entertainment, which soared 90 percent to $413.5 million from $217.6 million in 2003."

Statistical evidence nicely merges nicely with the ancedotal. A website run by a Japanese software programmer is the home for those who want to post Björk songs they have personally remixed. There are more than ten thousand of them! "Digital technology, abetted by the Internet, is turning fans from passive acolytes to active participants in the artistic process," writes Matthew Mirapual in the *New York Times*. As the backyard wrestling enthusiasts demonstrate, this is undeniably true, and the number of people who are moving from passive to active expands daily.

Another *New York Times* trend piece discusses the phenomenon of ordinary people paying for the recording of their own CDs. The article appeared not in an arts section, but in a style section. The implication is that these young adults (in their twenties and thirties) are not creating culture so much as indulging in fad and fashion. The tone of the article is intrigued but dismissive—"the vanity CD has become the cultural equivalent of the novel in the dresser drawer, a talisman against the workaday pressures to abandon one's creative dreams." The piece quotes a studio owner who says: "It seems like everyone is doing it. The threshold of talent for making a CD is very low." This is one of the few articles to appear in a daily newspaper that actually discusses the lives of "real" (read: not already famous) people actually creating a cultural product, rather than just consuming it. Tellingly, the journalist can't decide if he should make fun of these people—who account for as much as 35 percent of the average recording studio's income—or sympathize with their desires. Nevertheless, we learn of a twenty-five-year-old teacher who has spent $10,000-plus on his CD, and a twenty-eight-year-old floor trader whose stage name is Storm and has just finished his indie rap masterpiece. As in backyard wrestling, we are tempted to wonder who these people are and why we should care about them. "American culture is centered around entertainment," the floor trader explains. "Making a CD is one of the easiest ways to become a part of that."

Is the pop theme really so pervasive? After all, most of us don't start backyard wrestling leagues, don't attempt world records, don't record rap CDs in our spare time. But, on the other hand, some of us do attempt these things, and certainly many more of us have sought to at least partly redefine our lives through participation in some aspect of pop culture. People try to access mass culture through many different pursuits: the writing and publishing of amateur periodicals in the form of zines and online blogs (amalgamations of diary entries and web links); the creation of pirate radio stations; the recording of indie amateur CDs; attending Lord of the Rings conventions and dressing up like Gollum and Gandalf. Still others become fans, compiling tribute websites and collections relating to the famous. Pick any human being who once held even a marginal degree of fame, and you are likely to find that some other human being in Manitoba, Maine, Monaco, or Munich has

created a virtual world for that figure. Googling on, say, the fallen eighties teen star Corey Haim reveals hundreds of independently created websites discussing this largely uninteresting figure.

And yet there are those who will never feel that their need to be close to pop, to be part of pop, can be answered through the cool distance of the web. On the extreme edge, finding their way onto the stomping ground of the press-hungry serial killer, fans desperate to realize the promises of pop become stalkers, impersonators, even assassins, losing their grip on what is left of reality in order to assert themselves in a pop culture world where nobody dies or gets hurt, where everybody lives forever, happily ever after, on the big or small screen.

Though most of us don't personally know a celeb stalker, we certainly know of the other types: the just-a-bit-too-enthusiastic collector of memorabilia; the waiter who is really a director-writer perpetually adjusting his screenplay; the pop supplicant willing to spend long days polishing stacks of bottled water to be consumed by the performers after the show; the amateur critic, whose acerbic commentary on the latest efforts of Gus Van Sant, Pavement, and Lucinda Williams annoys friends long into the night; and, finally, the quiet fan, who sings along, watches all the awards shows, buys the records and videos and movies, cries on cue. Few of us lack opinions and thoughts and memories derived from pop culture. These days—and this holds true for the urban citizens of the majority of countries in the world—most of us are unlikely to ever meet another human being on the planet who has escaped pop culture's hold on the imagination.

Increasingly, the relationship is one of unrequited desire: We want in. The majority of us don't want to destroy the system, challenge the mass-market capitalism that degrades culture, and expose celebrity worship as a fraud. To the contrary—we uphold the system; we live for the system. The amount of energy many of us expend to get into the pop-culture system suggests just how much we love and want to be part of it. As Todd Gitlin writes in his book *Media Unlimited*:

> Today, there are vast possibilities for micro-celebrity: the talk-show guest, the studio spectator, the website proprietor, the volunteer during the public television fund drive, the amateur performer selling downloads or CDs over the Internet. . . . the lottery winner, the eyewitness to the shooting, the neighbor on camera after the kidnapping next door, the character wading into the margins of "real life," saying, "Look at me, I'm here too!"

In a *New York Times* article on B-movie actors, wannabe starlets illustrate the way pop compelled them in the same relentless pursuit of fame. "I graduated fifth in my high school class," said Jenny McShane, whose work includes such straight-to-video classics as *Shark Attack 3: Megalodon*. "I was National Honor Society. I know I have the intelligence to do whatever job I have to. . . . I want to do this till the very end. I want to be like Katharine Hepburn."

"I'll do whatever it takes," says Tarri Markel, another thirty-something actor who so far has specialized in playing vermin and serial-killer bait in movies like *Rats* and *Death Train*. "A break could come tomorrow or six months from now or six years from now . . . I don't have a time limit."

And so a good number of us record our demos, market ourselves, network, retain the services of an agent, line up for *Idol*—do whatever we need to do to break in. We fill out our applications and—inevitably—all but 99.9 percent of us are told to forget it. Does this dissuade us? Clearly not, if the six thousand people in the Toronto gravel field are any indication. Why the enthusiasm, the desperation? After all, the best most of these people could expect might be a kind word, a polite dismissal. Nevertheless, it's a chance to be part of it, the system, the pop dream.

As the enthusiasm for *Idol* auditions demonstrates, when we are provided a forum to access pop culture, we throng to it like ants to sugar. When Amazon.com ran a contest to see who could post the most book reviews, the winner clocked in with a staggering 2,164 write-ups. The runner-up wasn't even close, at 1,464, but made up for it by offering his own website, Review Don Mitchell's Reviews,

which leveraged his Amazon.com profile by offering visitors prizes if they contributed critiques of his reviews to his site.

Meanwhile, millions of people are flocking to parallel-world online video games that allow them to live out their fantasy of special twenty-four hours a day. There are more than 100 million people around the world who pay a monthly subscription to play games like Warcraft, Magic Land and Second Life in which you can be anything from a mobster to a wizard to a seductive elf princess. A staggering $3.6 billion is spent on subscriptions every year. But the best evidence that this phenomenon is more than just casual distraction is the emergence of an entire parallel economy in which players exchange real money for virtual status like gold stockpiles, powerful spells, and, in some cases, even entire islands and personas. There are over 100 thousand young Chinese men indirectly employed by the Western specialites who not only want to play a game and distract themselves from their everyday lives, but also want to realize the pop dream of an all-powerful instant celebrity status they will never find in real life. Alas, who has the hundreds and thousands of hours you'd have to put in to achieve power and status in these massive multiplayer games? The 100 thousand Chinese employed in the task of killing monsters to build up gold stockpiles that can then be sold to American and Japanese gamers, the thousands of Ebay postings selling fantasy real estate, weapons and characters for real money, all tell us that many of the people who turn to these games are there to realize a pop dream of special that real life can never deliver. Online, all-powerful characters that can make you feel like someone really special are just a credit card purchase away.

THE UBIQUITY OF POP announces itself in weird ways. Psychologists at the University of Leicester have identified a mental disorder they are calling celebrity worship syndrome (CWS). Their study claims that one in three in the United Kingdom suffer from some derivation of the disease. Explains Dr. John Maltby, who reported on the study in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, "Our findings suggest the possibility that many people do not engage in celebrity worship for mere

entertainment. Rather, there appears to be a clear clinical component to attitudes and behaviors associated with celebrity worshipping." In other words, celebrity worship has moved beyond just another wacky thing the kids do and entered the realm of identifiable mental diseases. The doctor and his colleagues have even classified three levels of celebrity worship. At its least troublesome, there are those who simply like to casually follow the careers and lives of certain celebrities. At the mid-range of the affliction are those who believe that they have "an intense personal-type relationship with their idol." Finally, there are what Maltby calls the "hardcore CWS sufferers," who "believe their celebrity knows them and are prepared to lie or even die for their hero." Their celebrity worship is "borderline pathological." Maltby suggests that CWS is emerging as traditional relationships with family and people in the community are on the wane.

Rising out of the ashes of true mentorship and human connection is the pop-instilled desire to have relationships with celebrities. Alas, mighty few of us can actually have meaningful interactive relationships with celebrities. But our need to do so is embedded in a pop-culture system that asks us to get to know our performers, watch their movies, listen to their songs (ostensibly about their most intimate crises), read their biographies and tell-all interviews, but never actually assume that we have any right to communicate with these people except as passive, supplicating, paying fans. Well, according to Maltby, this tension, coupled with the decreased power of the traditional institutions that once infused our lives with meaning, is beginning to manifest itself in emotional crisis and mental disorder.

Getting pop culturites to believe that celebrity fascination is actually a mental-health problem may prove difficult. While searching the web for info about celebrity worship syndrome, I came across a fan site for pop star Kylie Minogue. Noting that Minogue was one of the celebs cited in newspaper articles on CWS, the site's creator put in a link to the story with the headline "Kylie is Worshipped." *See*, you can almost hear this Kylie fan thinking, *I'm not the only one.*

The identification of celebrity worship syndrome is an indication of the extent to which pop is changing our relationship to everyday

life. The *Houston Chronicle* reports a new trend in which millions of Americans are spending lots of money having gold caps and rims put over their teeth in imitation of hip-hop and rap artists. This look is known affectionately as being *grilled out*. Alan Wolfe, when doing interviews with Greensboro, North Carolina university students for his book *Moral Freedom*, reports: "A surprising number of the students we interviewed, when asked what vice meant to them, immediately thought of the television show *Miami Vice*." In Russia, people were indignant that their president, Vladimir Putin, resembles Dobby, an elf from the movie *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. According to Russia's *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper, at some point a major Moscow law firm was even preparing a lawsuit against Warner Brothers, claiming that they had no right to base their character's look on the Russian president. These are strange—but telling—examples of the way pop lodges in our consciousness.

In *The Ingenuity Gap,* Thomas Homer-Dixon describes the poverty of an Indian city. Frustrated, he points out that many of the people who could barely feed themselves owned televisions, which they took great pride in. He might not have understood this need, but anyone who has grown up with the box as a third parent knows that television infuses us with a certain value, a kind of individual cachet. When you are watching TV, it is as if the entertainment is just for you. You become special, targeted, a person. TV is a way to escape the burden of—say—poverty. Not necessarily because its entertainment value is so great, but because it (1) regularly features the lives of ostensibly normal people, (2) offers the illusion of choice, (3) is "free" and constant, meaning that you can never be denied—you are entertained when you say you are ready to be entertained, and (4) permits you a connection to the world of celebrities, products, and the good life, no matter how poor or distanced from the nexus of power you may be.

Pop culture, and especially its gift of "free TV," gives us access to a world we will otherwise never know. From the Amazon rain forest to the operating room to Michael Jackson's mansion to the mysterious life of a Mafia drug lord, we can enter into places far more

exciting and seemingly real than our own everyday existence. At the same time, this process instills in us the desire to find similar intensity and excitement in our own lives. We don't just watch the movie, listen to the song, and play the video game, we try to replicate the scenario in our daily lives. Consumer-culture critic Juliet Schor has discovered in her research that the more time a person spends watching TV, the more money that person spends.

The ubiquity of the pop theme means we can never get far enough from it to make an honest assessment about our own expectations. Even educators lose their perspective when it comes to pop success. At the first blush of Avril Lavigne's fame as a teen pop star, her former principal was getting as many as twenty Avril-related calls a day from around the world. Rather than taking the opportunity to, maybe, gently question Lavigne's decision to drop out of high school at sixteen, the principal chose instead to dutifully read from a prepared text: "I am thrilled for her success," says principal Kerry Stewart of suburban Ottawa's Napanee District Secondary School. "We think she's an excellent role model for students who have lofty dreams."

In the case of pop stardom's lofty dreams, the mundane world of education steps aside. Such is the power and allure of pop culture in our lives, and so deep runs the myth that anyone can attain stardom. The result is a world filled with pop-culture supplicants, enthusiasts, and obsessives. The fantasy of the ordinary person turned international success has become a universal fantasy, encoded in the unconscious. This is the new conformity, which the sociologist Ulrich Beck calls "a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it."

Mule Skinner Blues

Pop culture's just-do-it individuality has penetrated even the most downtrodden lives. Consider the people we meet in the documentary *Mule Skinner Blues* (2001). The film chronicles the denizens

of a Mayport, Florida, trailer park. There's Beanie Andrew, a sixty-six-year-old alcoholic whose dream had always been to make a horror film in which he emerges from the primordial Southern swamp in a gorilla suit. There's rock 'n' roller Steve Walker, also a heavy substance abuser, whose band plays local bars. There's the seventy-something country yodeller Miss Jeannie, and the middle-aged janitor Larry Parrot, who methodically composes unpublished horror stories on an ancient manual typewriter. Is Mayport, perhaps, a hotbed for aspiring entertainers? Hardly. It's a hick town that the filmmakers stumbled upon pretty much by accident. Not unlike the better-known *American Movie*—in which filmmakers document the efforts of an impoverished film buff trying to shoot an indie horror feature—again there's the sense that *Mule Skinner Blues* could have been anywhere in the Western world, could have featured any number of lonely outsiders clinging to the dream despite all evidence that pop stardom simply could not be any further away.

The filmmakers behind *Mule Skinner Blues,* Stephen Earnhart and Victoria Ford, think it is more than just coincidence that all the people in their documentary are obsessed with earning pop recognition.

"It's a by-product of our society," Earnhart says without hesitation. "The clichéd fifteen minutes of fame, wanting to be in the movies, to be a celebrity. They see the lifestyles on TV. I don't know why, but everybody is obsessed with it."

"It's even more so for someone that's been down and out," adds Ford. "It's a recognition of their existence, a validation—I'm worth something."

Do the filmmakers feel they are personally perpetuating the dream of stardom and celebrity?

"This is our predicament as an art form," answers Earnhart. "These are our myths, the myth of celebrity and success, they are stories being told to our unconscious. It's hard to separate them from our mass culture. If a guy grew up in the woods, would he have those stories?"

Mule Skinner Blues chronicles the lives of a motley crew of pop dreamers, but finds its locus when the filmmakers actually help

Andrew make his movie, providing equipment and expertise to shoot a Larry Parrot–devised screenplay in which Andrew and Walker play leading roles. *So Mule Skinner,* at least partly, chronicles the usual triumphant ascendancy of the individual, clinging to his or her dreams and having them come true.

"It's part of the human spirit," notes Earnhart. "To create hope. To not have it would be to kill some sort of primal instinct. If Steve Walker wasn't playing guitar he would be dead with alcoholism. You can be critical of the dream, but you can't be critical of what the dream means. To give that up is to create the walking dead."

"I think part of the appeal of the film," adds Ford, "is that they are regular people out there expressing desires that people have across the board. So in that sense the film is more about desire and will than it is about outcome."

In other words, *Mule Skinner* avoids the cliché of the I'm-Special theme largely because it is an investigation of what the theme means, rather than a narrative simply reiterating the invariably positive outcome of what happens when you pursue your dreams. The most telling scene in the movie is in an interview with Miss Jeannie, who has spent her whole life as a singer-songwriter. At one point, she takes a plaque off her mantel and shows it to the camera. She notes that it is nothing more than a certificate of appreciation. That's it, she says; after fifty years of singing, that's all she has to show for her career. It's a scene that demonstrates how the pop promise not only raises up, but also devalues. Is that really all Miss Jeannie has to show for it? Didn't she give pleasure, enter the lives of people in her community in a way that is as important and powerful as entrance into the high-powered entertainment industry? Clearly, to Miss Jeannie and to all the characters in *Mule Skinner Blues,* those things don't mean squat. It's being on TV that matters. What matters is, to paraphrase Victoria Ford, having one's existence recognized by the pop-culture forces that shape our world.

In the end, by helping Andrew and his crew make their lame horror movie, *Mule Skinner* cannot avoid the pop theme of transcendent ordinariness. Says Earnhart: "We wanted to show people with this

movie that you can just go out and do it, that was our philosophy, that we're all in the same boat, we all have this burning desire to create." All well and good, but *can* you just go out and do it? Without a New York film crew, Andrew's film would never have been made and Miss Jeannie would never have shot her video, another project the filmmakers assisted with and included in the *Mule Skinner* release.

How many Larry Parrots are out there, banging out horror story after horror story? How many Steve Walkers are trolling the small-town taverns, hard-rock crooners with tattoos and long stringy hair who dream of screaming arenas and MTV heavy rotation? In *Mule Skinner Blues,* talented filmmakers put forth a positive message of indie creativity and hoped that their honesty and low-budget aesthetic would prevent the film from becoming just another articulation of the you-can-do-it-too pop fantasy. Alas, I'm not sure it is possible to demonstrate the existence of the pop fantasy without, in some way, choosing sides. Stephen Earnhart agrees that the fantasy is all-pervasive, but goes ahead and makes the fantasy, in some small way, come true for the hapless inhabitants of one little nook, in one little cranny of the world. But what about the rest of us? Where's our New York film crew? Are you for the fantasy or against it? Or does it even matter? Like an oil slick, the pop promise spreads and sticks to everything and everyone.

Simmel: Outside Looking In

Despite having ample real-world evidence of the fact that pop and its message of individual redemption and reinvention clearly influence our lives, I wanted a theoretical framework to hang these ideas on. Someone must have an abstract philosophical approach to the pop world that might explain how the mass production of stories could have become such a beckoning, unattainable, contradictory, and often alienating presence. I found what I was looking for in the ideas of Georg Simmel, a German philosopher who wrote in the early part of the twentieth century.

Simmel lived in a time when mass-culture production—with its attendant ramping up of propaganda and entertainment—was just developing. Caught between the rapidly developing world of mass culture and the rarefied high-art world, Simmel saw the culture of his time as an entity standing outside the human beings who produced and perpetuated it. That is, he was one of the first to see that a culture industry was developing, one which could manufacture cultural product by rote pattern and format.

Simmel argued that culture was becoming not a direct, integral manifestation of the human spirit, but rather something more distant and, at times, even threatening. Culture was separating from humanity. The singing of songs, telling of stories, and playing of instruments was falling into the hands of experts and technocrats. Simmel wrote of a situation in which creative life was "constantly producing something that is not life, that somehow destroys life, that opposes life with its own valid claims. Life cannot express itself except in forms which have their own independent existence and significance. This paradox is the real, ubiquitous tragedy of culture." For Simmel, cultural manifestations that spring from individual psyches come to stand outside us as independent of individual human existence and act as a cultivating or even colonizing force. Life is, ultimately, in danger of being subsumed by the demands of a culture existing on a parallel plane to life and opposing life with its own "valid claims."

This idea of life and culture standing outside each other and interacting with and against each other helps explain the way pop culture stands outside the life of, say, John Conte, allowing him to see how ridiculous his involvement in the record-breaking piano event and documentary are, even as he cannot resist participating. Conte, infected by a pop culture churned out on an assembly line, ends up pursuing a world record he doesn't want in order to make a documentary nobody really cares about.

In conjuring up a culture that "opposes life," Simmel provides the framework to understand how it is that pop culture begins as something that is so closely aligned to the interests of individual

human life, and ends as an entity that stands outside us with a life of its own. Simmel articulates a pop culture that stands outside us and infects us; an entity that, in Simmel's harsh words, actually "destroys life." Simmel writes of the "paradox": the essential tension between our own desire to create and be noticed because of our creation, and the creation itself, an entity that stands so much outside us that it becomes separate, alienating, colonizing—the omnipresent fantasy infiltrating our conscious and unconscious thoughts. "It seems to be in the nature of inner life," Simmel warns, "that it can only ever be expressed in forms which have their own laws, purpose and stability arising from a degree of autonomy independent of the spiritual dynamics which created them."

This brilliant theorist, emerging at a time of rapid cultural change that was affecting everything from political systems to religious institutions and even the sanctity of marriage, connects the development of this new kind of separate autonomous culture to the emerging "world of things." That is his term for the mass-produced world that he sees as being far more capable than our solitary selves of containing the glut of ideas and entertainments that, on an individual level, Simmel predicts will lead to "fragmentation" and a "state of simultaneous dissatisfaction and over-satiation."

What Simmel sensed "in theory" in the early twentieth century can now be observed in our everyday lives. John Conte represents this culturally induced fragmentation, as does Ken Hechtman, Miss Jeannie, and the Idolites. All are dissatisfied with what they have accomplished, and yet none live in poverty or desperation; in fact, their needs—emotional and physical—are more than met. Today, as Simmel predicted, Western society is fragmented, over-satiated, and dissatisfied. Our things, particularly pop culture, keep getting more alluring and evocative. Our expectations are raised, but the world we live in—the world we made!—is unable to fulfill what our own pop culture promises us. Bloated on promise, starving for opportunity, a good chunk of us search for a way into the pop world through mind-altering drugs (prescription and otherwise), TV tryouts, liposuction, ill-thought-out trips to combat zones, and

ever-more-virulent outbreaks of starvation-inducing eating disorders. Our culture has become separate from us. In the struggle to renew our claim to our own fantasies, we seem to be moving further and further away from ourselves.

Chasing Fame at the Hard Rock Academy

How will the new generations access the fantasy they have been promised their entire lives? Instead of starting funds for their university education, we might soon be contributing to their tuition at places like the Hard Rock Academy. Striving for fame by acquainting oneself with its rituals and practices is what the Hard Rock Academy is all about. It is, in a way, the literal embodiment of Simmel's depiction of a culture that is us but also stands outside us, alienating and beckoning at the same time. The academy is affiliated with the Hard Rock Cafe chain, and its flyer shows a museum wall featuring a Madonna dress, a Lenny Kravitz guitar, *NSYNC's shirts and, smack in the middle, a big SPACE AVAILABLE sign. "Find out what it takes to fill this space," urges the flyer.

Hard Rock Academy is based in Florida, home to Don Wood, a local businessman and one of the academy's founders. Wood describes the academy as a "boot camp where would-be performers can see where they stand." Teenagers gather for a week or two to work on their singing, dancing, and general look. They get to record a CD single. When they're not playing pop star, they're touring the Hard Rock Cafe's memorabilia collection or taking a limo ride to their very own wrap-up party. "It's an opportunity to see what the music business is all about," Wood enthuses. "How to create an image, how to market, what goes on behind the scenes."

Wood explains that most kids—and their parents—don't have a clue how to develop talent and, even worse, don't understand that connections are far more important than talent. "People don't really get discovered because of their talent," he says. "There are lots of talented people in the world; some make it, some don't." The academy will help kids understand what they have to do to

make it in today's cutthroat music industry. "What we really want to tell them is: Work hard, and you have to work smart. If you really want to make it, here's stuff you should know before you spend fifty thousand dollars of your parents' money making a CD no one cares about."

Anyone can enroll in the Hard Rock Academy. You don't audition to get in—you just pay the hefty fee. You train with the coaches and choreographers of the stars and, according to Wood, you leave with greater confidence, believing in your ability to go all the way. "A young guy came here who had never sung or danced in his life, and he left believing that he could do those things. . . . We don't promise fame, we promise the experience. What we're trying to do is give them an appreciation of what it is to be a star."

Appreciation of what it is to be a star as opposed to actually telling the kids at any point that they will never be stars. There's a fine point here, a kind of transmogrification in which "the experience" implicitly suggests future fame. After all, the flyers explicitly allude to future stardom, and the fancy booklet on the academy repeatedly references the celebrity bands and industry experts the kids who attend will work with. When I met with Don, the academy was just getting underway and had so far played host to only one group of kids. Nevertheless, Don insists that staff will keep an eye out for talent and use their connections to further the careers of worthy attendees. "Record companies and management companies are already asking to see the talent that comes through our program," he says. "So there will be lots of opportunities."

The Hard Rock Academy promises potential fame, but of course really just offers a prepackaged taste of that fame, with its cutesy limo ride, its recording session, and proximity to celebrity paraphernalia. The academy promotions never mention the *unlikelihood* of getting discovered, though there are plenty of allusions to the potential fame waiting in the wings to sweep teens away. This is, essentially, a new-conformity factory, where our need to get noticed can be married to the for-profit systems of lifestyle capitalism. At once a taste of what stardom might be like and a serious

attempt to connect you to the business of pop, the academy does it all and leaves you wanting one single thing: *more*.

Wood, it seems, truly believes that a two-week stint at the Hard Rock Academy can prepare a teenager for stardom, and that his academy might actually discover the next teen starlet. At the same time, he knows perfectly well that the majority who attend will be talentless, will never be discovered, and will leave with expectations that will never be realized. The Hard Rock Academy offers an *Idol*-like tryout atmosphere in which everyone makes the cut. Who will discourage the youngsters of today from pursuing their pop dream? Not Don Wood; not their parents, who gladly pay to have their kids attend the Hard Rock Academy; not the society we live in, which accords pop success the greatest respect. In Don Wood's mind, there is a way things get done: training, a long-term plan, a unique product you hone to perfection then unleash on the market with the help of carefully cultivated contacts. Yet in every way, his vision is the antithesis of what pop and the Hard Rock brand promises, which is doing it on your own: kids jamming in a basement, struggle then triumph, but most of all, originality and genuine talent.

Like so many of us, and in accordance with Georg Simmel's thinking, Wood seems caught between the reality and the fantasy. Or am I giving him too much credit? Is he a partial believer in the rock 'n' roll dream, or a canny businessman angling for a new way to insert money-making into the pop-culture methodology that relentlessly peddles the you-can-do-it-too mantra? The Hard Rock Academy is merely one entity in a long line of institutions that have sought, since the arrival of pop culture and its legions of experts, to trade on our desire to be more than what we are. From poetry anthology scams (your work of genius automatically included with purchase of the book) to film academies to modelling schools, preying on the naive and hopeful has always been part of the pop legacy. But something like the Hard Rock Academy not only trades on our emotional connection to pop, but also pretends to offer its young clients genuine spontaneity and a real sense of what it takes to be a star. Don Wood recognizes an economic opportunity born

from the rise of the new conformity. But he's also someone who really does want people to understand what it takes to launch a pop act in North America. Unfortunately, his academy cannot both critique the music industry and be part of it. Here, again, we see how pop culture usurps humanity, by promising more—far more—than it can ever deliver. Ultimately, the Hard Rock Academy will be another portal, purveyor of the perpetually unfulfilled promise, the lie of pop we all want to believe.

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, I take a break from my computer and pull my guitar out. I unearth the ragged notebooks in which I've scribbled attempts at songs over the years. I select one and tentatively start singing and playing. Though I am alone, I am not playing for myself. Not really. Instead, I imagine an audience. Adoring fans. Record contracts complete with studio musicians and technicians who can give my nasal croon an Al Green suavity, and my choppy guitar playing a punk edge. Soon the words come fast and furious. I belt them out. I hit the strings as hard and as fast as I can. The cattle pens of *Canadian Idol* supplicants, the John Contes, Ken Hechtmans, and Hard Rock Academies all leave my mind. Tomorrow and yesterday disappear. I am nowhere and everywhere. Alone with my fantasy.

In a few minutes, the song will end.

I close my eyes.

Until then, I'm a star.

Harding, Katherine. "Beer at Work a Frothy Issue." *The Globe and Mail,* December 4, 2002.

Hitt, Jack. "A Gospel According to the Earth." *Harper's,* July 2003.

Jang, Brent. "Births Decline Again." *The Globe and Mail,* September 27, 2002.

Kaplan, Robert D. *An Empire Wilderness.* New York: Random House, 1998.

Lehmann-Haupt, Rachel. "Need a Minister? How about Your Brother?" *The New York Times,* January 12, 2003.

Lewis, Michael. "The Artist in the Gray Flannel Pajamas." *The New York Times Magazine,* May 3, 2000.

Lyall, Sarah. "With Approval, Europeans Opt Not to Marry." *The New York Times,* March 24, 2002.

Smith, Graeme. "God at the Touch of a Screen." *The Globe and Mail,* April 12, 2003.

Swainson, Gail. "Elvis Priestley Rocks His Pulpit." *Toronto Star,* January 12, 2004.

Vansittart, Katherine. "Akared States." *The Globe and Mail,* November 27, 1999.

Yourk, Darren. "Marriage Numbers Decline Sharply." *The Globe and Mail,* November 20, 2003.

_____. "Young Not Wedded to Marriage." *The Globe and Mail,* July 11, 2002.

3: Everyone's a Star

"And the Oscar Does Not Go To." *The New York Times,* March 23, 2003.

Barber, Benjamin. *Jihad vs. McWorld.* New York: Balantine, 1996.

Beck, Ulrich, and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. *Individualization.* London: Sage, 2002.

Bracewell, Michael. *When Surface Was Depth.* Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002.

Chapman, James. "Are You a Celeb Worshipper?" *This Is London,* May 14, 2003. http://www.thisislondon.com.

Gitlin, Todd. *Media Unlimited.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001.

Gray, Tim. "Report Shows Internet Spending Jumps", internet-news.com, June 14, 2005.

Hechtman, Ken. *www.straightgoods.com,* December 4, 2001.

Kapica, Jack. "TV Loses Ground to Net: Study." *The Globe and Mail,* May 13, 2003.

Klosterman, Chuck. "Celebrities Are Just Like You and Me." *The New York Times Magazine,* December 15, 2002.

Lesly, Philip. *The People Factor.* Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, 1974.

MacDonald, Gayle. "The Road from Nowhere." *The Globe and Mail,* February 22, 2003.

Menon, Vinay. "Why We Like to Watch." *Toronto Star,* August 3, 2002.

Mirapual, Matthew. "Why Listen to Pop When You Can Mix Your Own." *The New York Times,* August 20, 2001.

Schor, Juliet. *The Overspent American.* New York: Basic Books, 1998.

Simmel, Georg. *On Individuality and Social Forms.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

"Social Studies." *The Globe and Mail,* November 25, 2002.

St. John, Warren. "Trying Hard to Get Free, via Rap on Your Own CD." *The New York Times,* March 3, 2002.

Taffel, Ron. "Wall of Silence." *Psychotherapy Networker,* May/June 2001.

Wolfe, Alan. *Moral Freedom.* New York: Norton, 2001.

4: Crowd Control

Ahrers, Frank. "Fiercely Top 40." *The Washington Post,* April 7, 2001.

Baker, Chris. ".hack Attack." *Wired,* October 2002.

Barber, Benjamin. *Jihad vs. McWorld.* New York: Balantine, 1996.

Bellah, Robert, et al. *Habits of the Heart.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Black, Debra, and Robin Harvey. "Stigma of Depression Finally Gone." *Toronto Star,* June 6, 2003.

Boehelrt, Eric. "Radio's Big Bully." *Salon,* April 30, 2001.

Carr, David, and Lorne Manly. "At Star Crazy Magazines, the Brand's the Thing. *The New York Times,* March 10, 2002.